



10

The Trinity

Key Theme

- The Godhead is triune: one God, three Persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

Key Passages

- Genesis 1:1–3; Psalm 33:6; John 1:1–5; Isaiah 44:23–24; Colossians 1:15–17; Psalm 104:30; Matthew 3:13–17

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify biblical support for the Trinity.
- Distinguish between the orthodox Christian view of the Trinity and views historically identified as heresies.



Lesson Overview



Come On In

Have students mark Genesis 1, Psalm 33, John 1, Isaiah 44, Colossians 1, Psalm 104, and Matthew 3 in their Bibles.

Write on the board before class, “How would you describe the Trinity using an analogy?”



Studying God's Word

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Even though the word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible, it accurately explains the triune nature of God as presented in Scripture.

- Study the Prepare to Share section.
- Go Before the Throne.
- Ice cubes, water, and a small saucepan
- Print one God Is Triune sheet from the Resource DVD-ROM for each student.
- Print one Trinity Diagram from the Resource DVD-ROM to show in class.



Activity: Trinitarian Heresies

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Students will compare various historical Trinitarian heresies to the Bible and the Athanasian Creed.

- Print one Athanasian Creed from the Resource DVD-ROM for each student.
- Print one Trinitarian Heresies worksheet from the Resource DVD-ROM for each student.



Prepare to Share

SCRIPTURAL BACKGROUND

To prepare for this week's lesson, read Genesis 1:1–3; Isaiah 44:24; John 1:1–5, 1:14; Matthew 3:13–17; Colossians 1:15–17.

The word *Trinity* is not found in Scripture but the concept of the Trinity is clear in its accounts. It is an important doctrine of the Christian faith, advocating that God eternally exists as three Persons. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God—but there is only one God. Because of our finite minds, this concept is impossible to fully understand and/or explain. Let's consider a few things.

There is only one God. "I am the Lord and there is no other; there is no God besides Me" (Isaiah 45:5). See also Isaiah 46:9; Galatians 3:20; 1 Corinthians 8:5–6.

All three Persons of the Trinity—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are called God. In *Christ* dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9). The *Holy Spirit* and *God* are both referred to as God (Acts 5:3–4).

All three Persons of the Trinity are eternal. *God* is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 90:2). The throne of *the Son* is forever and ever (Hebrews 1:8). *The Spirit*, too, is eternal (Hebrews 9:14).

All three Persons of the Trinity are Creator; let's expound a bit here using the background Scriptures listed above.

Genesis 1:1–3 clearly references that *God* and the *Spirit of God* were present at creation.

John 1:1–5 brings *Christ*—the second Person of the Trinity—into the picture at creation. He was in the beginning with God, and all things were made through Him.

Colossians 1:15–17 again confirms that *Jesus Christ* is the firstborn over all of creation. And by Him all things were created. This passage also reiterates the eternity of Christ.

The Bible, while not using the term Trinity, plainly teaches that while there is but one true God, He consists of three separate yet equal Persons—and all were present at creation.

Many discussions surround this important doctrine, and can cause division in the church. Remember that the primary truths of the Trinity are presented in God's

Word. And be willing to allow that there are secret things that belong to the Lord our God, which have not been revealed (Deuteronomy 29:29).

APOLOGETICS BACKGROUND

How often we hear people speak of God: God is good; God will answer our prayers; God is in control; God has a plan. Yet many of these same people seldom speak the name of Jesus Christ—and may not even believe that salvation comes through Him alone. They deny and fail to understand the important doctrine of the Trinity—three Persons in one God.

These people discount the significance of who Jesus is—that He is 100% fully God and 100% fully man. Specifically, there are many who claim that Jesus Christ was merely a man—a prophet, the first created being, a sinless, good person—but not God in human flesh. The significance of the doctrine of the Trinity eludes them.

And yet, the New Testament is abundantly clear that Jesus is God. Jesus claimed to be one with the Father (John 10:30–33); He used the title of "I AM" from the Old Testament (John 8:23, 58); He demonstrated His power over nature, disease, demons, and death (Matthew 8); and He forgave sins—something only God can do (Mark 2:1–11).

Upon seeing the resurrected Christ, Thomas declared, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28), and Jesus did not rebuke him but affirmed him for saying so. And finally, the Jewish leaders recognized Jesus's claims to deity and tried to stone Him for it (John 5:18, 8:59); ultimately they had Him crucified for blasphemy.

Why is it important to believe Trinitarian doctrine and specifically that Jesus is both God and man? Our very salvation requires it. The death of a mere man (no matter how noble) could not provide the purchase price required to redeem other men from their sins against an infinite God. But because Jesus is God, is eternal, and is infinite, He alone is able to satisfy the penalty for those sins by His death.

In addition, Jesus had to be fully human in order to redeem Adam's fallen race. The substitutionary atonement required that Jesus Christ must die as a man to bear

judgment for the sins of men. Only the God-man could bridge the gap and bring both God and man together. As a man, He lived a perfect life and is qualified to be our High Priest and Savior (Hebrews 2:17, 7:24–28).

Praise God for His eternal, triune nature, and thank Him that He has provided the way for sinful man to be reconciled with a holy God, through the sacrifice of the perfect God-man, Jesus Christ!

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

As stated above, the word Trinity does not appear in the inspired Word of God. It did not become a formal doctrine of the Church, by name, until the fourth century. This fact has led to numerous debates over the origin of this word and its validity as a doctrine of Scripture.

Many teachers in the history of Christianity have twisted the concept of the Trinity. To misunderstand the nature and character of God is a serious problem. When this misunderstanding leads to a compromise in the true understanding of the gospel, the mistake can rightly be called a heresy—a doctrine that leads to damnation.

A brief look at some of the historical heresies follows. In all cases they deny either the oneness of God, the distinction between the Persons of the Trinity, or the full deity of one or more Persons of the Godhead.

- **Modalism:** This idea suggests that God acts in three different “modes” but is only one Person. God appeared as the “Father” in the Old Testament, as “Jesus” in the earthly ministry, and as the “Spirit” in the present age. Presently, some Pentecostal groups hold to Modalism.
- **Arianism:** Named for the fourth-century teacher Arius, this view teaches that Jesus and the Holy Spirit were created by God the Father. This idea was condemned at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.
- **Adoptionism:** This view teaches that Jesus was an ordinary man until, at His baptism, He was adopted by the Father and given supernatural powers and the status of “Son of God.” Some Unitarians hold this view today.

- **Unitarianism:** This view holds that there is a single God with no distinct Persons. Whether Jesus or the Father is God varies, but many present-day Unitarians reject the pre-existence of Jesus, insisting that He began to exist at the virgin birth.

These various heresies deny the essence of the gospel by corrupting the biblical understanding of atonement, justice, and the effect of Christ’s work on the Cross. Church councils were called to deal with mutations of the truth that were being spread in the early church. As a result, the doctrine of the Trinity was codified in the Nicene Creed in 325, and later in the Athanasian Creed. Both of these creeds are the basis of an orthodox understanding of the relationships within the Trinity.

The Trinity is yet another reminder of the immensity of God and our inability to fully understand His awesome nature.

For more information on this topic, see the Online Resource Page.



BEFORE THE THRONE

Holy God, I humbly come before you acknowledging your majesty and my insignificance. I know that you have created everything, that you are sovereign over all, and that no purpose of yours can be thwarted. Father, I thank you that you sent your Son to take the punishment that I deserve and that you have given me the Holy Spirit as a sign of your salvation. Help me to recognize the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit so I can praise you in a way that honors your true nature. I pray that you would help me to walk worthy of the calling you have given me. Give me wisdom, Father, to present the Trinity in such a way that the students in my class will grow in their understanding of who you are. Lead them to a knowledge that will bring them to worship you as only you deserve.

► **Pace your lesson!** You can use the provided clocks to indicate the time each section should be completed to keep the lesson on schedule. While teaching, you can compare your anticipated times with the actual time and shorten or drop sections as necessary.



Review

In the last lesson we learned about some of the attributes of God. We made a list from Scripture and I hope you have taken some time over the past week to use those attributes to praise God for all that He is.

? If we went out into the community and asked people what God is like, what do you

think would be the most common responses? *Most people will likely speak of love, mercy, providence, and other “positive” attributes of God while not knowing of or minimizing the “negative” attributes of God like wrath, justice, etc. We need to have a full understanding of God’s character so that we can communicate His nature to others in an accurate way.*



► Have students mark Genesis 1, Psalm 33, John 1, Isaiah 44, Colossians 1, Psalm 104, and Matthew 3 in their Bibles.

► Write on the board, “How would you describe the Trinity using an analogy?”



Studying God’s Word

Today, we are going to learn about another attribute of God—one that is very difficult to wrap our minds around. The idea of the Godhead being triune—the doctrine of the Trinity—is not directly stated in Scripture, so we are going to look at several different passages to see how the Bible presents this extremely important doctrine.

Consider using this short demonstration to show how our analogies of the Trinity can actually misrepresent what the Bible teaches on the subject.

? Have you ever heard, or used, the analogy of the three states of water to describe the Trinity to someone? *Show the glass of water, the ice, and the saucepan.*

Since water can exist in three different states at different temperatures—as a solid (ice), liquid water, and gas (steam)—it seems like a helpful way to illustrate the idea of the Trinity—that God is one, yet three. If I melt this ice it will become liquid water. If I heat the water, or let it sit on the counter, it will turn into a vapor. Yet it is still made up of two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen, H₂O. As we continue through this lesson, let’s think about that analogy and see if it holds up to the test of what is recorded in Scripture. We’ll come back to this analogy later. *The typical explanation of this analogy comes across as the heresy of Modalism, but we’ll explain how it can be rightly used later in the lesson.*

READ THE WORD

Genesis 1:1–3

The first passage that we are going to look at should be familiar—we used it two weeks ago. Let’s read Genesis 1:1–3 together. *Have someone read it aloud.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

We are all very familiar with this passage, but today we are going to look at it from an angle that you may not have thought about before. This passage gives us a glimpse into the Trinity, so let's examine the passage using some of the questions and tools we have been talking about.

Observe the Text

- ? Who are the persons? *God and the Spirit of God.*
- ? What are the actions of God and the Spirit? *God created and the Spirit was hovering.*
- ? When did this take place? *On day one of creation, about 6,000 years ago.*
- ? Who is responsible for creation? *God.*
- ? What does the passage tell us about the nature of God? *God is the Creator and there is a Spirit of God.*

Remember that connecting various passages on a given topic is a critical part of the inductive Bible study method. Genesis 1:1–3 is not the only place in the Bible that talks about creation.

Let's look at two other passages that talk about creation: Psalm 33:6 and John 1:1–5. *Have someone read Psalm 33:6.*

Psalm 33:6

- ? In Psalm 33:6, what connection do you see to Genesis 1:1–3? *In Genesis 1:3 God speaks to create the light, and in Psalm 33:6 the heavens are made "by the word of the Lord."*

There is another, more subtle connection that some of you may have picked up on. The word *Spirit* in Genesis 1:2 is the same Hebrew word as *breath* in Psalm 33:6. The Hebrew word *ruach* is translated as *Spirit* in Genesis 1:2, and as *breath* in this Psalm 33:6. So the phrase "the breath of His mouth" can rightly be understood as a metaphor for the Spirit of God.

- ? Given this metaphor, who created the heavens, according to Psalm 33:6? *Both God the Father and God the Spirit.*

In John 1 we see a similar parallel, but with Jesus rather than the Spirit. *Have someone read John 1:1–5.*

John 1:1–5

- ? Who is the "Word" in this passage? *Jesus. See verse 14.*
- ? What is the parallel between this passage, Psalm 33:6, and Genesis 1? *All of these refer to something spoken—the Word, God said, and the Word of the Lord. All of these are references to Jesus, who is the Word incarnate (John 1:14). All refer to the creation.*

Discover the Truth

None of these verses have stated that God is a Trinity. But as we look at these verses it should be clear that there are three distinct Persons involved in the act of creation—God, the Spirit of God (Holy Spirit), and Jesus. However, the next passage we will look at presents an interesting idea.



READ THE WORD

Isaiah 44:23–24

Let's read Isaiah 44:23–24 together. *Have someone read the passage.*

EXAMINE THE WORD

Now that we have read the text, let's take some time to observe what it is saying to us. This process is an important part of understanding God's Word.

Observe the Text

- ? What type of literature is this passage? *Poetry.*
- ? How do we know this passage is poetry? *The parts of creation described are not actually shouting, singing, etc. as they glorify God for His acts.*
- ? What is God being praised for? *His redemption of Israel and His acts of creation.*
- ? What has God done according to verse 24? *He has formed each person in the womb and made all things, stretching out the heavens.*
- ? Who helped God perform these acts of creation? *The verse clearly says He was alone.*
- ? In the previous set of verses, we learned that there were three Persons involved in creation. This verse tells us that God acted alone in creation. Do these verses contradict each other? *Since we know that God cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Hebrews 6:18), either our previous conclusion was wrong or there is another explanation that can reconcile these two ideas. It is very clear that both the Word and the Spirit were present at creation, so there must be another explanation that will harmonize these two apparently contradictory statements.*
- ? Who can provide an explanation that solves what appears on the surface to be a contradiction? *The concept of the Trinity—that God is one, yet three Persons—can reconcile the ideas.*

Let's look at some other verses that describe the creation of various things: Colossians 1:15–17 and Psalm 104:30.

Colossians 1:15–17

Let's read Colossians 1:15-17 together. *Have someone read the passage.*

- ? Who is the Creator according to the Colossians passage? *The pronouns used must be traced back to verse 13, but the reference is to Jesus ("the Son of His love"). Jesus is described as the agent of the creation of all things.*

Let's read Psalm 104:30 together. *Have someone read the passage.*

- ? **Who is the Creator of humans according to Psalm 104:30?** *The pronoun "Your" must be traced back to verse 24, but the agent of creation is the Spirit of God, just as we saw in Genesis 1.*
- ? **If we look at all of these passages together, what do they tell us about who the Creator is—God the Father, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit?** *All three Persons are said to have been involved in the acts of creation and in sustaining life on the earth.*

Discover the Truth

Although we have not found the word *Trinity* anywhere in the Scriptures we have looked at, I hope you can see the picture coming into focus. God is both one and three, but in different ways so that there is no contradiction. He is one God consisting of three distinct Persons. The Father is not the Son is not the Spirit, yet they are all the single God described as creating the universe. We have been examining this idea using the role of Creator, but there are many other roles and descriptions ascribed to all three members of the Trinity. We might say that God the Father commanded the Son and the Spirit as the agents of creation.

Likewise, we could examine passages that describe the worship of each of the three Persons, yet we are to worship only the one true God. We could examine passages that call all three Persons eternal and that attribute the resurrection of Jesus to all three Persons. The doctrine of the Trinity is one that is constructed by looking at the Bible as a cohesive unit instead of as a bunch of books about the same topic. One God with three distinct Persons is what we find in the text.

- ? **Who can think of a passage in Scripture that would help us to show that there are indeed three members of the Godhead?** *The clearest passage is the baptism of Jesus in Matthew 3:13–17 (Mark 1:9–11; Luke 3:21–22).*



READ THE WORD

Let's read Matthew 3:13–17 together. *Have someone read the passage aloud.*

Matthew 3:13–17

EXAMINE THE WORD

This passage has a lot of implications for how we understand the Trinity, but let's make sure we examine the text carefully to avoid any errors of interpretation.

Observe the Text

- ? **Who are the human characters in the account?** *John the Baptist is baptizing Jesus.*

- ? **How do we see the three Persons of the Trinity present in this passage?** *The Son is being baptized, the Father is the voice from heaven, and the Spirit appears in the form of a dove.*
- ? **Does this passage demonstrate that God exists as a Trinity?** *Many students will say yes, but this passage supports only the idea of three Persons in the Godhead, not the idea of the Trinity.*
- ? **How could this passage be misunderstood?** *Taken by itself, this passage could be used to support the idea of tritheism—worship of three distinct gods that are not members of one godhead.*

There are other verses that speak of all three Persons. In John 15:26, Jesus says that He will send the Helper (Holy Spirit) from the Father. Again, this doesn't prove the Trinity, but only shows the personhood of each member of the Godhead.

Discover the Truth

Now that we have looked at this idea, let's make sure we understand that there are no individual verses that prove the Trinity, but when we look at the entire Bible and its teaching, the doctrine of the Trinity emerges as a unifying theme. There are many who reject this idea, insisting that God is a single Person or that there are multiple gods. We'll examine some of these positions in the activity, but here is a quick reference sheet that gives a summary of the passages that support the Trinity. You can keep this in your Bible to refer to in the future.

➤ Pass out the God Is Triune Reference sheet for the students to keep in their Bibles for future reference.

➤ Note: We include and read the Athanasian Creed to show that the early church had a developed and clear view of the Trinity. They viewed this as a cardinal doctrine. Encourage students to compare any creed or statement with the full counsel of God's Word.

We are going to look at one of the historical confessions of the Christian faith, the Athanasian Creed. This creed dates from around AD 500. It is a detailed explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity. This creed is held by the catholic Church to be the orthodox confession. Here the word *catholic* simply means the universal church, not the Roman Catholic Church. This confession is used by Catholics and Protestants alike, as it was written before the historical division between Catholics and Protestants.

Through the early church, these doctrines, based on the clear teaching of the Bible, were established at various councils and written in creeds. The Athanasian Creed is named for Athanasius of Alexandria, though it was written after his death and was not the product of a formal council. The creed puts the beliefs regarding the Trinity into simple statements that help identify heretical teachings. Heresy is any unbiblical teaching that prevents those who hold to it from being saved. For instance, believing that Jesus was simply a man is a view condemned as heresy by the Athanasian Creed, which draws that idea from Scripture.





Trinitarian Heresies

MATERIALS

- God Is Triune reference sheet for each student
- Athanasian Creed for each student
- Trinitarian Heresies worksheet for each student
- Pencils

INSTRUCTIONS

The students will be completing a short summary of some of the more common Trinitarian heresies. Have the students read over the Athanasian Creed and then find passages from Scripture that support the statements from the creed. Also have the students identify any modern groups that hold these heretical views.

To help us identify ways that the concept of the Trinity has been distorted, we are going to use the Athanasian Creed and Scripture to evaluate these heresies. On the worksheet you will find a short summary of these ideas that go against the Bible's teaching and are outside of orthodox Christianity.

Your job is to identify the statements from the Athanasian Creed that go against these heresies and then find Scripture references

that support the creed's claims. Then, if you are aware of any modern religions that hold these views, note those. We will come back together in a few minutes to compare our lists and share Scripture references and other information you have found. *After an appropriate amount of time, bring the class back together and help everyone fill in any information they missed.*

CONNECT TO THE TRUTH

God has called us to worship Him in truth. If we are not worshipping God as He has revealed Himself in the Bible, we are not honoring Him. Groups and teachers who teach ideas that go against the Bible's revealed truth lead people into error, and they will face great judgment from God. We must be careful to study Scripture carefully so that we do not fall into the same errors. Knowing what heretical ideas have already been rejected by those who have come before us can save us much time and effort in countering errors.



Applying God's Word

WHAT YOU HEARD IN THE WORD

We started this lesson off with an analogy of the Trinity. We spoke of the Trinity in terms of ice, water, and steam. Other analogies that are popular are the clover (three leaves yet one clover), space (three dimensions), and time (past, present, and future). All of these are appropriate if used carefully, but all have obvious limitations in trying to explain the nature of God.

Let's summarize what we have learned today by reviewing three key concepts that present the case for the triune nature of God. We will put them in a diagram to help us remember the relationships the Bible presents within the Trinity.

- **Premise 1:** There is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 44:23–24, 46:9).
- **Premise 2:** The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all identified in the Bible as God (Galatians 1:1; John 1:1; Acts 5:3–4).
- **Premise 3:** These three each relate to one another and to the world as distinct Persons (Matthew 3:13–17; John 15:26).
- **Conclusion:** The one true God of the Bible has revealed Himself to exist in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

We can diagram these relationships in the following way: *Using the Trinity Diagram, explain that the Father is not the Son is not the Holy Spirit and that each is God—one yet three.*

GOD'S WORD IN THE REAL WORLD

When you engage people in conversations about the gospel, you are likely to face questions about the Trinity as you speak of the work of the Holy Spirit in conversion, the work of Christ in His obedient life and death on the Cross, and the Father whose wrath abides on sinners. An understanding of the Trinity will help you become a more effective witness. You can also use this understanding to praise God for the way He works through each Person of the Trinity to accomplish His will and bring glory to Himself, especially in providing a way for sinful man to be reconciled to a holy God.



MEMORY VERSE

Psalm 119:89–90 Forever, O Lord, Your word is settled in heaven. Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You established the earth, and it abides.



GROUP PRAYER TIME

Be sure to pray with your class before you dismiss them.

- Praise God for His revelation to us and for how each Person of the Trinity relates to us.
- Ask God for grace to know Him better.