

The Triune God



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Deut. 6:4; Phil. 2:6; Matt. 28:19; Gen. 1:26, 27; John 14–16.*

Memory Text: “But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, looking for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life” (*Jude 20, 21, NKJV*).

Key Thought: Scripture contains references and hints to the deity and unity of the divine Godhead.

Although the word *Trinity* doesn't appear in the Bible, the teaching definitely does. The doctrine of the Trinity, that God is One and composed of three “Persons,” is crucial because it is dealing with who God is, what He is like, how He works, and how He relates to the world. Most important, the deity of Christ is essential to the plan of salvation.

In Scripture, there are three separate but interrelated types of evidence for the Trinity, or tri-unity of God: (1) evidence for the unity of God, that God is One; (2) evidence that there are three Persons who are God; and (3) subtle textual hints of God's three-in-oneness.

The distinctions among God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit found in the Bible must be understood as being the way God is in Himself, however difficult this may be for our fallen minds to grasp. The “eternal heavenly dignitaries—God, and Christ, and the Holy Spirit,” as Ellen G. White calls them (*Evangelism*, p. 616), are equal but not identical or interchangeable. As fundamental belief number 2 says, “There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three co-eternal Persons.”

*Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, January 7.

The Oneness of God

The belief system of the ancient Hebrews was rigorously monotheistic: “mono” expressing “one” and “theistic” from the Greek word for “God,” meaning that there is only one true God. This position is unwavering all through the Old Testament. There is but one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and not many gods as believed by the nations and tribes around the Hebrews. In this sense, the religion of the Bible was unique.

How does God speak about Himself in Exodus 3:13–15? How do these verses imply the oneness of God?

The oneness of God is also found in the text (*Deut. 6:4*) called by the Jews “the Shema”. It was given this name because the opening word, the command “Hear” in Hebrew, is the word *shema*. This statement is one of the great truths about God, a truth that the people of Israel were commanded to believe and to teach their children.

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (*Deut. 6:4, ESV*). Compare that verse with Genesis 2:24 (*ESV*), “Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” What might it mean that the same Hebrew word for *one* appears in both texts?

The same word, *echad*, for “one,” is used of God in the “Shema” of Deuteronomy 6:4. This word *echad*, for oneness, does not imply a mathematical sum but a complex unity instead. Something is being affirmed here about a unity of distinct parts. Husbands and wives are to be “one” (*echad*) according to Genesis 2:24, just as in Deuteronomy God is “one.”

How does the New Testament talk about the oneness of God? *James 2:19, 1 Cor. 8:4.*

How should the understanding of God as one help us avoid the pitfalls of idolatry in any form? Why should the Lord alone be the One whom we worship? How can you eradicate any “idols” from your own life?

The Deity of Christ

The deity of the Father is scarcely, if ever, in dispute. Those who question the Trinity often challenge the deity of Christ. Were Christ anything but eternal and fully divine, the plan of salvation would be seriously compromised (see Thursday's lesson).

How does Paul, once a rigid Pharisee, talk about the deity of Christ?

Phil. 2:6.

For a Pharisee grounded in the Old Testament teaching of the oneness of God, this is an astonishing statement, because it reveals Paul's deep commitment to the deity of Christ.

The book of Hebrews—written to Jews who were strong monotheists, as was Paul—contains potent statements underscoring the deity of the Son of God. In Hebrews 1:8, 9, Christ's divine nature is powerfully and explicitly expressed.

Most important in revealing the deity of Christ is Jesus' own self-consciousness. He didn't march through the streets of Jerusalem with a triumphal chorus proclaiming His deity. Yet the four Gospels include many threads of evidence which reveal that this is how He understood Himself. Jesus repeatedly claimed to possess what properly belonged only to God: He spoke of the angels of God as His angels (*Matt. 13:41*); He claimed to forgive sins (*Mark 2:5–10*); and Jesus claimed the power to judge the world (*Matt. 25:31–46*). Who else but God could rightfully do that?

Review how Jesus accepted the worship of various people in the Gospel records (*Matt. 14:33, 28:9, Luke 24:50–52, John 9:35–38*). Compare His actions with Paul's (*Acts 14:8–18*). What does Jesus' acceptance of all this worship reveal about His deity?

At His trial, one accusation against Jesus was that He claimed to be the Son of God (*John 19:7, Matt. 26:63–65*). If Jesus did not regard Himself as God, this was a critical opportunity for Him to correct a mistaken impression. Yet He did not. In fact, it was at His trial before Caiaphas that He affirmed His own deity under oath. Hence, we have powerful evidence from the Bible of the deity of Christ.

Think about Jesus' life. Focus on the fact that He was God, the Creator of the universe. What does this tell us about God's love for the world? Why should you draw much comfort and hope from this truth?

The Holy Spirit

If God can be “one,” with the two Persons of the Father and the Son, adding a third Person to the Godhead should not particularly add more difficulty. We are talking here about the Holy Spirit.

Read Genesis 1:2. What does this tell us about the role of the Holy Spirit, who appears so early in the biblical record?

How does Matthew 28:19 draw attention to the three members of the Godhead?

Three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned when Jesus instructs how new believers are to be baptized. This baptismal “formula” is used today in most Christian baptisms. The person who has chosen to follow Jesus is baptized into the “Name” (singular, not plural, in the Greek), although three Persons are included. Three Divine Beings are viewed as One.

At the baptism of Jesus, all three Persons of the Trinity appear together. Read Mark’s dramatic description of that baptism (*Mark 1:9–11*). Mark’s description of the heavens as “parting” (*vs. 10, NKJV*) would be better translated as “torn open” (*NIV*). Mark draws attention to all three Members of the Divine Godhead in an awesome revelation of God that affects even nature itself.

As with Jesus, the work of the Holy Spirit is linked with, and attributed to, the actions of God. Review the following portrayals of the Holy Spirit’s actions:

1. When announcing the birth of Christ, the angel tells Mary that her Child will be called “holy” because the Holy Spirit will come upon her (*Luke 1:35*).
2. Jesus claimed that the Spirit of the Lord was upon Him, anointing Him to preach (*Luke 4:18*).
3. He also claimed to be driving out demons by the Spirit of God (*Matt. 12:28*).
4. The Spirit, who is to carry on Christ’s work after His departure, is another Counselor of the same kind (*John 14:16*).
5. Jesus breathed out the Holy Spirit upon His followers (*John 20:22*).
6. New Christians will have both the indwelling Holy Spirit (*John 14:17*) and also the Spirit of Christ (*Gal. 2:20, Col. 1:27*).

Christ and the Holy Spirit are intimately linked with each other’s ministry. Moreover, there are biblical references that identify the Holy Spirit as God. Read Acts 5:1–11. How does this incident help us to understand the deity of the Holy Spirit, as well?

In Unity and Equality

However clear it is in the Bible that God is One (*echad*), the Bible also talks about the plurality of Persons. Scholars and Bible students throughout the millennia have seen in many Old Testament texts powerful evidence of the plural nature of God. This truth, as with many others, is more fully revealed in the New Testament.

Read Genesis 1:26, 27. How is God’s plurality revealed here?

This pairing of the plural and the singular when referring to God also occurs in Genesis 11:7, 8 at the building of the tower of Babel. God Himself speaks again. The “LORD” is mentioned, yet He speaks as one of a group (“Us”).

Read Isaiah 6:8. In what ways do you see the plurality of the “Lord” revealed there, as well?

In the New Testament, how does Peter’s sermon at Pentecost exalt Jesus within the Godhead? (*See Acts 2:33.*) Peter, a devout monotheistic Jew, and thus a believer in One God, proclaims the full divinity of Christ, now in heaven. In his letter to the Jewish exiles of the dispersion, Peter again communicates evidence of the triune nature of God. (*See 1 Pet. 1:1–3.*)

How does Paul include the plurality of God as he describes the process of salvation? *2 Cor. 1:20–22. (See also 2 Cor. 13:14.)*

With our finite and fallen minds, this teaching is not easy to fully grasp. But so what? We are dealing here with the nature of God, the Creator of the universe. How foolish it would be to think that we could fully understand Him, especially when, as humans, we don’t “fully” understand pretty much anything. Dwell on even the “simplest” thing you can think of. How many aspects of it remain beyond your grasp? How much more so with something as grand as the nature of God Himself?

The Trinity and Salvation

The Gospel of John gives direct and conscious attention to the unique nature of God. John seems to be fully aware of the oneness, yet “threeness,” of God.

Read Christ’s prayer in John 14–16 and count the number of references to the three Persons of God. How do these passages help us to understand the reality of this important truth?

This passage in the Gospel of John is the most extensive concentration of references to the coequal, three-Person God. Here, the inter-dynamics among the Trinity come through repeatedly. The doctrine of the Trinity, far from being a piece of abstract speculation, is the inevitable conclusion that comes from a systematic survey of Scripture.

Of special importance in this context is the deity of Christ. If Christ were not fully God, then all we have is the Lord shifting the punishment for our sins from one party to another, as opposed to taking them upon Himself. The whole point of the gospel is that it was God Himself on the cross bearing the sins of the world. Anything short of this would denude the atonement of everything that made it so powerful and effective.

Think about it: if Jesus were merely a created being, and not fully God, how could He—as a creature—bear God’s full wrath against sin? What created being, no matter how exalted, could save humanity from the violation of God’s holy law?

Were Jesus not divine, then God’s law would not be as sacred as God Himself, because the violation of it would be something for which a created being could atone. The law would be only as sacred as that created being, and not as sacred as the Creator. Sin itself would not be so bad if all it took to atone for it was the death of a creature and not the death of the Creator to atone for it. The fact that it took God Himself, in the Person of Christ, to remedy sin presents powerful evidence of the seriousness of sin.

Also, our assurance of salvation through what Christ has done for us—and not through our own works—comes from the fact that God Himself paid the penalty for our sins. What could we do to add to that? Were Christ a created being, maybe we could add something. But with God the Creator sacrificing Himself for our sins, it’s all but blasphemous to believe that anything we do could supplement that sacrifice. Thus, were Christ not divine, the atonement would be fatally compromised.

Think for a moment: the Creator of the universe died in your stead, in your place, so you could have the promise of eternal life in Him. How can you learn to draw hope and assurance from this amazing truth? In light of this reality, what else really matters?

Further Study: In the doctrine of the Trinity, we do not find three different divine roles displayed by one Person (that is *modalism*). Nor are there three gods in a cluster (that is *tritheism* or *polytheism*). The one God (“He”) is also, and equally, “They,” and “They” are always together, always closely cooperating. The Holy Spirit executes the will of both Father and Son, which is also His will. This is the truth that God reveals about Himself all throughout the Bible.

Some people struggle with the divinity of Christ because of how, while here in the flesh, Jesus had subordinated Himself to the will of the Father. Many see this as “proof” that He was somehow less than the Father. This reality, however, does not reflect the inner structure of the Godhead. This subordination reflects, instead, how the plan of salvation was to operate. Jesus was to come into humanity, becoming “obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross” (*Phil. 2:8, ESV*). Also, “though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered; and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him” (*Heb. 5:8, 9*). These statements reveal that the subordinate role Jesus played resulted from the Incarnation, which was crucial to the plan of salvation. They don’t prove that He is anything other than fully divine and eternal.

“ ‘His name shall be called Immanuel, . . . God with us.’ ‘The light of the knowledge of the glory of God’ is seen ‘in the face of Jesus Christ.’ From the days of eternity the Lord Jesus Christ was one with the Father; He was ‘the image of God,’ the image of His greatness and majesty, ‘the outshining of His glory.’ It was to manifest this glory that He came to our world.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 19.

Discussion Questions:

❶ Some early Adventists struggled with the doctrine of the Trinity. Today the church has taken a firm stand on the doctrine. How does this change over time reveal to us the unfolding nature of truth? In your own experience, how have you grown in your understanding of truth? What beliefs did you once hold that, today, you no longer accept?

❷ John 8:58 reads: “Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, before Abraham was, I am.” How does this text powerfully reveal the full divinity of Christ?

Summary: If we want to deepen our love for the great infinite God we serve and be drawn to worship Him, we first must try to grasp what He tells us about Himself. The Trinity is a mystery, but in Scripture “mysteries” are deep truths that an infinite God reveals to us on a finite level. Thus, we can safely speak of God only from our knees: “ ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!’ ” (*Deut. 6:4, NKJV*).

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Jude 20, 21*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Outline the biblical basis for an understanding of the Trinity.

Feel: Be in awe of the largeness, complexity, and intertwining righteous work of the Three in One.

Do: Worship the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Three in One

A How have the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit worked together in our behalf from before the foundation of the world?

B What expressions and demonstrations in the Gospels demonstrate Christ's divinity?

C How do Scriptures describe both the plurality and the unity of the Godhead?

II. Feel: The Power and the Glory

A What aspects of the Godhead awaken awe, fear, and respect?

B What feelings toward God are stirred by descriptions of the ways in which the Father, Christ, and the Holy Spirit cooperate for our salvation?

C What aspects of God's triune nature increase a sense of intimacy in our relationship with Him?

III. Do: Thou Art Worthy

A In what ways do all the qualities of the Godhead work together to enhance our concept of a God worthy of worship?

B How has your worship of God changed as you have learned about the unique aspects and intertwining relationships of the Trinity?

► **Summary:** While we have a hard time comprehending the nature of the Author of the universe, Scriptures help us to understand that God exists in three distinct Persons, each with different functions. Yet, They work together as One.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1—Motivate**

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: The Bible teaches the unity of God, but further study reveals that this unity is a dynamic relationship among three distinct Persons.

Just for Teachers: Many people think of the doctrine of the Trinity as mysterious, or even as a doctrine that is best left unexamined and “taken on faith.” Emphasize that if the doctrine is properly understood, it really helps us to better understand God and our faith in Him. Indeed, many foundational Christian doctrines are based upon the understanding of God that is implicit in the doctrine of the Trinity.

The atomic theory, the idea that matter is composed of innumerable submicroscopic units we call atoms, is one of the pillars of modern science. It was a Greek, Democritus (circa 450 B.C.), who coined the term *atomos*, meaning literally uncuttable. The atom, Democritus believed, was the hidden, indivisible unity underlying the multiplicity of the things that we see around us.

As scientists began to rediscover and confirm Democritus’ hypothesis in modern times, they made further discoveries. The atom, that primal unity, was, in fact, a name for a complex relationship between the particles that composed it. The protons were not more “atomic” than the electrons, or vice versa. If you were lacking either of them, you were lacking an atom.

In the same way, the Old Testament of the Bible informs us that God is One. But as we look into this fact further, we discover that this unity is the product of a harmonious relationship among Three distinct Beings, all equally divine and all coeternal. While the atom can be, and has been (in contradiction to its name), split, this triune God really is the indivisible unity underlying all reality.

Discuss With the Class: What other examples of unity in multiplicity can we find in the world around us that help us to understand the Three-in-One nature of the Trinity?

► **STEP 2—Explore**

Just for Teachers: The Bible introduces us to a God who is One, a God characterized by *echad*, or unity. And yet, from the very beginning we also are presented with a picture of a multifaceted God. Emphasize

that the unity of God spoken of in the Old Testament does not refer merely to a mathematical singleness but rather to a singleness of purpose and essence. Also, emphasize that the plurality of the Godhead is in no way to be confused with polytheism. Bring out clear teachings about God's plurality in the Old Testament and His unity in the New.

Bible Commentary

I. The Oneness of the Triune God *(Review Deuteronomy 6:4 with your class.)*

Deuteronomy 6:4 tells us that God is One. Why is this important? Most of us are aware, to some degree, of the pantheons (literal meaning in Latin: “every god”) and mythologies of the ancient peoples surrounding biblical Israel. As people forgot the God who had created them in His image, they created gods in their own image.

Many of the gods in these pantheons had started out as objects of worship for a distinct class or group of people. Perhaps they were tribal or familial gods. Or perhaps they were gods who personified an admired trait, or even a profession or occupation. As the New Testament says, it is difficult or impossible to serve two masters; so, most people had a favorite, keeping the others at bay with an occasional, well-timed offering or pinch of incense.

As kings and priests gained power, they found it useful to gather these gods into pantheons that resembled a royal court of the time. These were unities of a sort, usually with one god who ruled over an uneasy collection of lesser deities with their own mutually exclusive agendas that reflected their diverse origins. But this was not the unity connoted by the Hebrew word *echad*, which could just as usefully be translated as *harmony*, a concept that definitely did not apply to ancient polytheism.

The inspired writers of the Bible rejected this polytheism because they knew that God was One. But this oneness is not merely a number. It means that the God of the Bible is unique. But His uniqueness alone is not what makes Him worthy of worship. Otherwise, we could just as easily worship snowflakes or our own fingerprints.

Consider This: While we may not seek out other gods, per se, as ancient polytheists did, don't we put other things above the true God? How does this divide both our loyalty and our focus? What can we learn from the unity and singleness of purpose displayed in the Godhead? See *John 17:22*.

II. *Kenosis* *(Review Philipians 2:6–8 with your class.)*

As the lesson notes, doubts about the Trinity tend to focus upon the deity of Christ. Normative Christianity teaches that God took the form of the Man Jesus Christ in the first century A.D. in a minor province of the Roman Empire. He was executed as a criminal in a particularly ignominious manner, and three days later He was resurrected to life.

As Paul notes (*1 Cor. 1:22–25*), these facts were unacceptable to many. Jews who thought that they understood the Scriptures believed Christians were not just wrong but heretical. Yes, a Messiah was coming, but not in that way. Greeks, perfectly willing to assimilate all the wisdom of the world into their philosophical tradition, found this seemingly errant nonsense not very wise at all.

Even Christians found this story hard to accept. Christian heresies sprang up, mostly concerned with the deity of Christ but especially with the atonement. Such groups as the Ebionites taught that Jesus was just a man, a prophet at best. Others taught that Jesus really was God but that He only *appeared* to be human during His ministry. He only *appeared* to suffer on the cross. This view was called docetism, a word rooted in the Greek verb that means “to seem.” Arianism taught that Christ was “sort of” divine but that He was a created being.

All of these heresies set out to resolve what their formulators regarded as difficulties with the plain message of Christ’s divinity, humanity, and atonement, as preached by the apostles and the four canonical Gospels. But as they resolved these perceived difficulties, their solutions essentially nullified the power of the true gospel. If Christ were just a man, how did His sacrifice help anybody? He was just a wise teacher who stumbled into a very bad predicament and faced it bravely. If He only seemed to suffer on the cross, again, what was the point? And if He were not truly divine but more of a super angel or demigod, how could His death and resurrection atone for offense against God?

In contrast to all that, the apostles taught that Christ was, in every sense, God but that He let go of His status and emptied Himself (*kenosis* in Greek) of the prerogatives of divinity, even to the point of dying a criminal’s death on the cross. He had, and was, everything, but out of love He gave it all to us and became nothing. If you know that, you know the gospel.

Consider This: Why is a correct understanding of the true nature and divinity of Jesus Christ so essential to our understanding of His saving life, death, and resurrection?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: Use the following questions to help your students to reinforce what they have learned about the nature and importance of our knowledge of the One triune God.

Thought Questions:

- ➊ What do you think is meant by the biblical authors when they say God is One? Why is this Oneness so important?
- ➋ Why do you think that the deity of Christ is the thing most often challenged when people attempt to cast doubt on the doctrine of the Trinity? Why is the divinity of Christ so difficult to accept in spite of the clear biblical and historical evidence?

Application Question:

What can we learn about that which God wants for us in our individual lives, families, and churches by examining the doctrine of the Trinity and His unity in multiplicity?

► STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: This week you and your students have learned the importance of both God’s unity and His multifaceted nature, as seen in the doctrine of the Trinity. The following activities will help your students to remember and apply the lessons learned in their future study and spiritual growth.

Activity 1: An important aspect of the Oneness of God that is taught in the Bible is His utter uniqueness. Nothing and no one else is like God. Have a blackboard or whiteboard at hand, if available, and briefly discuss the uniqueness of God. (Pen and paper are an equally adequate substitute.) Then ask the class to suggest ways in which God is unique. As students think of them, write down the characteristics that define God’s uniqueness. Then lead the class in a prayer of praise to God for these qualities and the ways in which He manifests them in our behalf. You can either begin or end the class this way.

Activity 2: Everyone knows that the Old Testament teaches the Oneness of God, while the New Testament introduces the Son and the Holy Spirit. But is this true? Ask your class members to look in the Old Testament for examples of manifestations of the Holy Spirit or the Son. Some examples: Exodus 31:3, 1 Chronicles 28:12, or Job 33:4 for the Holy Spirit; Genesis 18:3, Daniel 7:13 for appearances of Christ. You may want to give this as an assignment the week before you teach the lesson, if possible.