

SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Video Lecture Series

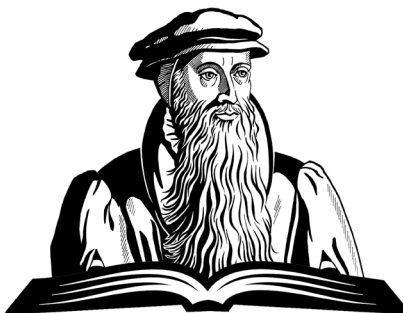
by Robert D. McCurley, ThM

Module 2:

THE DOCTRINE OF GOD

Lecture 8

THE TRINITY



The John Knox Institute
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Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide

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Module 2 ~ The Doctrine of God

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Module 2 ~ Lecture 8

THE TRINITY

Some things are easy to learn, and other things are far more challenging and difficult. Learning to count, for example, is fairly simple. On the other hand, we would find the science and math needed to send a rocket into outer space, to be complicated. It takes years of painstaking study to learn that kind of math, and its application to rocket science. But we expect that to be the case. We're not surprised, because we have a sense of the technical difficulties involved. In fact, if you reduced it to simple math, you would find it dangerous.

Well, when it comes to the study of God, we need to have a similar mindset. Some things will be relatively easy to grasp, without much effort. But the more we study, and the deeper we dig, the more we find our minds stretched to comprehend all that God is in His glory. That is especially true when it comes to the doctrine of the Trinity. We can affirm simple statements like, "God is three in one," which is good and appropriate. But when we begin to dig further, we find more complex truths. And this is further reinforced when seeking to distinguish sound doctrine from false heresies. This requires careful reflection. The content of these lectures is different and, indeed, more difficult from what would be found in preaching a sermon. But this doctrinal study provides a solid foundation to place underneath our thinking, reading, praying, and preaching. We are being pressed to go deeper, and to beware of oversimplifying the doctrine of the Trinity. Omitting vital Trinitarian concepts will hinder us from applying the doctrine rightly. That means we need to be prepared to be stretched in the material before us today.

The series of lectures in this second module on systematic theology is devoted to the doctrine of God. The purpose is to explore what the Bible teaches about God Himself. In the previous lectures, we've been answering the question of what God is, all that is in God. We learned that there is one God, that is, one and only one divine essence. And we have explored what God reveals about His essence by way of His attributes. In the present lecture, we turn to the question about who God is, and therefore, to the doctrine of the Trinity. There is one God who subsists in three persons. We will consider an introduction to this all-important, fundamental doctrine.

First of all, we'll begin by looking briefly at a passage of Scripture to open up our consideration of the doctrine of the Trinity. At the end of Christ's earthly ministry, we read, in Matthew 28:18–20, these words, "And Jesus came and spake unto them, saying, all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen." While God reveals His existence and some of His attributes through creation and providence, the revelation of salvation, that is, the saving knowledge of the blessed Trinity, can only be found through His Word. The revelation of the Trinity comes in connection with the revelation of the gospel, as

you see here in Matthew 28. God revealed both the Trinity and the gospel at the same time, and in the same ways, more obscurely by way of anticipation in the Old Testament, and more clearly and fully by way of fulfillment in the New Testament.

Consequently, we should not be surprised to see this reference to the Trinity tied to baptism, one of the most fundamental ordinances in the New Testament. You learn the same, for example, in the apostolic benediction, in 2 Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen.” We see, in Matthew 28, that the believer is baptized into the “name,” (singular), “of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost,” (plural). So, in the unity of the divine being, there are three persons; and these three are one God, of one substance, equal in all of the indivisible, divine attributes. That means that the revelation of the Trinity is God’s self-revelation about who God is, internal to the divine being, as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit stand toward each other. We see shadowy references to plurality in the opening three verses of the Bible, for example: “God created the heavens and the earth.” You see reference to the Spirit hovering over the waters. And you can connect this to other places, where Christ is the One who created the world. So you see it in the opening verses of the Bible, and in the Old Testament narratives, and Psalms, and Prophets. But in the New Testament, we discover greater clarity about that same plurality, a plurality of equality. 1 Corinthians 8:6, “But to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him, and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him.” There is one God, and there are three who are equal, who perform divine works, and who are worthy of worship and obedience. As we will see, the three are not three gods, but one God in three persons or subsistences—the blessed holy Trinity. We know this because God revealed it to us in the Scriptures. But the doctrine of the Trinity surpasses our comprehension.

In previous lectures, we felt the weakness and limitation of our minds, in considering many of God’s attributes. But we are stretched even further in truths about the Trinity. That is because there is nothing comparable to the Trinity in this world, and there are no analogies to illustrate it. In this lecture, we’ll explore an introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity, providing some basic categories and terminology that will equip us for exploring these truths further in the days ahead.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the highest and most precious doctrine in the Christian faith, and so it warrants careful attention. But it is also the most practical doctrine. It is the foundation of the believer’s salvation and all communion with God, delivering some of the greatest joys to us. But before we turn to the practical, we must begin with the doctrinal. As I’ve noted, this will require some heavy lifting and some diligent thinking on our part. We’re talking about God, so it should not surprise us that it will be difficult. But it is also all-important.

And so secondly, let’s consider the doctrinal exposition of the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine is summarized in Westminster Confession of Faith, chapter 2, paragraph 3, which says, “In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.” Well, given the fundamental importance of this doctrine, as well as the difficulty and complexity it entails, we need to aim at clarity, by defining our terms and categories precisely, thereby seeking to avoid the pitfalls and dangers of theological inaccuracy and error. There is one God, and there are three persons that the Bible refers to as God. So, how do we understand this? Well, let me give you a number of points in this pursuit of clarity.

First of all, let’s think about the word, “persons”—one God, three persons. When using the

word “person” to describe the three, we need to be careful about a point of confusion. When we hear “person,” we may find it difficult not to think of the idea of a human person. We unavoidably connect this to the idea of finite, created, separate relations. So for example, human persons, like fathers, beget other persons, like sons. We must not think in terms of the imperfections of created persons, who have a limited essence, distinct and separate from one another. In the doctrine of God, we are referring to an uncreated person, devoid of the limitations and finitude of human personality. An uncreated person is the divine essence subsisting in a relative property. You say, “Well, wow! That sounds very complicated. An uncreated person is the divine essence subsisting in a relative property.” Well, let’s further define those words, so we can take what sounds complicated—the vocabulary—and focus our attention on, “What do those words mean?” Because if we understand what they mean, then all of the sudden the word doesn’t seem so puzzling to us. Let’s define the words “subsistence” and “relative property.”

That brings us, secondly, to this idea of subsistence. “Subsistence” is really another word for “person” in the Trinity. So think of it as a synonym. It’s not a perfect synonym, but a close synonym to the word “person” in the Trinity. Now, I realize this is abstract, but subsistence means a manner of existing, a manner or way of existing. So it means the way in which the one God, the divine essence, exists in the Father eternally begetting the Son, the Son being begotten eternally, and the Holy Spirit proceeding eternally from the Father and the Son—three subsistences in one divine being. It’s the way in which the triune God exists. The word “subsistence”—you can even hear it in the English. The word “subsistence” connects to the unity of one divine essence, unlike human essences, which are, as I said, finite and separate from each other. So two humans share a common essence in general—we refer to it as “humanity” or “human nature”—but they are not the same essence in particular. They’re distinct human beings from each other. This also helps clarify that the three persons are triune, not triple. The divine essence does not exist apart from the three persons, nor is the divine essence the sum total of the three persons. The divine essence *is* three persons, or subsistences. The subsistences do not divide up God into three parts. Remember our treatment of the doctrine of divine simplicity. God is not composed of parts. The three are not divided in being, but distinguished by their relative properties and personal relations. So let’s define those words. Let’s see if we can understand those concepts, “relative properties” and “personal relations.”

So, thirdly, “relative properties” are the names of the personal internal acts of the divine essence. They describe an act of God relative to God, not the creature—not anything outside of Himself. Each cannot be attributed to the other two persons of the Godhead. They’re internal, in that they do not describe anything in creation or outside of God and the Bible. There is One who is not of another, but is also not alone—He eternally begets. So the relative property is generation, or begetting, which distinguishes Him in the divine essence. Likewise, the Bible speaks of One who is eternally “begotten” and is “of the first.” The relative property here is affiliation, of being begotten, which distinguishes Him in the divine essence. And lastly, there is One who is not begotten, but who proceeds eternally from the first and the second, and the relative property here is procession, which distinguishes Him in the divine essence. So there’s one divine essence that subsists in three relative properties, each one having the whole divine essence, without the essence being divided.

Now, we can add further to this to strengthen our sense of clarity. That brings us, fourthly, to “personal relations.” Personal relations, therefore, derive from these relative properties. Personal relations are the names that the Bible supplies. You’ve probably already anticipated this. First, we speak of the Father. The Father has His name from His paternity in relationship to the Son; He eternally begets the Son. The Gospel of John, 1:14 and 18, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt

among us, (and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.” Verse 18 says, “No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.” Secondly, God the Son has His name in relation to the Father, who begets Him eternally. So eternal generation means that the one and whole essence of the Father is communicated to the Son without multiplication or division. Think of John 10:30, “I and my Father are one,” or that same book, 14:11, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me.” Thirdly, God the Holy Spirit has His name in relation to His proceeding eternally from the Father and the Son. He receives the complete undivided divine essence from the Father and Son. In John 15:26, Jesus says, “But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.” He is also called the “Spirit of Christ” in Romans 8:9 and the “Spirit of the Son” in Galatians 4:6. The Bible attributes divine actions and perfections to the Holy Spirit.

So the doctrine of the Trinity is based on careful study of the Scriptures, in which we find one God in three persons—three in one. It is difficult to understand, but it provides the foundation for the whole Christian faith, so we neglect it to our own peril.

Fifthly, in considering the tri-unity of God, we must also affirm the unity of the Trinity. This is a very important point. Each of the three persons has the whole undivided divine essence. So we must reject the idea, for example, that only the Father is somehow truly God, and that the Son and the Holy Spirit are something lower, as if having only a derived deity. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory. Each has the whole divine essence. So the essence of the Son is the divine essence, and the essence of the Holy Spirit is the divine essence. Similarly, we can say the Father is God in Himself, the Son is God in Himself, the Holy Spirit is God in Himself. But then, when we turn to speak about subsistence and ask the question, “In what manner, or way, does each person have the whole divine essence?” we answer, “The Father is of none, the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Each has the whole divine essence, and yet the essence remains undivided. In previous lectures, we learned about God’s attributes which belong to the single divine essence, and therefore apply equally to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There are not three eternal, or three omnipotents, but one eternal omnipotent God subsisting in three persons. So we reject the error of tri-theism—there being three gods—as well as polytheism. We affirm, as we saw earlier, monotheism. There is one God.

Sixthly, since the divine essence is numerically one, and there are three persons subsisting within the Godhead, they are indivisibly united. They mutually inhabit one another. The Father is in the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son. In John 14:11, Jesus says, “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me.” Theologians call this the doctrine of perichoresis—mutual indwelling of the three persons. 1 Corinthians 2:11, “For what man knoweth the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.” God the Trinity enjoys perfect fullness of communion and mutual delight in Himself from all eternity. The Father loves the Son and the Spirit infinitely, eternally, and unchangeably, and you can say the same about the Son’s love for the Spirit and the Father, and the Spirit’s love for the Father and the Son. God does not need creation or anything outside Himself to be complete. Creation serves to display God’s glory, but it is not the source of God’s glory and blessedness.

Seventhly, we have referred to the internal works or actions within the Godhead: the Father begetting, the Son being begotten, the Spirit proceeding, and so on. We can also speak of the external

works or actions of the Trinity, outside of the Godhead, with reference to their actions regarding creation. Indeed, the Trinity was revealed when God the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit. These two missions, the coming of the Son and of the Spirit, are a revelation of the life of God. The Father sending the Son and sending the Holy Spirit, that is, Christ's incarnation, and the outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost, take place in time, and in time, they provide revelation or manifestation of what we've already learned about the eternal relations within the Trinity. In other words, it is God who is sending God. There are, in the eternal essence of God, three distinct persons.

Eighthly and lastly under this section, since the three persons of the Trinity are God indivisibly, so also the works or external operations of God outside Himself are indivisible. The three persons carry out jointly the works of God concerning the creature. This is seen, for example, in creation, which I noted earlier. There's a reference to God creating the heavens and the earth, there's a reference to the Spirit who is present hovering over the waters, and then we learn in the New Testament that the Father created the world, the universe, through the Son, that the Son was the one who made all things, and so on. All three persons are working jointly in the work of creation. The same can be said with regards to redemption. The Father sends the Son, and the Son is sent by the Father, and the Son is being upheld by the Spirit in all that He is accomplishing. And even in the application of salvation, the Father choosing the elect, the Son purchasing the redemption, the Spirit applying that redemption to them, and so on. We could speak at length about this, and indeed, you'll hear more about it in the module on the doctrines of salvation. Scripture brings to the forefront certain persons of the Trinity in connection with certain works, which reflects the order of the persons within the Trinity. But it is always in connection with the three, without hierarchy or subordination, within the Godhead.

Thirdly, we should consider this briefly from a polemical angle as well. So let's consider it polemically. First of all, and this is important, when you're first thinking about the Trinity in any depth, you should resist and reject all human analogies or illustrations from the created world to explain the Trinity, because they result in error. They will always result in one type of heresy or another. Some of them you'll have heard. People say, "Well, the Trinity is like water. It can be ice when it's frozen, or it could be liquid when it's water, or it can be a gas, it can be vapor." Or they'll say, "The Trinity is like a tree; it has roots in the ground, and it has a trunk, and it has branches." Or they'll say, "The Trinity is like a man who is a son and also a husband and also a father." Well, all of these analogies are heretical when it comes to the Trinity. You can't refer to God as one person who has three different modes of existence, or one person that has three different relationships to that which is outside of Himself, and so on. It leads to all sorts of trouble. The doctrine of the Trinity is ineffable, it is sublime, it's beautiful, it's mysterious, and it is clear in terms of what the Bible teaches us. We need to stick to the text of Scripture, recognizing that the Trinity is completely distinct from everything else that we know in the created world—that there's nothing here that does justice to explaining it.

Secondly, let me point out two opposite errors. We're not going to consider this at length. But on the one hand, there are various forms of modalism. The idea is that God appears in different modes—God is one person manifested in three different modes. That's somewhat simplistic in terms of describing modalism, and it takes lots of different forms, but we need to beware of this idea of there being one person manifested in three different modes. The opposite error is tri-theism, when speaking about the Trinity, to refer to three divine essences, which would thus be three gods rather than one. And that can take place in different forms shapes and sizes and so on. So beware of those two opposite errors.

Thirdly, some teach that God the Son is subordinate to God the Father. Now we've learned that the three are one God, the same in substance. So we must vehemently reject the error that God the Son in His divinity is in any way subordinate to the Father. He is not. The subordination of the Son that is described in various places in the Gospels is entirely limited to Christ's incarnation as the God-man, the Word made flesh. It speaks of the obedience of the human will of Christ's human nature to the divine will, not to a relation within the divine being. So God the Son is not subordinate to God the Father, within the divine being.

Fourthly, you'll sometimes hear objections to the technical vocabulary that is used in discussing the doctrine of the Trinity. But it is necessary to make clear distinctions, and the reason is because heresies all claim to hold to the Bible. They may say, for example, that Jesus is God. But when you question them or you listen to them, you discover that they mean that He is a created god, or that He is similar to God but not of the same essence. And there are many, many, many other perversions. So as you begin to flesh out what a person is saying or what they mean, indeed, what you are saying and what you think, we have to employ clear distinctions. We have to strive to be precise in our language. These truths are too precious to be distorted.

Fourthly, we can now draw some practical application for ourselves. First of all, the Trinity is the foundation of the believer's salvation. John 17:3, "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." It is impossible to know the Father without the Son. Jesus says in John 14:6, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me." And it is impossible to have the Son without receiving the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:9, "But ye are not in the flesh, but in the Spirit, if so be that the Spirit of God dwell in you. Now if any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his."

Secondly, the Trinity is the foundation of all of our worship. Revelation 5:11–14 brings out the character of our Trinitarian worship. You can actually connect that back to Isaiah 6 as well. We see that we are baptized into the name of the Trinity. Even the most simple, basic component of the Christian life, prayer, is Trinitarian. We learn to pray to the Father, we learn to pray in the name of the Son and through the mediation of the Son, and we learn to pray by the Holy Spirit. The Bible teaches us that we ascribe praise and adoration to each of the three persons, and seek from each of the three divine blessing.

Thirdly, the believer's obedience is tied to the Trinity. The Father commands us to "hear" the Son, Matthew 17:5. We behold the glory of God in the Son (John 1, Colossians 1, Hebrews 1). The Son commands us to take the gospel to the nations, as we saw in Matthew 28. And saints are called to obey "what the Spirit saith unto the churches," as you see in Revelation 2.

Fourthly, the believer is brought into union with the triune God. John 14:23 says, "Jesus answered and said unto him, if a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him." The believer is brought into union with Christ in their salvation. The Holy Spirit comes to indwell the believer in their salvation. And this union leads to communion with each of the persons of the Trinity. Communion or fellowship is giving and receiving, and the believer is brought into a precious privilege of being able to enjoy this in time and eternity, receiving from the Father and the Son and the Spirit, enjoying all of the riches and bounty that are conferred upon us in salvation, us giving in our love, our service, our worship, our praise, our obedience to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as well. There is communion that results from this union in the triune God.

Well, in this lecture we have provided a brief survey of the doctrine of the Trinity. There is obviously much more to learn, but this provides some help for a Trinitarian reading of the Bible.

And it should lead us to long for a greater knowledge of the one God who subsists in three persons. In the next lecture, we'll be turning our consideration to the doctrine of God's divine decrees, His eternal purpose in foreordaining whatsoever comes to pass.