

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; (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*).

Curse of the Fetish Priest

by GUILLAUME DJOSSOU

Giving one's life to God can be a life-or-death decision in some regions of the world. As a lay pastor and church planter working near the city of Cotonou, Benin, I saw this firsthand.

When Ann and her husband became Seventh-day Adventist Christians, Ann's father, a fetish priest in Benin, cursed her with death.

One day as Ann sat working under a tree, she noticed dark clouds forming. She gathered her things, but before she could leave, rain started falling. The rain wasn't heavy, so Ann remained under the sheltering tree.

Suddenly, lightning struck, and Ann's clothes caught fire. She yanked off the burning cloth wrap, but her back was badly burned. Some Seventh-day Adventist church members nearby ran to help Ann to safety. Ann lost consciousness before they reached a nearby house.

Realizing that Ann's injuries were the work of the devil, the believers read Revelation 12:7–12 and claimed God's power over Satan. Then they prayed for Ann. While they prayed, some people approached the house and began invoking spirits. The believers realized that these were fetish priests, and they prayed even more earnestly, even as the voodoo priests called on their spirits.

When Ann regained consciousness, the believers tried to take her to the hospital. But the priests prevented them from leaving. Finally, the police arrived and helped the Christians take Ann from the house. Ann eventually recovered from her ordeal.

At the time the demons attacked Ann, the little Seventh-day Adventist congregation had just eight members. But word spread about how God had saved Ann from the curse of the voodoo priests, and many people came to hear about Ann's powerful God.

Because of Ann's steadfast faith and the family's work in the community, many people have given their lives to Jesus. The little church in the village has grown to more than 50 members.



Your mission offerings are helping to advance the work of God in a demon-infested region of the world. Who knows how many people will hear Christ's message of love because you have given? Thank you.

GUILLAUME DJOSSOU (left) was a lay evangelist when this event happened. He is now studying theology at the Adventist University Cosendai in Cameroon.