

# UNIT 1: The Attributes of God

## Section 5: God's Tri-Unity

*Assigned Reading:*

*A. W. Pink – The Attributes of God  
No Assigned Reading*

### Introduction:

As we have been studying, worshipping God involves knowing God! But in knowing Him, we come upon much that goes beyond our comprehension (as we talked about God's Incomprehensibility). Of all the doctrines in the Bible this one is surely one of the most difficult to grasp, and involves us certainly declaring that there is mystery in our knowledge of God. **Deut 29:29 explains**, "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." **Observations:**

- 1) There are "secret things" which we were not meant to know! They are God's.
- 2) The things "revealed" are for us and our children! Pass these truths on!
- 3) The things are "revealed" so that we may "observe" (practice) them!

So, while we must admit that there are mysteries that we are not told, the things that are revealed are for us to treasure and study and hold dear to our hearts, for those are the things we may know about our Lord! **John Calvin makes a great statement in this regard**, "... let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends. For how can the human mind measure off the measureless essence of God according to its own little measure... Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of Himself... but we shall be "leaving it to him" if we conceive of Him to be as He reveals Himself to us, without inquiring about him elsewhere than from His Word." In contemplating the Trinity, we must at the outset admit that the term never appears in the Bible. It is a term that Christians have used over the centuries to describe the Biblical material describing to us who God is. Any term is only as useful as it depicts accurately the true nature of things, and therefore, we need to analyze what this term means.

Some might object to trying to discuss or ponder God's nature, specifically the Trinity, since it goes so far beyond our ability to comprehend... It is interesting to note that in Church History, the term was developed so that thought could be applied to God's nature, but certainly not to remove the mystery of God. There is a deep "anti-intellectualism" that has taken over in so many churches today. A living, vibrant faith, though, is one that is full of thought and purpose... True worship arises out of deeply contemplated truths, as presented in the Scriptures. The truth is that this doctrine cannot be avoided, and it is to people's own peril to believe differently. The Trinity is not an attempt at saying "we know God exactly and completely," but instead an attempt at holding onto the mystery of God as He has revealed Himself in His Word. We are merely trying to explain that this doctrine is not inherently contradictory, and while the full extent is beyond comprehension, there is an element in which we can understand something about God's existence as the Bible describes it. By the way there are countless things that we must admit we don't completely understand and meanwhile admit they exist... A good example comes from the field of Quantum Physics. In studying light, physicists in trying to account for the phenomena of light hold that it is waves AND quanta (bundles of energy), yet logically it cannot be both. One physicist put it, "On Mon, Wed, and Fri, we think of light as waves; on Tues, Thurs, and Sat, we think of it as particles of energy." Presumably, on Sun physicists do not concern themselves with the nature of light. One cannot explain a mystery, but can only acknowledge its presence!

Enjoying the Lord involves thinking deeply upon Him! To contemplate God we must contemplate Him as revealed in the Scriptures. In contemplating the One God, we must concurrently contemplate Him in Three Persons! How often have you heard someone say, I love the Trinity? I'm sure if your experience has been like mine, hardly ever! Why? We say we love Jesus, God, the Spirit; we exclaim love for the Bible, the Cross, the Blood; we sing of our love for justification, forgiveness, mercy, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Coming, etc. Perhaps the lack of our descriptions of "love for the Trinity" comes from how little we understand this doctrine, and therefore it evokes little thought, contemplation, or praise. Meanwhile, the Trinity is absolutely crucial to Genuine Christianity!

**Q1:** What do we mean by the term, Trinity? Is this an acceptable term to use?

**Q2:** Is there any appropriate illustrations for the Trinity? If so, what could be used?

**Q3:** What does the Bible have to say about the Trinity?

**Q4:** What is the history behind the term Trinity?

## Outline:

### I. Defining "Trinity"

#### A. *A Prelude to a Definition*

1. We understand that there is a "mystery" of the Trinity, but this doesn't mean it's irrational. It means that we realize that God is **completely unique** in the way He exists, and there are elements of His being that are simply beyond our mental capabilities to comprehend!
2. We are attempting to use language (which is finite) to express in words infinite truths!
3. How do we normally discuss things? We use comparisons and place things in categories...
4. Ex) "tastes like chicken," "soft like a feather."
5. Problem? God is completely unique! **Is 40:25** "To whom then will you liken Me?"
6. But it is the Trinity that preserves this "unique" quality
7. **Tozer**, "Our sincerest effort to grasp the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity must remain forever futile, and only by deepest reverence can it be saved from actual presumption."

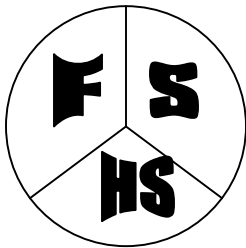
#### B. *The Trinity Defined*

1. Trinity was coined by Tertullian (Latin: trinitas)
2. Basic Definition – Within the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
3. **Warfield**, "There is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence."
4. **More Significant Terms:**
  - a. Immanent/Ontological Trinity – personal properties by which the Persons are distinguished—generation and procession (inner, eternal workings)
    - (1) Perichoresis – inter-Trinitarian relations (community of being)
    - (2) Penetration – each person penetrates the others while being penetrated by the others
    - (3) Father: origination of the Son and Spirit (eternal generation, eternal procession)
    - (4) Son: eternally generated from the Father
    - (5) Spirit: eternally proceeding from the Father (and Son??)
  - b. Economic Trinity – Administration, management, and actions of the Persons (outer workings)
  - c. In the Trinity there is "ontological equality but economic subordination."
5. **Three Foundations:**
  - a. Monotheism – There is Only One God
  - b. There are Three Divine Persons

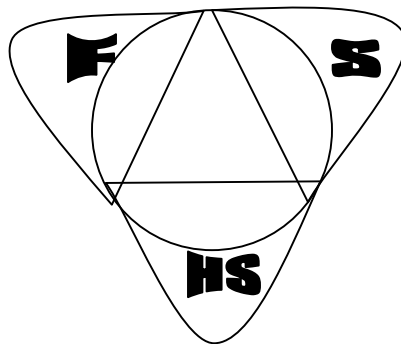
c. The Persons are Coequal and Coeternal

### C. Illustrating the Trinity

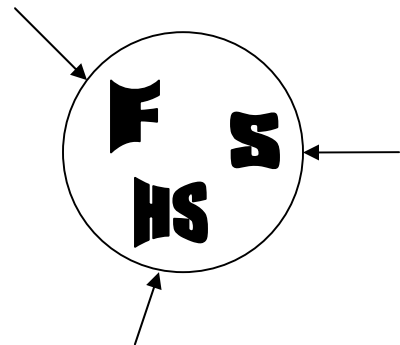
1. No illustration can possibly capture all that is involved in the biblical revelation of the Trinity... Most are merely parallels of the “three-in-one” idea...
2. The problem in general is that analogies drawn from the physical realm tend to be either tritheistic or modalistic in their implications...
  - a. Tritheistic illustration: Egg (yolk, white, shell), 3-leaf clover
  - b. Modalistic illustration: Water (solid, liquid, gas), Man (Farmer, Mayor, Elder)
  - c. We have a tendency to alternate in analogies between these two false pictures...
  - d. Maybe the best we can do is illustrate from human personality: (**Augustine**)
    - (1) A man can think about something (He is the subject)
    - (2) A man can think about Himself (He is the object)
    - (3) A man can think about Himself thinking (thoughts he as a subject has about himself as an object)→ In this occurrence, subject, object, and thoughts are distinct, yet each thing in a way includes the man’s whole being... All the man is the subject, all the man is the object, and the thoughts are about all of the man as a person...
  - e. III)  $1+1+1=3$  ...  $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$
  - f. It is interesting that in the Bible which is replete with many analogies from nature and life to describe God’s character, that nowhere is there an analogy provided to teach the doctrine of the Trinity! Closest we get are the titles themselves: Father, Son, H.S.
3. See “Ancient Diagram of the Holy Trinity” (p45 **Charts of Christian Theology**)
4. See the Following Diagrams...



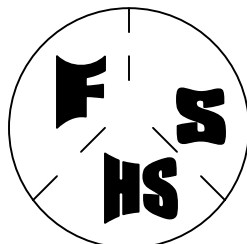
God’s Being is NOT divided into three equal parts belonging to the three members of the Trinity.



The Personal distinctions in the Trinity are NOT something added onto God’s Real Being.



The Persons of the Trinity are NOT just three different ways of looking at the one being of God.

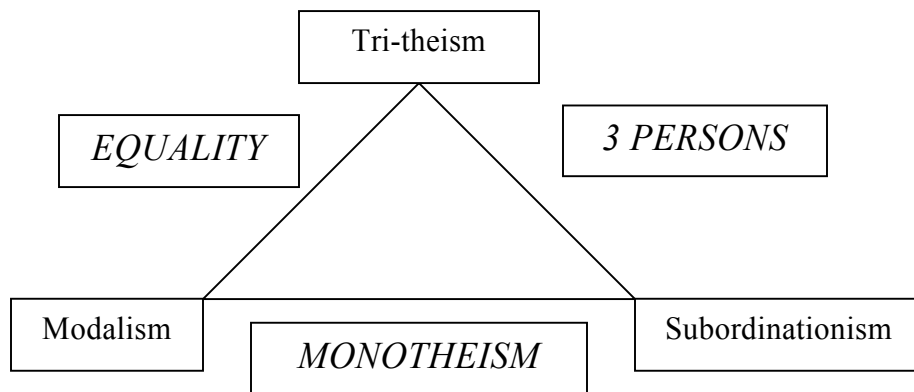


There ARE three distinct Persons, and the being of each Person is equal to the whole being of God.

5. But, the scriptures do not ask us to believe in a contradiction...
  - a. To say God is three persons and not three persons would be a contradiction
  - b. To say There is One God and there is not One God would be a contradiction
  - c. To say “There is One God and God is Three Persons” is NOT a contradiction!
  - d. There is mystery here (something we don’t utterly understand), but that shouldn’t trouble us as long as these aspects are taught by the Scriptures.
  - e. **Berkhof**, “The Trinity is a mystery... man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible. It is intelligible in some of its relations and modes of manifestation, but unintelligible in its essential nature.”

*D. The Trinity Distinguished From Error...*

*Any Departure from the above results in error!* [See **Triangle** below]



1. Dynamic Monarchianism (Adoptionism)
  - a. Originator: Byzantine leader, Theodotus (AD 190) explained that at Jesus’ baptism, the Spirit, or Christ descended on him. Prior to that he was merely an ordinary man...
  - b. Paul of Samosata claimed that the Word (the Logos) was not a personal, self-subsistent entity; that is Jesus Christ was not the Word. God accomplished what He willed through the man Jesus, who was not God Himself.
  - c. This tended to be a more isolated phenomenon...
2. Modalistic Monarchianism (Patripassionism)
  - a. This belief was much more widespread and a somewhat popular teaching
  - b. Originator in most complete/sophisticated form: Sabellius in early 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD.
  - c. They believed there is One God who may be variously designated as Father, Son, and Spirit. These are merely names that are appropriate at different times. (One person, 3 names or roles)
  - d. Today, the United Pentecostal Church believes this way...
3. Subordinationism
  - a. The Son was inferior to the Father in being. The Son eternally derives his being from the Father. They explained that the Son was eternal (not created) but still not equal to the Father in being or attributes – subordinate.
  - b. Origin (early church father) in attempted to protect the distinction of persons advocated a form of this in his writing... It was rejected at the council of Nicea.
4. Tritheism – belief in three gods...

## II. The Biblical Record Regarding the Trinity

### A. *There is One God – Monotheism...*

1. **Deuteronomy 6:4-6** “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart.”
2. **Exodus 20:3, Deut 4:35, 32:29...**
3. **Isaiah 40-48** “Trial of the False Gods”
  - a. **40:13-18** “Who has directed the Spirit of the Lord, or as His counselor has informed Him? With whom did He consult and who gave Him understanding? And who taught Him in the path of justice and taught Him knowledge and informed Him of the way of understanding? Behold, the nations are a drop from a bucket, and are regarded as a speck of dust on the scales; behold, He lifts up the islands like fine dust. Even Lebanon is not enough to burn, nor its beasts enough for a burnt offering. All the nations are as nothing before Him, they are regarded by Him as less than nothing and meaningless. To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?”
  - b. **43:10** “You are My witnesses,” declares the Lord, “and My servant whom I have chosen, in order that you may know and believe Me and understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me.”
  - c. **44:6-8** “Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me. Who is like Me? Let him proclaim and declare it; yes, let him recount it to Me in order, from the time that I established the ancient nation. And let them declare to them the things that are coming and the events that are going to take place. Do not tremble and do not be afraid; have I not long since announced it to you and declared it? And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any other Rock? I know of none.’”
  - d. **45:21-22** “Declare and set forth your case, indeed, let them consult together. Who has announced this from of old? Who has long since declared it? Is it not I, the Lord? And there is no other God besides Me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none except Me. Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”
  - e. **46:9-10** “Remember the former things long past, for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times things which have not been done, saying, ‘My purpose will be established, and I will accomplish all My good pleasure.’”
4. **Plural words (pronouns and verbs) – “persons”:** Gen 1:26, 3:22, 11:7, Is 6:8
5. **NT... I Cor 8:4-6, Eph 4:3-6, James 2:19, I Tim 2:5-6**

### B. *There are Three Persons*

1. The Father recognized as God – Jn 6:27, I Pet 1:2
2. Jesus recognized as God – **Jn 1:1 (see below), Phil 2, Col 1, Heb 1, Mk 2:1-12, Jn 12:9**
  - a. Word order in Greek is quite flexible – Importance of Endings and Definite Article!
  - b.  $\kappa\alpha\iota\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\upsilon\ \eta\gamma\eta\mu\epsilon\upsilon\ \sigma\epsilon\iota\sigma\tau\omicron\varsigma$
  - c.  $\tau\omicron\upsilon\ \tau\omicron\upsilon$  is thrown forward and lacks an article
  - d. Reason: Emphatic Position and lack of article demonstrates the specificity of Greek!
  - e. Martin Luther, “the lack of an article is against Sabellianism; the word order is against Arianism”

- (1) kaiV oJ lovgoc hJ~n oJ qeovc - and the Word was the God (i.e. the Father; Sabellianism, Modalism)
- (2) kaiV oJ lovgoc hJ~n qeovc - and the Word was a god (Arianism, Jehovah Witness)
- (3) kaiV qeovc hJ~n oJ lovgoc - and the Word was God (Orthodoxy)
- f. The word order tells us that Jesus Christ has all the divine attributes that the Father has; lack of the article tells us that Jesus Christ is not the Father. Jesus Christ is God and has all the attributes that the Father has. But he is not the 1<sup>st</sup> person of the Trinity
- g. “What God was, the Word was!”
  - (1) The Word is ETERNAL – always existed, didn’t come into being at a point in time
  - (2) The Word is PERSONAL – not a force, a person eternally in communion with the Father
  - (3) The Word is DEITY – The Word is God in His nature
- 3. The Holy Spirit recognized as God – **Acts 5:3-4, 1 Cor 2:10, Jn 3:5-6,8**

As long as we use history as a light to illumine, not an authority to obey we can profit greatly from its study.

### C. *The Persons are Coequal and Coeternal*

- 1. **Matt 28:19 Great Commission – “baptismal formula”**
- 2. **Matt 3:16-17, II Cor 13:14, Jn 15:26**
- 3. **I John 5:7 (Comma Johanneum)**
  - a. The textual evidence for this verse is extremely weak...
  - b. It is not only in recent discussion that its validity has been challenged!
  - c. Erasmus (writer of a “critical” edition Greek NT) refused to include it
  - d. He promised to include the words if there was even one manuscript that had the words included... the copy he was given, he commented “the letters were hardly dry”
  - e. Nevertheless, he included the verse in a latter edition, and that edition became the basis for the “textus receptus” that the KJV utilizes as its source text.
  - f. Since Erasmus’ time there have been only 3 other Gr manuscripts, only one which is dated to the time before Erasmus, but even then the passage appears only in the margin and is thought to be the work of a 17<sup>th</sup> C copyist (which would date after Erasmus).
  - g. Also, no quotations of this verse by the early church fathers (Irenaeus, Clement, Tertullian, and Athanasius – the great defender of the Trinity)

## III. The Historical Record Regarding the Trinity

### A. *2<sup>nd</sup> Century*

- 1. Not much in-depth theological reflection while you’re on the run (persecution)...
- 2. Still we see evidence of the Trinity in documents!
- 3. **Clement** of Rome [one of the earliest Christian writers outside the NT]
  - a. A church elder in Rome (some think bishop)
  - b. Wrote a letter from Rome to Corinth regarding a rebellion taking place in the church at Corinth... See the following excerpts!
  - c. “For Christ is of those who are humble-minded, and not of those who exalt themselves over His flock. Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Scepter of the majesty of God, did not come in the pomp of pride or arrogance (though He could have!), but in a humble state, just as the Holy Spirit had spoken concerning Him.”
  - d. “For as God lives, and the Lord Jesus Christ lives, and the Holy Spirit, who are the faith and hope of the chosen ones—the one who in humility of mind, with extended gentleness,

without regret has done the ordinances and commandments given by God, this one will be enrolled and given a name among the number of the saved through Jesus Christ, through whom is the glory unto Him for ever and ever, amen.”

4. **Ignatius of Antioch**

- a. Tradition says he knew John (similarity of language)
- b. Wrote letters to various churches on his way to martyrdom in Rome
- c. “My spirit is but an offscouring of the cross, which is a scandal to the unbelieving, but to us it is salvation and life eternal. Where is the wise man? Where is the disputer? Where is the boasting of those who are called understanding? For our God, Jesus the Christ, was conceived by Mary according to a dispensation of God, from the seed of David, yes, but of the Holy Spirit as well.”
- d. “You being stones of a temple, prepared before as a building of God the Father, being raised up to the heights through the mechanism of Jesus Christ, which is the cross, and using as a rope the Holy Spirit.”

5. **Athenagoras [AD 177]**

- a. In writing apologetically defending that Christians are not “atheists” said the following...
- b. “Who, then would not be astonished to hear men who speak of God the Father, and of God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and who declare both their power in union and their distinction in order, called atheists?”

**B. The Nicene Creed (325AD) [300 bishops attended]**

1. Newly found peace from persecution from without (by the Roman Empire) gave way to problems within! Apologetics → Polemics Debate arose about the nature of Christ...
2. A council was convened to do justice to the witness of the Scriptures regarding God’s nature!
3. \***Culver**, “The Nicene Fathers’ effort was never conceived as one to dissolve the essential mystery of the Godhead, for they recognized such could not be done. The intention, successfully achieved, was precisely to preserve the mystery.”
4. Debate over Substance of Christ:
  - (1) Patripassionists (Sabellianism)
    - Believed the Father became the Son...
  - (2) Arius & Eusebius of Nicomedia
    - Son was created ‘ex nihilo’ by the Father
    - Son was created before the rest of creation, and through Him all else was created
    - Son was ‘heteroousios’ from the Father
    - Son was finite: “There was when he was not”
  - (3) Athanasius & Alexander of Alexandria
    - Son was begotten by the Father’s nature
    - He was not subordinate to the Father
    - He was coeternal with the Father
    - Son was ‘homoousios’ with the Father
    - Son is a separate personality from the Father, distinct, not merely a mode
    - argued, though, that this is NOT ditheism! (Same substance, different person)
  - (4) Eusebius of Caesarea (Semi-Arianism)
    - Rejected Arius’ beliefs – Son not created ex nihilo, was begotten before all time, not subordinate to the Father, distinct person from the Father
    - BUT rejected both ‘homoousios’ and ‘heteroousios’, rather the Son was ‘homoiousios’ (similar substance) to the Father.

#### (5) Western Bishops

- Satisfied with Tertullian's formula: Three persons in one substance.
  - Not concerned with "metaphysical problems" – issues were eastern in origin
5. The council decided biblically (Homoousios) The truth of the following statement comes from its faithfulness to the Scriptural testimony, not because the council had authority in and of itself!
  6. Used a term to describe the essence of Biblical truth! Specific, no room for ambiguity; people love to twist meanings from words to make them mean what they don't. This term allowed the church to be very clear/plain
  7. The Nicene Creed was enlarged at Constantinople (381) and approved at Chalcedon (451)
  8. "We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And we believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father before all worlds, the unique Son, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, by Whom all things were made, whether things in heaven and things in earth, Who for us men and for our salvation came down and became incarnate, by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father; and he will come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end. And we believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father **and the Son**; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And I believe in one Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen."

#### C. East and West...

1. Terminology:
  - a. WEST: (latin) una substantia, tres personae (one substance, three persons)
    - Tended to focus on the UNITY of God – 3 persons interpreted in terms of mutual fellowship... In fact Augustine considered the Spirit the bond of love between Father and Son.
  - b. EAST: (greek) mia ousia, tria hypostaseis (one essence, three persons)
    - Tended to focus on the DISTINCT individuality of the 3 Persons. Unity is safeguarded by stressing Son and Spirit as eternally derived from the Father (who is often referred to as the "Source")
2. Factors leading to the SPLIT...
  - a. Translation Issues...
    - (1) Gr. hypostaseis = Lat. Substantia... Lat. Personae = Gr. Prosopon
    - (2) When the Greeks said 3 hypostaseis it was like saying 3 substantia to Romans
      - The East looked like Tritheists to the West...
    - (3) But when the Romans said 3 personae it was like saying 3 prosopons (roles)
      - The West looked like Modalists to the East...
  - b. The Filioque Clause... 589 AD (church council in Toledo)
    - (1) An addition to the Nicene Creed by the West – "and the Son" in reference to the Spirit proceeding from the Father.
    - (2) This was done due to John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7, 20:22... But the church was making a statement about the eternal relationship between the H.S. and the Son, something Scripture never explicitly discusses...
    - (3) Response from the East...

- The Father is the only “source” in the Godhead. The Father pronounces His Word and in so doing breathes out in order to give expression to that Word.
  - The distinction protects the Spirit from being conceived as Son, and protects against a threefold hierarchy in the Godhead.
  - Lastly it preserves the personhood of the 3 members of the Trinity (whereas Augustine’s view of the Spirit de-personalizes Him).
- (4) AD 876 was the initial date of division...
- (5) AD 1017 this clause received official endorsement – 1054AD Official Split
- (6) The underlying political issue, though, was the East in relation to the Pope...

*D. Overall Assessment...*

1. Many Christians have differed on a great many subjects, but on this one they have agreed – the Trinity!
2. It is so absurd from a human standpoint that no one would have invented it...
3. We hold to this doctrine because God has revealed that this is what He is like!
4. **A.H. Strong**, “Inscrutable, yet not self-contradictory, this Doctrine furnishes the key to all other doctrines.”
5. Someone has said, “Try to explain it, and you’ll lose your mind; But try to deny it, and you’ll lose your soul.”

**REMINDER**

We don’t believe in the Trinity only because the church long ago believed in it, we believe it because the Bible explains God to us that way!

## IV. The Implications of the Trinity

### → **SO WHAT? What difference does this whole discussion make?**

1. If we truly love the Lord and His truth, we will be impacted by the denial of the truths that He has revealed about Himself.
  - Wouldn’t you be upset if someone said to you, that’s not your dad or mom, or he/she is not your friend? How much more pure, holy, and intense should our zealotry be in defending the truth about the God we profess to worship and adore?
  - Do you hear friends, family, coworkers, and students speaking lies about God?
2. The doctrine of the Trinity always calls us back to the balanced center point.
  - Imbalances in worship are caused by a corresponding imbalance in our view of God. For example, some become so enamored by the Spirit that the Father and Son are lost in the haze of emotions, others become so focused on the Father that they lose sight of the love of the Son and joy and empowerment of the Spirit.
  - Since the fullness of deity dwells in each person of the Godhead we must not elevate one person to the expense of the others. Christian worship will be vital, consistent, and powerful when the proper attitude toward the triune God is maintained. – “*The Doxology*”
  - While knowledge in itself does not save, worship does not exist without knowledge. Jesus tells us in **John 17:3** “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.”
3. Impact on the Gospel
  - The Father, in eternal love and mercy, saves men through the redeeming work of the Son, Jesus Christ, and draws them to Himself by the power and regenerated work of the Spirit.
  - The Gospel is Trinitarian! Remove any person of the Godhead and you have no gospel! Each performs a different role!
  - **Calvin**, “Arius, says that Christ is God, but mutters that he was made and had a beginning. He says that Christ is one with the Father, but secretly whispers in the ears of his own partisans that He is united to the Father like other believers, although by a singular privilege.

Say 'consubstantial' and you will tear off the mask of this turncoat, and yet you add nothing to Scripture." - **Today**, heresy attempts to parade itself as "orthodox" – *we must differentiate!*