

## **STUDY 2**

## **The Godhead: The Holy Trinity**

Four main points

1. Existence
2. Metaphysical Attributes
3. Moral Attributes
4. Trinity

### **1. Existence**

Reading:

Romans 1:18-25, Acts 17:22-31  
KTT 67-74  
H & W 41-42

### **2. Metaphysical Attributes**

Reading:

Psalm 139:7-10; 1 Timothy 1:17; Colossians 1:17  
KTT 80-85  
H & W 43-47 (50-51)

### **3. Moral Attributes**

Reading:

Rev. 4:8; 2 Peter 3:9 - 15; 1 John 4:7-10  
KTT 85-90  
H & W 47-50

### **4. Trinity**

Reading:

Deuteronomy 6:4; John 1:1; Matthew 28:19; Ephesians 1:3-14  
KTT 75-80  
H & W 51-57

## 1. Existence

There are many philosophical arguments that set out to prove the existence of God but most of these can be classified in one of four major types – the cosmological argument (that the universe has a cause and that cause is God), the teleological argument (that the universe appears to be designed with a purpose showing it was designed by an intelligent and purposeful God), the ontological argument (that the greatest thing to be imagined must exist because it is greater to exist than not to exist) and the moral argument (that God is the source of right and wrong). Generally the Bible simply assumes the existence of God. The very nature of God means that if we are to know God at all it is on the basis of his self-revelation. The Bible claims that God has revealed himself to us in ways that we can understand and that we can understand because we are made in the divine image (Genesis 1:27). The Holy Scriptures are God’s guidance to understand what God has revealed to us.

It has been said, ‘unbelief never has enough proof’ (Hebrews 3:9-10). The Psalmist writes, ‘The fool says in his heart, “There is no God”’ (53:1). However, this foolishness is not related to academic or intellectual capability but rather is a moral and spiritual condition that is the opposite to the Biblical notion of ‘Wisdom’. In the Bible unbelief, sin and a broken relationship with God are inextricably linked. The Apostle Paul refers to those who, ‘in their wickedness suppress the truth’ (Romans 1:18) adding that those who do so are ‘without excuse’ in their denial of God (Romans 1:20).

There are places within the Scriptures where evidence for the existence of God is claimed. This evidence may be divided into two categories, that which comes from natural and that which comes from supernatural sources. There is enough evidence in the ‘natural world’, in creation, to show the existence of God. It is because of human sin and wickedness that this is not recognised (Romans 1:18-25). Some notion of God survives throughout the world (Acts 17:24-28) but this needs to be enlightened by God’s supernatural self-revelation.

Traditional Christian thought has seen the major sources of God’s self-revelation as being through the word of the inspired Biblical writers and supremely in the ‘Word made flesh’ (i.e. Jesus Christ). The Bible bears witness to Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation and claims to be a faithful record of his life, teachings, claims, death, resurrection and ascension and his promises for the future. It is because of this record of self-revelation that our thoughts started with the Bible and moved on to what we could know about God.

## 2. Metaphysical Attributes

What we know about God depends on what he reveals to us, including his name. In the Bible the name is not simply an identifying label but a description of the person's character. This is why reverence for the name of God is so important. Metaphysical attributes are characteristics that are absolutely distinctive to God, as opposed to those that are, in some measure, reflected in humankind. No list of the divine attributes can ever be exhaustive, for God is infinite, that is limitless, without bounds of either time 'eternal' (1 Timothy 1:17) or space 'omnipresent' (Psalm 139:7-10).

God is spirit (John 4:24). He is a non-material being. This is the very root of the prohibition of making images of God or idols. God is in no way dependent on that which he has created (Acts 17:25). He stands outside of his creation and yet is actively engaged in every part of it (Colossians 1:17). This is sometimes referred to as God's transcendence (that God stands outside of his creation) and immanence (he is close at hand at every point). The idea that God is everywhere is sometimes expressed as his omnipresence. The notion that God is more present in one place rather than another has to be disregarded. It is not so much that he is more present in a particular place or circumstances but that he is more revealed or known.

There is nothing that God does not know. His knowledge is absolute (Romans 11:23). There is nothing that God cannot do providing, of course, that it is consistent with his own nature and sovereignty (Jeremiah 32:17). God is unchanging (immutable) in his character, nature, purposes and promises. To say that he never changes does not mean that he is static but rather that he is consistent in his ways and works. God is also independent. He does not need the rest of his creation for anything (Acts 17:24-25). He is self-existent. God was not created nor was there any time when he came into being. He is from everlasting to everlasting (Psalm 90:2). All things that exist were created by him.

Nevertheless, God is often represented personally, as a being with mind, will and emotions. We must beware of limiting God by the use of anthropomorphic (man-shaped) language but applying human terms to God helps to reinforce his personal nature. Therefore, we can speak of God's face and eyes and ears and mouth and hand and finger. He is the source of the 'life-breath', which characterises living beings. However, we have to be careful not to limit God or to take verses that speak of God anthropomorphically out of context from the whole of scripture which speaks of God as the omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent creator.

### 3. Moral Attributes

The adjective most often used to describe God in the Bible is 'holy' (Revelation 4:18). Holy, so often construed in a negative way in the present day, means God's exaltation in majesty above the creation, his perfection and his purity. He is separate from all that is 'fallen' through sin. It is because of his holiness that God hates all sin. God's controlled (it is not temper) and permanent (it is not a mood) opposition to sin is known as his wrath (Romans 1:18; 2:5).

God's love is so difficult adequately to express that the New Testament writers used a rare word 'agape' (*a-ga-pay*) for divine love. It has the essential quality of giving-love. It is argued that for God to be love there must be a lover and a beloved at the very heart of his nature (1 John 4:7-10). Some see this as a pointer to the Trinity.

Three closely related aspects of God's nature are his justice, his mercy and his grace. God is righteous and he acts justly (Psalm 36:6). In short, justice means getting what you deserve. Mercy means the remission of punishment and God's disposition to relieve the misery caused by sin (Psalm 103:5; Titus 3:5). In short, mercy is not getting something unwelcome that you deserve. Grace is unmerited favour from God, which is shown by his forgiveness of sin (Ephesians 1:6). In short, it is getting something good that you do not deserve.

The disposition of God is to deal graciously and benevolently with all his creatures. He is good (Psalm 145:8-9). He is patient (2 Peter 3:9-15). He is wise (Colossians 2:2-3). His character, his words and his actions are entirely dependable. He is truthful (Numbers 23:19). The utter reliability of God's character, commands and promises, and his steadfast, determined loyalty may be summed up as his 'faithfulness' (Psalm 89: 1-2, 8).

It is important to understand that God is not the sum total of all the divine attributes, metaphysical and moral, as if there were some kind of recipe of ingredients for God. God's holiness, love and righteousness are no more essential to his nature than any of his other attributes. No understanding of God is complete that omits any of the divine attributes. No one attribute is singled out as being more important than the rest. These attributes are exercised in unity and in harmony because he is God. It is quite wrong to think that God is inconsistent so that he is a gracious and loving God at one point in human history and a just or wrathful God at another point. God is forever the same. 'God is a unity and everything he does is an act of the whole person of God' (Grudem).

#### 4. Trinity

Every statement of Christian Doctrine is, in a way, an attempt to make orderly sense of the various strands of teaching in the Bible. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith for it is at least a partial answer to the question, 'what is God like?' It is right to say that the word 'Trinity' cannot be found in the Bible but the doctrine of the 'Trinity' makes sense of the Scriptural teaching. The Christian Doctrine of the Trinity can be summarised in three statements. There is one God and only one God; this one God exists eternally in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; these three persons are completely equal, each fully possessing the divine nature or essence.

The teaching of the Old Testament is unequivocal. There is but one God (Deuteronomy 6:4). The Israelites were absolutely committed to belief in one God. The idols of the heathen were not gods in any real sense. It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that it was against this background that the early Christians came to believe that Jesus shared the nature of God. John's Gospel calls Jesus God (1:1; 20:28). The early Christians not only knew Jesus as the Son of God, but also worshipped him and applied to him titles used of God in the Old Testament. The Holy Spirit was also regarded as divine and described in personal terms (John 14:26; Romans 8:27). The early Christians named God the Father, Jesus Christ his only Son and the Holy Spirit alongside each other in a way that implies their divinity and equality. The idea of Trinity (three-in-oneness) is the solution to the problem of one God in three persons.

There are, perhaps, hints of the Trinity in some Old Testament passages (e.g. Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:7; Isaiah 6:8 and even Psalm 45:6-7, quoted in Hebrews 1:8). In the New Testament, there are several passages where the persons of the Trinity are named together (e.g. Matthew 3:16-17). Perhaps the most notable text is part of what is commonly known as 'The Great Commission' (Matthew 28:19). Baptism was the outward sign of initiation into the Christian community. Matthew, the most Jewish of the Gospels, says that baptism is in the name (singular) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. New Testament writers also use 'God' to refer to the Father, 'Lord' to refer to the Son and Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:4-6; Ephesians 4:4-6; Jude 20-21) as if the three should stand together.

In the Holy Trinity, God is three persons, each person is in essence God (consubstantial). Each person is fully God (not one-third of God). God is one God but each divine person is distinct. The persons of the Trinity eternally existed and are properly worshipped as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.