

Is God One or Three

Matthew 3:16 - 17

One of the last videos we saw, and last sermon we heard from Jim was concerning the three persons of God. In case you were left with questions or misunderstandings on this subject I have prepared this sermon to try to answer those questions and help you understand it better. I hope it will not confuse you more. Now, I hope everyone is awake this morning because this is a meaty sermon.

Sometime this week I hope to have this converted to print and uploaded to our church website along with the scripture sheet which should be there now. This will help you to study and understand it more.

In covering this topic, I am going to have three goals in mind:

(1) present the facts and information from the scriptures. This is the primary and most important aspect of our study. “What say the scriptures” must always be our starting point when studying any spiritual topic.

(2) Consider all rational conclusions. I will endeavor to present to you what are the current thoughts that exist today in regard to the issue.

(3) Offer my own view at this time in light of the scriptures and my reasons why I hold the view. Only at the end of the lesson will I try to allow my view to color the study that we have made.

As always, I greatly encourage you to listen to the lesson with an open mind and heart that is not tainted with prejudice or a desire to prove oneself correct. I also greatly encourage you to take the lesson and study these things for yourself in depth and detail.

Finally, after prayerful study, if you have found me in error, I would appreciate a presentation of your thoughts based on scriptures you offer to me. With these things in mind, let us begin our study.

There have always been questions and difficulties in trying to understand the nature and person of God. There is considerable disagreement within the religious world concerning the nature of God. It should go without saying that it is important for us to know the most we can about God since we have been called to be like Him.

One of the most common descriptions of God is the trinity. Most people understand that the word “trinity” is not found in the Bible. This should always make one on guard when unable to use biblical names. However, there is nothing wrong with using non biblical names as long as they are accurate.

For example, the word Bible is not found in the scriptures, but it is an accurate statement of what we have in our hands.

The words “omnipotent,” “omnipresent,” and “omniscient” are also not found in the scriptures but are accurate words to describe God as all powerful, ever present, and all knowing.

The greater questions we must ask are these:
Are the principles of belief of the trinity accurate?
How does God describe Himself?
Is God one or is God three?
These are the things we will look at in this lesson.

There are clear biblical teachings that tell Us that there is one God.
Deuteronomy 6:4 says

(4)Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one!

Also, in Ephesians 4:6 we read that there is “one God and Father of all.”
Now please turn to Mark 12:29. We have it right from Jesus as we read

(29)Jesus answered him, ‘The first of all the commandments is: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’”

Jesus knew that there is one God and taught that to those who would come to Him. But this immediately should leave in our minds a dilemma. If there is one God, how is it that Jesus claimed to be God?
This, of course, was one of the arguments that the religious leaders in Jesus’ day were using against Him. How could Jesus be God?
Look at John 1:1-3. Make no mistake about it, Jesus claimed to be God, was proven to be God, and the apostolic writers verify that Jesus is God.
John wrote

(1)In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (2)He was in the beginning with God. (3)All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

In John 1, the Word is identified as Jesus who came to earth as the light of the world.

If you turn to John 5:18 you will see that the multitudes and religious leaders understood that Jesus claimed to be God. The bible says.....

(18)Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God.

Many other passages such as Colossians 1:15-18 and Hebrews 1:2 verify Jesus to be the creator and in the beginning, and therefore God.
Again, we must ask the question, how can it be that God is one when we see that Jesus is God, and the Father is God?

From the beginning God revealed that there was more than one person that make up God. In Genesis 1:1 we read, “In the beginning God....”

The Hebrew word for God is “el.” However, that is not the Hebrew word that was used when God described Himself to the world. Instead, He used the Hebrew word “elohim” which is the plural of “el.”
This plurality is seen in the word more clearly in Exodus 20:3

(3)You shall have no other gods before Me.

The word “gods” is “elohim.” Some suggest that the plurality of the word suggests that it denotes majesty and glory. While this may be true concerning other texts, it cannot be true here because the plurality is more distinct later in Genesis 1. This plurality can even be seen in our own English language in Genesis 1:26a

(26a)Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.

If there were only one person, then these words do not make sense. The sentence ought to read, Then God said, I will make man in My image, according to My likeness. But we have already noticed that there was more than one person in the beginning. John 1:1-3 tells us that the Word was there in the beginning, creating with the Father.

While we are considering these things, it is as good a time as any to also point out that the Holy Spirit is God also.

In Hebrews 9:14 we read that the Spirit is eternal.

In I Peter 1:12 we read that the Holy Spirit was sent from heaven, yet another indication that the Holy Spirit is God.

In Acts 5:3-4 we see that Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit, which Peter says is lying to God.

However, possibly one of the clearest texts is in I Peter 1:2

(2)To the pilgrim..., elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ.

Here it is revealed that there are three persons in God who are active in the salvation of the elect. Now, when I use the word “person,” I do not use it as if they were human. By person I am simply describing an essence with a center of intelligence that is distinct from the other. I will deal with more of this later.

This leaves us with some interesting questions that we will now address: How can we say that there is one God as the scriptures teach, yet also notice that there are three people who claim to be God?

Here are some possible explanations.

(1)Arianism

This view is so named because it began with a man named Arius, who flourished in the early fourth century. According to this view, God is so transcendent and so separate from everything else that He needs a mediator for every relation He has with the world. Thus, He created the Son as a kind of semidivine being to act as His agent in creating the physical universe. After being created and creating the world, the Son became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth and lived such a perfect life that He was honored further by being given the title of Son of God. Thus Jesus is not eternal as God is. Instead He is a creature who had a beginning. In other words, the essential equality of Father and Son is denied. Jesus is not God, nor is Jesus merely man. This view is most commonly found among the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Even with the passages that we have

already studied we can see that this view is incorrect. John 1:1-3 is very clear in that Jesus, the Son, is not a created being, but is God. Jesus himself declares in Revelation 22:13

(13)I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End, the First and the Last.

In Hebrews 7:3 Melchizedek is compared to Christ in that they have “neither beginning of days nor end of life.” Thus, Jesus has no beginning or end, but is the eternal God.

(2)Modalism

Modalism is the view that in God’s inner nature there are no distinctions within God, threefold or otherwise. However, in His external relationships with His creatures, God assumes different modes to make Himself known and accomplish His purposes among men. This view essentially teaches that in the Old Testament God revealed Himself as Father, then became incarnate as the Son, and finally after Jesus’ resurrection, relates to His creatures as the Holy Spirit. Thus, these modes of relationship are successive, not simultaneous. This view tries to emphasize and takes solace in the oneness of God. With this view, God is one person who reveals Himself in three different ways to various people during different times in history. The most common group that holds to this view is the Oneness Pentacostals and United Pentacostal Church. It should also be noted that many from the Restoration held this view, including Alexander and Thomas Campbell and Barton W. Stone. This view has also made a great resurgence today among Christians.

I believe this is also an errant view because it simply cannot do hermeneutical justice to many scriptures. Too many times we read of all three persons of God acting. Other times we read two persons acting. Let us consider some of these passages.

Turn to Luke 2:52 where the bible says

(52)And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

If God is merely one person as modalism teaches, then Jesus was in favor with Himself. This makes nonsense out of what Luke just communicated to us.

Now turn to Matthew 3:16-17 where we have this account

(16)When He had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. (17)And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.

There are three distinct persons that are seen here. How can this be understood as only one person of God in this event? Did Jesus express approval of Himself?

Turn to Acts 10:38. Here Peter is preaching to Cornelius, his family and close friends

(38)How God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, who went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with Him.

In this passage we again see three distinct entities acting separately from one another.

God anointed Jesus with the Holy Spirit and with power. How does this make any sense if God is only one person? That view would make this passage become nonsense.

John 8:14, 17-18 are very important passages to consider in this study

(14)Jesus answered and said to them, Even if I bear witness of Myself, My witness is true, for I know where I came from and where I am going; but you do not know where I come from and where I am going.

(17)It is also written in your law that the testimony of two men is true.

(18)I am One who bears witness of Myself, and the Father who sent Me bears witness of Me.

Understand what Jesus is arguing in these passages. For someone's testimony to be considered true, there must be two witnesses. Jesus says that He is able to bear witness of Himself because He is from God. The second witness is the Father who sent Jesus who testifies that Jesus' words are true. If God is one person, then Jesus did not have the testimony of two people. He only had the testimony of one person, Himself. But Jesus says that He has the testimony of two people.

Mark 13:32 says

(32)But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.

Again this passage does not make sense if God is only one person. How could God know the day or the hour but not know the day or the hour if He is the same entity?

If there is no distinction between the Father and the Son, why was their knowledge different while Jesus was on the earth?

Further, if there is no distinction between the Father and the Son, then why was Jesus praying to the Father?

He must have been praying to Himself if the doctrine of modalism is correct. Surely this is illogical.

1 Timothy 2:5 says

(5)For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus.

The purpose of a mediator is that he is a go between for two people. If the Father and the Son are the same person, how can Christ be our Mediator? A mediator, by its very definition, is a third party who is distinct from the

other parties involved.

According to Acts 2:29-35 Peter preached that Christ resurrected and is now seated at the right hand of God.

Stephen, as he was about to die in Acts 7:55-56, saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God. If the Father and the Son are the same person, is Jesus sitting at His own right hand? What sense do these passages make?

Look at I Corinthians 15:24. Here Paul says

(24)Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power.

If the Father and the Son are the same person, will Christ give Himself the kingdom in eternity?

The scriptures repeatedly teach a distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

While this doctrine of modalism may sound good initially, it falls apart under the sheer weight of scriptures that teach the distinction found in God. So we see that logically modalism makes the events of redemptive history a kind of charade. Not being a distinct person, the Son cannot really represent us to the Father. So the vital works of Christ lose all their meaning in a modalistic view.

(3)Trinity

During the time of 200-300 A.D. many Christians were trying to formulate an understanding of the nature of God. Tertullian is credited with being the one who coined the term "trinity." The Nicene Creed in 325 A.D. also seemed to accept a similar view concerning God. The word trinity comes from a compounding of the word three (tri) and unity, therefore "trinity." The concept of the trinity is generally understood that God is three persons who share one essence. If this were all that the word "trinity" meant, I believe I would be on board with its teaching. But the reason that Alexander and Thomas Campbell, John Calvin, and Barton W. Stone were so strongly against the use of the trinity seems to be twofold.

First, the doctrine of the trinity led many to pray to the trinity. Instead of addressing the Father as the one we pray to, and Christ being our Mediator to bring our petitions on our behalf, the doctrine led to people blending the three together so strongly that there was no distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Second, the doctrine of the trinity has also led to the other extreme, that is, overemphasizing the individuality of the three.

I believe the doctrine of the trinity creates too sharp of a distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. What has nearly happened is that the teaching has almost created a belief that there are three separate gods that function completely without the other.

Some are teaching that one should only be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ and not in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as commanded in Matthew 28:18-19.

One of the problems with this, and there are many, is that one has created too much of a distinction as if Jesus is a separate God from the Father and Holy Spirit. I believe the scriptures teach against this as well.

Let's look at the Nature of God.

Genesis 2:24 - The marriage relationship.

In Genesis 2:24 the Lord establishes marriage for man and woman.

In this passage we read

(24)Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.

How is it possible for a man and a woman to live as one flesh?

It is very clear that both man and woman are two flesh and it is not possible to merge them into one.

What did the Lord mean by this command?

It is clear to all of us that the Lord was teaching that there was to be a unity between a husband and a wife. There would now be one mind, one purpose, and one goal that would exist in marriage. No longer would the two act according to each of their own desires and purpose, but all things would be done in harmony together, working as one.

Now look at John 17:20-22 - We see how we become one.

This unity of mind and purpose was exactly what Jesus prayed would happen to all those who were His believers.

Look at John 17:20-22 He says

(20)I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; (21)that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. (22)And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one.

Jesus prayed that we would become one, just as He and the Father are one. How did Jesus expect us to be one?

By being united in purpose, united in thought, united in goals, and united in decisions so that the message of Jesus could be spread unhindered.

How were Jesus and the Father one?

I believe in the same way, for Jesus said that we are to be one just as they are one. Jesus and the Father are one because they are of one mind, one purpose, one goal, and united in decisions. I believe this is what the Lord meant in Deuteronomy 6:4 when He taught

“the Lord is one!”

What was God teaching by commanding this in Deuteronomy 6:4?

The context seems to show that the people of Israel were to become one through obedience to the commands of God.

Voluntary submission to God.

This is one of the attributes that is missing in the main teachings concerning God that we have just covered. God was teaching through this

oneness and unity that there must be submission to achieve this goal.

In John 7:16 this was the repeated teaching of Jesus

(16) Jesus answered them and said, "My doctrine is not Mine, but His who sent Me.

Also John 6:38

(38) For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.

And then, John 5:19

(19) Then Jesus answered and said to them, Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.

Jesus submitted to the Father, and this is what Paul was teaching in Philippians 2:5-8. This is exactly what the Lord is teaching His children to do. We are to see the unity of God and have the same unity among all of us.

I do not believe that God was teaching that there is only one person just as He is not teaching that we are only one person as believers. But we are one person in that we are to have harmony and unity in purpose, goals, and decisions.

Unfortunately, as much as these are biblical images used to illustrate God, we can still go amiss if we push the imagery further than it is intended. This is not to convey a distinction into three separate gods. This simply shows that the three make up God. The Hebrew word "elohim" is a collective noun and denotes more than one though using singular verbs. An example of this is the word Congress, which is made up of many, though the word is singular.

Conclusion:

What we need to see is that we must be careful how we describe God, for there is a very fine balance between the "one" and "three" attributes of God.

Let us not go so far as to deny the three distinct beings that make up God, for they are seen throughout the scriptures.

And let us not deny that the Lord our God is one and we are called to be one just like God.

Further, the use of the word trinity can be safely used if communicators know what they are referring to. If we simply mean that there are three within God, this is a safe statement. But let us not accept the error by creating a greater distinction in God by using this word. We have a song which says, "God in three persons, blessed Trinity." If we have a proper understanding of this as we have studied in this lesson, then I am not troubled by the statement. However if we are making greater implications concerning the nature of God than what is revealed for us, then we are better off not to use the word.

Please study these things for yourself and see whether they are true.

I began the lesson by strongly encouraging you to think on these things

openly and to go study them. Please do so and if you find any flaw or any way to improve on this description, please let me know.

I would close by reminding you of two passages of scripture. One of them is in the Old Testament book of Proverbs 14:12 where Solomon wrote
(12)There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.

The other comes from the sermon on the mount and is found in Matthew 7:13-14 where Jesus said

(13)Enter by the narrow gate; for wide is the gate and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. (14)Because narrow is the gate and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it.

Where do you stand this morning? Whose voice are you listening to? If you are not in Christ then why don't you join Him and walk in His light while you still have the chance to do so? As you know none of us are promised tomorrow.

All you have to do is hear His word to acquire the faith that you must have. Romans 10:17.

You must believe the gospel of Christ - His death, burial, and resurrection. I Corinthians 15:3-4.

You then must repent of your past sins Luke 13:3.

Then you need to verbally confess Christ Rom. 10:10

Be baptized for the remission of your past sins. Acts 2:38

And finally live faithfully until you die. Revelation 2:10b

If you need to respond to the gospel or have a spiritual need why don't you come and make it known as we stand and sing the song which has been selected.

A.M. Sermon prepared by Cliff Marshall for 5/10/2020