

S T U D Y G U I D E



The Mystery of the Trinity

by R.C. Sproul



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Monotheism

MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Trinity has caused heated debate and controversy in the history of the church. Many have misunderstood the doctrine as involving a basic contradiction regarding how God could be one God and yet three persons. The Religious-Historical School of the nineteenth century endeavored to label the doctrine as a late development in biblical thought. Yet the original teaching of Scripture and the confession of the church is that God is one in essence and three in persons. In this lecture, Dr. Sproul introduces the doctrine of the Trinity.

SCRIPTURE READING

Exodus 1–20

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

1. To define the nature of progressive revelation and its relevance for the doctrine of the Trinity
2. To identify and explain the Religious-Historical School
3. To emphasize the New Testament's teaching regarding monotheism and the Trinity

QUOTATIONS

“The divine nature is really and entirely identical with each of the three persons, all of whom can therefore be called one.”

—St. Thomas Aquinas

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The doctrine of the Trinity has caused heated debate and controversy in the history of the church.
- B. Many have misunderstood the doctrine as a basic contradiction as to how God could be one God and yet three persons.
 - 1. The confession of the church is that God is one in essence and three in persons.
- C. Progressive Revelation is a gradual revelation of God and His plan of redemption.
 - 1. Progressive Revelation may expand or further develop previous revelation, but never contradicts previous revelation.
- D. The nature of the triune God is not clearly revealed at the beginning of Scripture.
- E. The unity of God is very clear in the pages of Scripture.
 - 1. The Bible affirms monotheism over against the polytheism of the surrounding cultures.
- F. Biblical monotheism stirred a philosophical controversy in the nineteenth century.
- G. G.W.F. Hegel (1770–1831) was one of the premier philosophers of the nineteenth century.
 - 1. Hegel developed a philosophy that attempted to explain the evolution of history and religion.
- H. The Religious Historical School argued that all things evolve from the simple to the complex including religion.
 - 1. The school suggested that animism is the most primitive form of religious belief.
 - 2. Animism is the belief that spirits inhabit trees, rocks, and many other elements of nature.
 - 3. Animism gradually evolves into a polytheism that worships the gods of fertility, wisdom, war, etc.
 - 4. Polytheism gradually evolves into henotheism wherein one god is worshipped by a culture without denying the existence of other gods.
 - 5. Battles between nations were often explained as battles between gods.
 - 6. Henotheism eventually evolves into monotheism which affirms the existence of only one god over the entire universe.
 - 7. Scholars debate when Jewish monotheism was firmly established in the nation.
- I. Orthodox Bible scholars have challenged the claims of the Religious Historical School arguing that the unity of God is clear in the early pages of Scripture.
 - 1. *“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth”* (Gen. 1:1).
 - 2. The domain of the God of creation is heaven and earth and not a limited geographical area.

- J. Critics see multiple gods in the Creation text because of the two names God is given: “Elohim” and “Yahweh”.
1. It is possible to translate Elohim as “gods” although it is used with a singular verb.
- K. Critics see animism in the biblical text because of Abram’s worship at the oaks of Mamre, Eve’s conversation with the serpent, and Balaam’s conversation with an ass.
- L. Critics argue for henotheism in the Bible because of the conflict between the God of Israel and the god of other nations.
- M. The first commandment given at Sinai is a strong avowal of monotheism.
1. “*You shall* have no other gods before me” (Ex. 20:3).
 2. The second commandment banning all forms of idolatry supports even further the monotheism of the Israelites.
 3. The prophets continually inveighed against the false gods and useless idols of the other nations.
 4. The prophets mocked those who worshipped gods in the rocks, trees, or sky.
- N. Although the New Testament develops our understanding of the three persons of the Trinity, it still affirms the monotheism of the Old Testament.
1. The three persons of the Trinity do not fragment the essence of God into three independent entities.
 2. The New Testament affirms the unity of the godhead.
- O. Augustine explained the relationship between the Testaments with the following phrase:
1. “The New is in the Old concealed. The Old is the New revealed.”
 2. There is a unity of thought in the two Testaments that is not compromised regarding the three persons, yet one essence, of the godhead.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. The confession of the church is that God is one in _____ and three in _____.
 - a. person, essence
 - b. essence, substance
 - c. essence, person
 - d. person, substance
2. _____ revelation is a gradual revelation of God and His plan of redemption.
 - a. Apocalyptic
 - b. General
 - c. Special
 - d. Progressive

3. The nature of the _____ is not clearly revealed at the beginning of Scripture.
 - a. creation
 - b. Trinity
 - c. universe
 - d. Fall
4. The Bible affirms _____ over against the _____ of the surrounding cultures.
 - a. polytheism, monotheism
 - b. monotheism, henotheism
 - c. henotheism, atheism
 - d. monotheism, polytheism
5. G.W.F. Hegel was one of the premier philosophers of the _____ century.
 - a. seventeenth
 - b. eighteenth
 - c. nineteenth
 - d. twentieth
6. Polytheism gradually evolved into _____ wherein one god was worshipped by a culture without denying the existence of other gods.
 - a. henotheism
 - b. monotheism
 - c. atheism
 - d. agnosticism
7. Henotheism eventually evolved into _____, which affirms the existence of only one god over the entire universe.
 - a. polytheism
 - b. monotheism
 - c. atheism
 - d. agnosticism
8. Although the New Testament develops our understanding of the three persons of the Trinity it still affirms the _____ of the Old Testament.
 - a. henotheism
 - b. monotheism
 - c. polytheism
 - d. atheism

BIBLE STUDY

1. How does God reveal Himself to Moses in Exodus 3? How does God identify Himself in Exodus 3:6? How does God's self-identification here challenge the Religious-Historical School?
2. How does God reveal Himself as a relational God in this passage? How does this self-description of God contrast with the descriptions of the other gods of the Ancient Near East?
3. What is Moses' reaction to God's appearance in 3:6?
4. What does God acknowledge or hear in Ex. 3:7? How is this fact consistent with God's character as a relational God? What else does God hear and acknowledge in Scripture?
5. In what sense do the Israelites have a polytheistic perspective in Ex. 3:13? How will Moses reassert a monotheistic perspective when he returns to Egypt?
6. How does the name God gives to Moses in 3:14 reflect God's unity and self-existence? How does God's self-declaration here refute animism, polytheism, and henotheism?
7. How does the Lord make the conflict between Himself and Pharaoh a very personal conflict? What does the Lord seek to teach the Israelites about Himself through the plagues and Exodus?
8. How do the first three commandments (Ex. 20:2–7) summarize the lessons the Israelites were to learn from the events of the Exodus? What are the other gods that will compete for the Israelites' affection in the wilderness?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How do the first twenty chapters of the book of Exodus refute the claim of the Religious Historical School that the faith of the Israelites was not always monotheistic?
2. How did the events leading up to the Exodus present a showdown between the Lord God of Israel and the multiple gods of Egypt? How does the Lord God humiliate the gods of Egypt?
3. Why is the profession of faith in Deuteronomy 6:4–5 so central to the faith of the Israelites? How does this confession of faith contrast with the faith of other nations?

4. How does Jesus reveal the Father and the Spirit in the New Testament and yet at the same time affirm the monotheism of the Old Testament (cf. John 5, 14)?

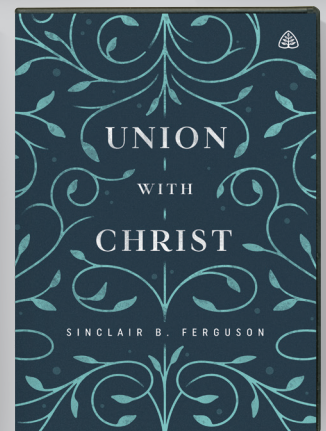
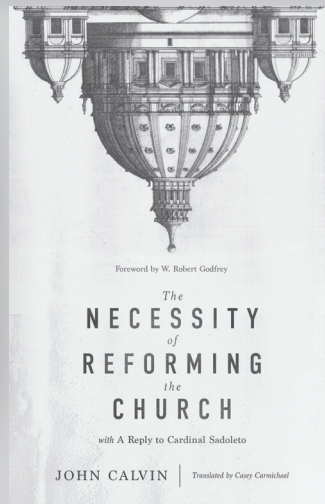
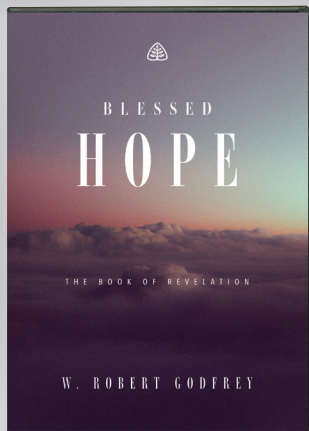
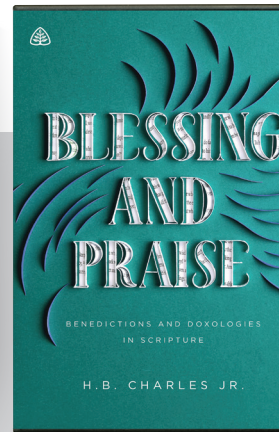
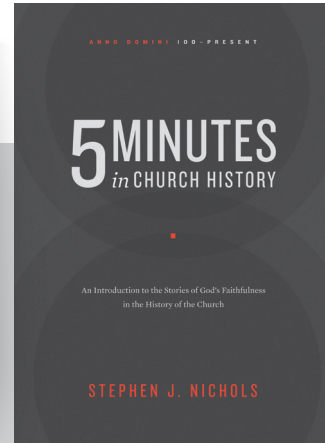
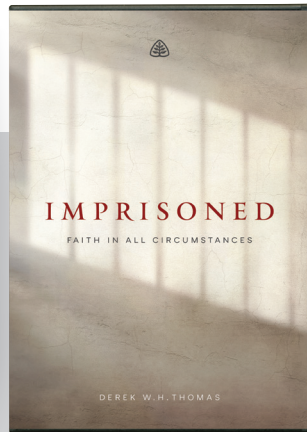
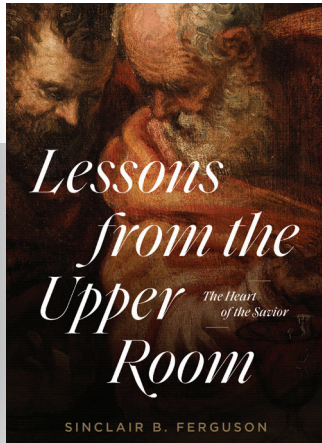
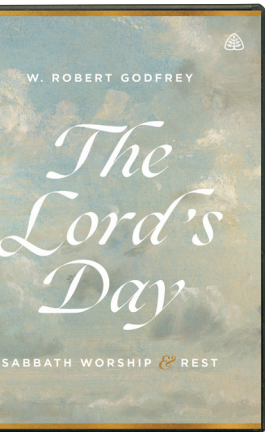
APPLICATION

1. Reflect on why it is comforting to the believer to know that the Lord is God, the Lord is One.
2. Consider what the relationships within the Trinity mean for the believer's relationship with the Trinity.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

Sproul, R.C., *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith*
Letham, Robert, *The Holy Trinity*

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