

# Discipleship in Depth – God

**Introduction:** Unlike all other academic disciplines, theology (the study of God) is an inherently limited discipline. Science, medicine, mathematics, and even history are all disciplines which are subject to new information and greater discoveries. I have on my shelves a great number of textbooks of science that when written represented the state of the art in scientific thinking. However, every one of them was replaced by a later textbook which had either modified, disproved or rethought the previous books “assured findings.” This is not to say that scientific discovery or mathematical expression lack limits. It is simply to say that our ignorance is profound and until we have the mind of Christ, we will continue to slowly push back the frontiers of ignorance.

But theology is different! While we can see the invisible God dimly through His visible fingerprints in creation and providence, our God is so great and so unlimited that it is impossible to truly know anything about Him except what He has revealed himself. Our questions about God vastly exceed our information about Him. God is ***transcendent***, which means He is so far above our ability to imagine or think that we truly must stand in awe. And it is fitting that is so. A God I could completely know and understand is no greater than me. We must begin our study of God with the words of the Breton Fisherman’s prayer which hung in John F. Kennedy’s office and still adorns many of the ships of the US Navy to this very day: “Oh God, the ocean is so big, and my boat is so small.” Indeed, the ocean of the truth about God is unfathomable and the little bark of our intellect is so small. It will be our joy throughout the endless ages of eternity to come to know more about our God with the genius mind of Christ and all the while we will worship and adore Him. As David cried out in wonder:

*“O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth! who hast set thy glory above the heavens. 2 Out of the mouth of babes and sucklings hast thou ordained strength because of thine enemies, that thou mightest still the enemy and the avenger. 3 When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; 4*

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*What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him? 5 For thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour. 6 Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet: 7 All sheep and oxen, yea, and the beasts of the field; 8 The fowl of the air, and the fish of the sea, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the seas. 9 O LORD our Lord, how excellent is thy name in all the earth!” Psalm 8:1-9*

### **Ineffability – What Can We Know About God?**

God is infinite; we are finite. God has no limits; we are very limited. The nature of God, His knowledge and His power have no boundaries. The author makes a powerful statement here, and I will quote it in full:

*“I recently watched a clip on the Internet that showed the expanse of our universe. It started with a person in a park in Florida. It then zoomed out ten meters. The rest of the show zoomed out further and further in multiples of ten. It passed the moon, the sun, our solar system, and our galaxy. (Did you know that the closest star to us besides the sun is 4.24 light years away? Light travels at 186,000 miles per second. Per second! Even at this speed, it would take over four years to get to the first star in our galaxy. And there are about one hundred billion stars in our galaxy! Passing the Milky Way, after hundreds of thousands of light years, we finally passed to the nearest galaxy. Yes, that’s right, we are only one galaxy among many. In fact, eventually, we would encounter hundreds of billions of galaxies! Where does it end? We don’t know. In fact, we don’t even know how to define ‘end’. New discoveries make us shrink and cower in amazement the discoveries are real and true, but they serve only to make us see how small we are.”*

Now aside from the shock and awe of this quote we must remind ourselves of just how little we are, with all of our so-called learning, and how vast is our universe. For some “intellectual” skeptic like Richard Dawson, Sam Harris,

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Stephen Hawking, Christopher Hitchens, or Bill Nye to say that there is no God is the height of arrogance and the depths of stupidity! What they are saying, of course, is that they know all about the universe and that this universe contains nothing that they do not know; and on this basis, they declare there is no God. Poor mental pygmies boasting loudly about what they claim to know as they sail a vast unknown ocean in the tiny life rafts of their own knowledge illuminated dimly by our present science!

God created this vast and incomprehensible universe in part to remind us of the great gulf fixed between an infinite God and finite humanity. This universe, with all of its vastness, is but a speck as compared to the vastness of our God! What we truly know about Him is amazing. And there are a good number of things we can know about God. We must realize that anything we know and understand about God is based solely upon what He has chosen to reveal about Himself. We must never fall into the same trap that modern science does in believing that we are intelligent enough or skilled enough to truly discover and understand everything about God. We cannot figure God out, we must simply content ourselves with processing that which has been revealed by God about Himself.

In the words of the author, “any study of God... Must start with his infinite nature and our inability to independently understand him. We call this God’s ‘ineffability.’ Things that are ineffable are beyond our ability to speak about or understand.” On the other hand, let’s not make the mistake of thinking that God is so great and so detached from our universe that we cannot come to know Him at all. That would be wrong. Because God is so wise, so infinite, so vast, we believe He is infinitely able to communicate Himself even to the small and finite minds of creatures such as you and me. Since God is all-powerful He certainly has the power to communicate Himself effectively to simpleminded humanity. If you’ve ever had the privilege of rearing a child you will quickly realize that in speaking to the child sometimes you must very simply and very concretely. You realize that there is so much more that you can tell the child but their capacity is limited and you must speak simply so that they might understand. Such is the way of God with man! Through creation, Providence, and most assuredly the Scripture God is revealing Himself simply, clearly and understandably to fallen humanity. And we can

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be certain that we can understand exactly as much as God desires us to understand about Him. As he said in Jeremiah:

*“Thus saith the LORD, Let not the wise man glory in his wisdom, neither let the mighty man glory in his might, let not the rich man glory in his riches: 24 But let him that glorieth glory in this, that he understandeth and knoweth me, that I am the LORD which exercise lovingkindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth: for in these things I delight, saith the LORD.” Jeremiah 9:23–24*

So, if we are going to boast about anything, it should be that we understand what God has made known about Himself and as a result of that we come to know Him! Remember the reason we can understand anything about God is that He has revealed himself to us. As the old saying goes, “while we cannot come to know God fully, we can come to know Him truly.” We might think of it this way: God is powerful enough to penetrate our ignorance and reveal himself to us.

### **Attributes of God:**

Exactly what has God revealed about Himself? The theological term “attribute” is used to describe what God has revealed about Himself. You, too, have attributes. They tell us about who you are and what you are like. For example, my own personal attributes include being large, slightly balding (or perhaps more than slightly), studious, short-tempered, near and far sighted with astigmatism, partially paralyzed, dogmatic in my theology, and having a desire to be like Jesus. From these characteristics, even if you had not met me, you could at least form some mental picture concerning me. Having never seen God face-to-face, we can still develop a picture of God by studying His attributes.

The attributes of God fall broadly into two categories: the essential attributes and the non-essential attributes. The attributes that are necessary qualifications for God being God are called essential attributes for two reasons. The first reason is that they simply must be—they are an essential part of being God. The second reason is very similar. These attributes make up the essence of God. We will consider six of these essential attributes: Eternality, Aseity, Omnipresence, Omniscience, Omnipotence, and

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Sovereignty. Non-essential attributes of God are the characteristics that are true about God but can be also shared with God's other creatures. We will simply mention three of them: Grace, Love, and Righteousness.

### **Essential Attributes:**

**Eternal:** God is above time. This makes Him eternal. This essence or quality of God does not mean that if you were to get in a time machine and travel as far back into the past as you can go or as far into the future as you can go that God would simply be there-even even though this is reality. What it does mean is that God is so far above time that He transcends it. He is above time and He is beyond time. Time is His creation. He made it out of nothing along with and matter. He made it all at once. And He made it out of nothing (ex nihilo - Latin for "out of nothing"). God moves through time from time to time but exists entirely outside of time! God exists eternally in the "eternal now". The Bible has much to say concerning the eternity of God but here are a couple of examples which are by no means exhaustive:

*"Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever thou hadst formed the earth and the world, even from everlasting to everlasting, thou art God." Psalm 90:2*

*"But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day." 2 Peter 3:8*

**Aseity:** God is a se. This means God is "of/by Himself." This is a hard concept for us to understand because we are so interrelated to each other and the world around us. But it really, in its essence, means that God is not dependent on anyone or anything! Perhaps the best way to understand this doctrine is to contrast and compare it with you and me. We are not a se. We had parents and we carry their genetics. We had nothing to do with where and when we were born. We depend on food, air, gravity, temperature, the distance from the sun, air pressure, physical laws, chemical reactions, and a host of other factors which both help us exist and keep us alive. To the contrary, God depends on nothing. He needs nothing. He is completely self-dependent. He doesn't even need you or me to complete Himself or make Himself happy!

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Note carefully His words in the fiftieth Psalm:

*“For every beast of the forest is mine, and the cattle upon a thousand hills. 11 I know all the fowls of the mountains: and the wild beasts of the field are mine. 12 If I were hungry, I would not tell thee: for the world is mine, and the fulness thereof.” Psalm 50:10–12*

It surely is amazing grace that Almighty God, who does not need you and me in any way, loved us enough to die for us bearing our dreadful sins and desires passionately to have a relationship with us on a personal level. Such a thought astonishes and amazes me and drives me to my knees in thankful praise!

**Omnipresent:** While God does not live in time or physical space, the Scriptures make it clear that we cannot go anywhere where He is not present fully and to the same degree. Even in the deepest and most desolate regions of eternal hell God is ever present, though He may limit men’s ability to sense His presence. There is literally no place that is outside God’s immediate presence. Where ever you go in this universe, you are in God’s immediate presence! As the psalmist points out:

*“Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence? 8 If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. 9 If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea; 10 Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me. 11 If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. 12 Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee.” Psalm 139:7–12*

This doctrine is both a comfort and a challenge - God is fully aware of where you are, what you face, and what you are doing! This is true always and without fail. It ought to govern how we conduct ourselves before others and how we comport ourselves before God! What a comfort this is in our time of trouble and the challenge in our time of temptation.

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**Omniscience:** Simply put, God knows everything - completely, perfectly, thoroughly, fully, and wonderfully! He knows your thoughts before you have them-in fact He knew them from eternity past. When my grandfather was born, Grover Cleveland was president of the United States and men traveled via horse and buggy. My grandfather lived to see Neil Armstrong walk upon the moon! Looking at the span of time between my grandfather's life and my own it is easy to see the enormous leap we have made in technology. But the advances made in technology are simply God's daily allowance for us all. Think of the vastness of space. Consider the thousands of billions of stars in the myriad number of galaxies spread throughout the inky blackness of space-God is perfectly aware of every single star. He knows its name, magnitude, and past, present, and future history to utter perfection. God is perfectly aware of each of us, our actions, and even our hidden motives. As the prophet Isaiah wrote many years ago:

*"Lift up your eyes on high, and behold who hath created these things, that bringeth out their host by number: he calleth them all by names by the greatness of his might, for that he is strong in power; not one faileth." Isaiah 40:26*

The psalmist cried out in amazement:

*"For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether." Psalm 139:4*

And he was moved to make this prayer:

*"Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: 24 And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." Psalm 139:23–24*

It is again a challenge and a comfort to think that there is someone in the universe who fully knows your heart and all your thoughts. We can be grateful that this is the same God who loved us enough to give his life for us on the cross of Calvary!

**Omnipotence:** There is no limit to the power and ability of God! To quote the author:

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*“In Scripture, in order to dignify God above all other gods, He is often called the “Almighty.” While people and things have “might,” no one has all-might. God alone is Almighty. There is nothing too difficult for Him.”*

In fact, the only things that God cannot do are things inconsistent with his character.

- God cannot lie.
- God cannot sin.
- God cannot fail.
- God cannot cease to be God.
- God cannot disappoint.
- God cannot be taken by surprise.
- God cannot be unprepared.
- God cannot do stupid things - for instance, God cannot make a rock so big that He cannot pick it up! (This is a perennially favorite question asked by ignorant members of ordination councils!)

Perhaps a better definition of omnipotence is that God has all authority and ability to do anything that is logically consistent with His character. Please note the following examples of omnipotence from the Scripture:

*“Is any thing too hard for the LORD? At the time appointed I will return unto thee, according to the time of life, and Sarah shall have a son.” Genesis 18:14*

*“Then Job answered the LORD, and said, 2 I know that thou canst do every thing, and that no thought can be withholden from thee.” Job 42:1–2*

*“And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth.” Revelation 19:6*

Isn't it a wonderful thought that the most powerful Being in time for eternity fully loves and cares for you and nothing is beyond His power!

**Sovereignty:** The simplest way to understand this attribute of God is to understand that God is in control over everything in the universe. God has no superior. He answers to no one, other than Himself. President Harry S Truman kept a sign on his desk that read: “the buck stops here.” With all due respect to President Truman, the buck stops with God! Everything, the good, the bad, the beautiful, and the ugly all happen under the umbrella of his permissive will. This does not imply that God approves, enjoys, or even desires everything that happens - but it does mean that ultimately everything that happens in time or eternity must figuratively pass across His desk for approval. This is a very difficult concept for us to comprehend but it is clearly taught in the Scripture:

*“In whom also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will:” Ephesians 1:11*

*“And at the end of the days I Nebuchadnezzar lifted up mine eyes unto heaven, and mine understanding returned unto me, and I blessed the most High, and I praised and honoured him that liveth for ever, whose dominion is an everlasting dominion, and his kingdom is from generation to generation: 35 And all the inhabitants of the earth are reputed as nothing: and he doeth according to his will in the army of heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth: and none can stay his hand, or say unto him, What doest thou?” Daniel 4:34–35*

In a later lesson, we will consider the problem of God’s sovereignty and human pain, but for now we must simply accept that our loving Father God has carefully planned our lives and is working out that plan in love.

### **Non-Essential Attributes:**

**Grace:** Our God is a gracious God. At its root, the word “grace” means “gift”. A grace gift is a gift that implies an undeserved gift. Such a gift is completely undeserved and unmerited. It is like the story of the fairytale commoner who is lifted from her poverty to become a queen through the love of the King. Grace not only gives us what we do not deserve but also keeps us from receiving what we do deserve. Grace is not simply the fact that I will get to go to heaven solely on the merits of Jesus Christ but also that I will never

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have to go to hell because of my sin! God is gracious. Grace permeates all of His activities and each of His actions. God stooped to save sinners like you and me, giving us gifts we do not deserve and laying the judgment all our sins upon His own precious Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in our place even though we do not deserve any of this. As the Scriptures say:

*“And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work.” Romans 11:6*

*”For by grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: 9 Not of works, lest any man should boast.” Ephesians 2:8–9*

*“For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, 12 Teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world;” Titus 2:11–12*

This, really, is what separates biblical Christianity from all the religions of the world. Every other world system is built on some sort of human merit or human works. Someone has to do something in order to earn the smile of God. But biblical Christianity proclaims to a sin weary world that a gracious God offers salvation freely and without human merit or good works, solely on the basis of His amazing grace!

I cannot improve on the words of the author:

*“The hardest thing in the Christian life is to accept God’s grace. Believe me, I know. Our sin nature does whatever it can to keep its pride, but you must learn that the very breath have is due to His stooping. Saturate yourself in grace starting right now.”*

**Love:** God is love. The problem is: what is love? A brief study in the word “love” from the Greek New Testament may be helpful here. Love is so rich a word and encompasses so many different ideas that the simple word love is not quite sufficient to express its meaning. The Greek language, chosen by God to express His Revelation in the New Testament, gives us the proper

tools for understanding the concept of love as expressed in the Bible. There are three separate koine Greek words that are translated “love.” Two of them appear in the Bible; while the third appears in literature of the time of the apostle Paul, but never in the Bible.

The word that never appears in the Greek New Testament is probably the word most associated with love in the times in which we live today. The word is “eros” and we get our word “erotic” from it. A better translation for “eros” might be “lust.” It really has reference to physical desire or sexual lust. In the proper boundaries of a committed marital relationship this kind of “love” could be considered proper. However, this appears to be the operative definition of love for Hollywood, television, pulp fiction, and much of teenage (and unfortunately adult) culture. This type of “love,” is self-centered and primarily based on gratification of feelings and impulses that are not exactly noble. As I stated earlier, this type of love never appears in the New Testament. And even within Christian marriage it is never the ideal! Men are told to love their wives as Christ loved the church. Women are instructed to submit to their husband as the church submits to the loving leadership of Christ. So, the erotic type of love is never really God’s ideal either in marriage or in the culture. Sadly, “eros”, based on external appeal (she is cute, he is handsome) and internal feelings and drives controls the thinking and the actions of much of the world today. The multi-billion-dollar Internet pornography industry, rock ‘n roll music, the fashion and clothing industry and our obsession with starlets, super models, athletes and soap operas are all expressions of the selfish lust that masquerades as love. The operative word with this type of “love” is “feelings.” And this type of love is easily corrupted, manipulated, and perverted. No wonder it is not endorsed or promoted by the New Testament

The second type of “love” is probably the most commonly mentioned and most broadly defined form of love in the New Testament. It comes from the Greek word “phileo” from which is derived words like “philanthropic”, “Philharmonic”, and “Philadelphia.” Philanthropic means to love mankind. Philharmonic to love sound or harmony. Philadelphia means to love as a brother. This is a word of relationship. It can mean the love of a parent for a child, the love of a child for a parent, the love of a brother for a brother or sister, the love of a husband for a wife or a wife for a husband, or simply the

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love of a friend for a friend. This type of love speaks of a mutual or reciprocal devotion in which both parties in the relationship derive benefit, joy and satisfaction. In this sense, it is both normal and natural. It is a very healthy and not one-sided relationship. Unlike eros, which is selfish, this type of love is mutually beneficial and forms the basis for partnerships of all types and kinds. It can be thought of as “partnership,” “friendship”, or “affection”.

The third type of love in the Greek New Testament is “agape.” This is a high and noble view of love. If “eros” is self-centered and “phileeo” is centered on the mutual satisfaction of both parties, then “agape” love is focused on the blessing and benefit of its object. Agape love is never focused on getting but on giving! This type of love is self-sacrificial and self-giving. This is the type of that God has for man. A holy, righteous, pure, and gracious God stoops to lift poor fallen man out of the gutter of sin, clean him up, and adopt him as His own precious child - not because we have any merit or intrinsic worth, but because God is good, kind, and loving! This is the type of love referred to in the following verses:

*“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.” John 3:16*

*“And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.” 1 John 4:16*

**Righteousness:** The best way to think of this quality is to think of the ideal of what a judge should be. In a perfect world, a judge would be a person who was legally, morally, judicially and practically without fault or flaw. This type of judge would neither be corrupt, nor corruptible. He would dispense justice and judgment perfectly without favoritism or fear. All of this sums up the characteristic of righteousness. God hates sin. God will not allow sin to go unpunished. If He did, He would be less than God and certainly less than righteous!

As a Christian, you must come to understand that there is a perfect balance between God’s love and grace and His perfect righteousness. If you miss this, you will not understand the message of the cross. God sent His Son to die for us not only because He loves us, but also because His eternal

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righteousness demands appropriate punishment for sin. The righteousness that God's holiness demands is the righteousness that God's grace provides through the sacrifice of His Son on the cross of Calvary. Please note these two examples of the righteousness of God in the Scriptures:

*"Keeping mercy for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will by no means clear the guilty; visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and to the fourth generation." Exodus 34:7*

*"And I heard another out of the altar say, Even so, Lord God Almighty, true and righteous are thy judgments." Revelation 16:7*

This is a glorious message. We never should fear the judgment of God because it took place for us as believers on the cross of Calvary. But God's righteousness should also remind us to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present evil world because of Jesus who took our place and our punishment on the cross!

**Trinity:** Now that we've examined a few of the more important attributes of God, let's spend a few moments talking about one of the most mysterious and wonderful doctrines in all of theology-the doctrine of the Trinity. Now we need to begin with the clear understanding that the word Trinity does not occur in the Scripture at all, but the doctrine of the Trinity occurs throughout the Bible-both in the Old Testament and the New Testament. Historically, the doctrine of the Trinity has been firmly embraced by all Orthodox Christians. Even today, the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and Historical Protestantism all hold the doctrine of the Trinity to be a central component of Christian truth which cannot be denied without the abandonment of essential Christian doctrine. Cults such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons strongly deny the doctrine of the Trinity and by so doing have fallen into great doctrinal error and have departed from Historical Christianity. The very fact of their denial of the Trinity is the central reason that these cultic groups are not considered Christian.

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The Bible teaches that there is one God who eternally exists in three persons, all of whom are fully and completely God and are totally co-equal but not identical. Let's consider this carefully and scripturally.

**One God:** Christianity is a monotheistic religion. In fact, it is one of three monotheistic religions that exist in the world today. The three monotheistic religions are: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Monotheism differs from the many polytheistic religions in this world because it embraces the truth that there are not many gods, a central teaching of polytheism, but only one God, the central teaching of monotheism. As Christians, we do not believe in three Gods. There is and can only be one God. The God of the Bible is the singular source of all things as evidenced by the Scriptures:

*“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD:”  
Deuteronomy 6:4*

This is the Shema-the very first “creedal statement” in the Word of God. A creedal statement is a short and memorable summary of belief designed as a teaching aid for passing biblical truth from one generation to another. Christianity emerged from Judaism and this statement was central to the confession of the Judaism faith. Judaism and Christianity are grounded in the belief that there is only one God whose covenant name is Jehovah. (Any time you see a verse that has the word Lord entirely in capital letters it is a direct reference to the name Jehovah.)

**Three Persons:** God reveals Himself throughout the Bible as a plurality. This is difficult to explain but the sense of the Scriptures is that, while God is one in essence (that is the stuff or substance of who He is) God is triune in person. This means that the Father is God. Jesus Christ is God. And the Holy Spirit is God. However, the Father is not Jesus or the Holy Spirit. Jesus is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is not the Father or Jesus. As the author puts it: “we believe in one “what” and three “whos.”

John 1:1 states:

*“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.” John 1:1*

Please note the precision of the language here, Jesus (the Word) was both with God and was God. This relationship between the essence and person

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of God forms one of the doctrinal basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. All three members of the Trinity are with other and they are all equally God.

Note carefully the great commission:

*“Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost:”  
Matthew 28:19*

You will note that we are to baptize in the name (singular) of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We are not baptizing in the names of God but the name of God who eternally exists in three persons.

**Trinitarian Errors:** While the doctrine of the Trinity is simply taught in the Scripture, men have found it easy to confuse or distort this vital teaching. Here are some ways people have gone astray in trying to explain the doctrine of the Trinity.

**Modalism:** Modalism is a distortion of the Trinity that teaches that there is only one God who displays Himself in three different ways, sometimes as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes is the Holy Spirit. It is like an actor in a one-man show, like Sir Patrick Stewart playing all the characters in the Christmas Carol. But the Bible clearly teaches that God is three separate persons with one essence. Very early in church history and with very good reason, Modalism was condemned as heresy (dangerously twisted and perverted teaching that does not match the Scripture). The greatest danger of this heresy is that it destroys the clearly taught and eternal relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as demonstrated in this classic passage of Scripture:

*“And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: 17 And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” Matthew 3:16–17*

Scripture clearly shows all three members of the divine Trinity together in one place and yet very clearly distinct from one another. If they were all each other, we would have to diagnose God as having a serious case of multiple personality disorder!

**Tritheism:** Tritheism is the belief that there are three gods. This error denies the essential unity of the Godhead and makes Christianity a polytheistic religion. This would be a denial of the Shema and the other clear teaching of the Scripture that indicates that there is only one God. We must never think of God as three distinct beings. God is one being who eternally exists in three persons.

**Ontological (Essential) Subordinationism:** Ontological Subordinationism is an error concerning the Trinity that even some Bible believing Christians fall into. Its basic teaching is that one member of the Trinity is greater in majesty, glory, power, or purpose than another member of the Trinity. For instance, some well-meaning Christians think that God the Father is the greatest, God the Son comes in a close second, and God the Holy Spirit comes in somewhere behind. Some have exalted the work of the Lord Jesus Christ and His position to the point where they worship Jesus only! Some charismatics ignore Jesus Christ and God the Father and only emphasize the Holy Spirit. All of these viewpoints are in error. God is one in essence, sharing the same divinity. Therefore, each member of the Trinity is equal in everything. Now this does not mean that they do not assume the roles in the plan of God that allow for functional subordination. They clearly do but this has nothing to do with their essence or being. We might illustrate it like this: every citizen of the United States has an equal standing in the law of the land but certain men, Congressman, Senators, governors, jurists, and even the president of the United States, take different roles in the administration of the country. This in no way implies that any of these men are more important or any different in the eyes of the law than a humble day laborer. They have different roles but the same standing. The Lord Jesus Christ could say:

*“Ye have heard how I said unto you, I go away, and come again unto you. If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I.” John 14:28*

The Lord Jesus Christ did not mean that the Father was greater in essence that He was (this would necessitate two Gods), but rather the Father had assumed a greater role or function in the plan of human redemption.

**Bad Illustrations:** As a pastor and Sunday school teacher for many years I have read some extremely poor explanations of the Trinity, attempting to find some analogy in nature to illustrate the Trinity. As well-meaning as these illustrations are, they each fall short and confuse the issue. We need seriously to abandon such ideas. Here are a few examples:

**Egg:** This is the first illustration of the Trinity I heard when I was growing up. It goes something like this: we have one egg that is made up of three parts- the shell, the egg white, and the yoke. The problem is that rather than being an illustration of the Trinity, it is an illustration of Tritheism because each part of the egg is made of separate substances! Obviously this is not a good illustration.

**Water:** Water exists in three states: solid (ice), liquid (water), and gas (water vapor). The problem with this illustration is that it is a wonderful illustration of Modalism, since these are merely the modes in which water can exist. God is always Father, Son and Holy Spirit simultaneously forever.

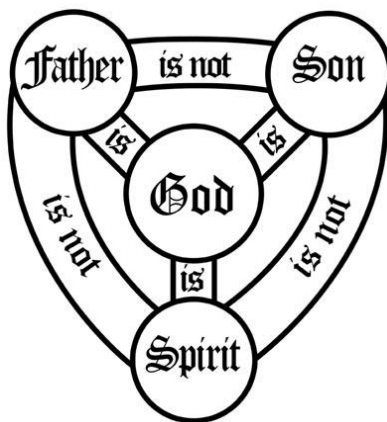
**Shamrock:** As a teacher of biology, I have heard other teachers use this illustration-a Shamrock is one leaf but it has three parts. Well, once again this is a great illustration of Tritheism! Each part of the leaf is essentially distinct from the other, that is they don't share the exact same essence just similar essences. We better find something else!

**Three People:** I've never heard this one, but the author mentions it in his notes and so I will. This would be the example of three people. Each of them share a human nature. Well again, this is a great illustration of Tritheism. Three people can share alike nature, that is they are all Homo sapiens, but they do not share the exact same nature. It is not that God the father, God the son, and God the Holy Spirit all share the same species of deity; they all share the same nature, the exact same nature. So again, this illustration comes far short of the teaching of the Bible.

**The Shield of the Trinity:** How, then, can we explain and illustrate the Trinity in a way that is both clear and understandable? From the outset, we must understand that God is transcendent and cannot be easily explained. A God who is easily explained and comprehended is not all that great. However, I have found a visual aid that I believe works very well in helping

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us understand the complex relationship between the members of the divine Trinity. It is called the shield of the Trinity:



It points out first that there is only one God. Then it shows that the Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. But it also shows that the Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit. The Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. And the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son. The shield of the Trinity is a simple, easily drawn and Scripturally accurate illustration of the Trinity.

We began this part of our study by talking about the ineffability of God. That is to say, God is, for all practical purposes, way beyond our ability to comprehend and explain. If we could fully understand God we would be on the same level with God, which is obviously not the case.

Our job as witnesses for the Lord Jesus Christ is to make the ineffable God comprehensive in some small way to a lost and dying world. As followers of Christ is our obligation to believe what God has revealed about Himself because He is trustworthy! Let me close with the words of our author:

*“Listen to this carefully: if you are finishing this chapter with some wonder, awe, and maybe even some “buffoonness,” that is ok. You have just joined hands with all the great saints of the past. God is infinitely more complex than the car. Yet He made himself known to you, and you can confidently rejoice in your understanding. Let the revealed mystery of the God we serve bring us to our knees.*

### Questions to Ponder:

1. Why do you think God made the universe so vast?

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2. Describe how God is like His universe.
3. God is sovereign over all of creation. It is this comfort you? How might it disturb you?
4. Grace describes God's stooping to us. Why do you think grace is so hard for us to understand and accept?
5. How can you accept God's grace in your own life?
6. Why do you think Christianity has been so universally defined by the doctrine of the Trinity?
7. The doctrine of the Trinity is impossible to understand by mere human viewpoint. How can its ineffability (indescribability) affect the way that you worship God?