

The Trinity

The doctrine of God as Three-in-One is unique to Christianity. It is admittedly difficult to grasp the truth of God as a Triune Being, yet it should not surprise us to find aspects of God that are beyond our full and complete comprehension. Yet its difficulty does not diminish its importance. The issue of who we worship is of profound significance in life.

More than a doctrine, the Trinity results from an understanding of God derived from His Word. Apart from the New Testament, we could not have conceived of God in the manner He is presented Himself to us. Because the Trinity accurately reflects the being of God, if we love God we are compelled to seek to understand it and study it. Our passion for God moves us to glorify Him as we ought, giving proper adoration to His Being as revealed to us. Therefore, while difficult, the doctrine of the Trinity is far from merely academic.

The Trinity defined

The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that there is only one God who exists in three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Each person of the Trinity is co-equal and co-eternal in one united nature as Divine.

Some have offered to replace the term "Trinity" with "Tri-unity" signifying the three persons of the Godhead united in one being. While the attempt at clarity is something to appreciate, we will not eradicate the term "Trinity" from English usage. Since we have to define "Tri-unity" also, it seems there is little value in replacing a familiar word that requires definition with an unfamiliar created word that also requires definition. Like it or not, the term "Trinity" will remain with Christianity.

The Trinity discerned

Since the word "Trinity" is not found as such in the Bible, its truth is derived by bringing a series of truths together into a complete whole. This is what is known as systematic theology, as our interpretive skill is correlated into doctrine. The Trinity is deduced through an abundance of clear teaching of the Bible concerning four fundamental points:

1. God is One.
2. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are described in the Bible as God.
3. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct persons.
4. God is unchangeable.

If God is One and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each individually God and immutable, then the Trinity is the necessary conclusion. God's immutability has been discussed in the prior section and the three other truths will be developed below.

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The oneness of God

The description of the Trinity begins with the unity of God. There is only one God. The Old Testament affirms the oneness of God in Deuteronomy:

- Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

The New Testament also affirms the oneness of God:

- 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 "Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is {but} one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we {exist} for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we {exist} through Him. (Cf. Ephesians 4:6; James 2:19).

The oneness of God is beyond His unity. God is united in being. Unity is not only a description of God, it is His essence. God is indivisible.

The threeness of God

The one God exists eternally as three, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The very first hint of the plurality of Persons within the Godhead comes as early as the first chapter of the Bible where God speaks of Himself with in a plural sense:

Genesis 1:26: Then God said, "Let **Us** make man in **Our** image, according to **Our** likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth." (Cf. Genesis 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8)

In context, the plural name for God, Elohim, speaks of God's supremacy more than the Trinity. However, while the plural is for magnification it opens the door for plurality. Also, the plural sense in Hebrew is three or more, further implying the Trinity.

The threeness of God is developed in the New Testament as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as all are recognized as God. This observation of the Deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is foundation to Trinitarianism and will be discussed in depth.

Importantly, the threeness of God does not contradict the oneness of God because the threeness is in respect to *persons* and oneness is in respect to *essence*. Christianity does not claim that God is one person and three people, or one nature and three natures. This would be contradictory. God is not one and three in the same sense.

The distinction of Persons

In the Old Testament, God the Father is distinguished from the Godhead in several ways.

- God is set apart from the Lord (Genesis 19:24; Hosea 1:7).
- The Lord is set apart from the Redeemer (Isaiah 59:20).

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- The Lord is set apart from the Spirit (Isaiah 48:16; 59:21; 63:9-10).
- The Lord is set apart from the Angel of the Lord (Genesis 16:7-13; Malachi 3:1).

In the New Testament, God the Father is distinguished from the Son in that they relate with each other (Matthew 17:5; 27:46). Also, the Son and the Spirit are distinct from each other (John 16:13-14).

The term "person" is somewhat inadequate because it connotes some things that are true of God and some things that are not. By using the term "person," Christians do not mean that God has a physical body or that there are three distinct beings. We have only known one person as equaling one being. The concept of three persons in one being is unfamiliar to us, but it is not an essential contradiction.

The relationship of Persons

Jesus Christ is uniquely described as God's "only begotten Son" (John 3:16). He is also described as "the only begotten God" in John 1:18. The Holy Spirit is uniquely described as "proceeding from the Father" in John 15:26. The Father sent the Son (John 5:36-37; 6:44; 1 John 4:14) and the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 1 Peter 1:12) in Christ's name. Due to the eternity of Jesus Christ, "begotten" must be understood in the sense of generation not creation.

From this we can deduce that the Father begat the Son and the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father. The difference between "begat" and "proceed" is a fine point indeed. The more common word "sent" is perhaps the safest place to focus the relationship within the members of the Trinity.

There is clearly an initiating role that God the Father has in the Trinity. The Father sent the Son with authority (Matthew 28:20; John 5:26-27, 30) and also sent the Holy Spirit (John 14:26). The Son clearly has the initiating role with the Holy Spirit (John 16:7).

Whether the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Son was one of the reasons for the "Great Schism" in 1054 A.D., when the Eastern and Western church split, dividing the organized church. The Eastern church (Orthodox Church) taught that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. The Western church (Roman Catholic Church) taught that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. In light of John 15:26 and 16:7 saying that the Son will send the Holy Spirit, the Western Church has the weight of the Scripture on its side.

The relationship within the Trinity never describes the Father in a subordinate role and never describes the Holy Spirit in an initiating role. While there is a functional order within the Trinity, this does not lead us to conclude there is a subordinate nature. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are equal in nature as God. We can see an analogy with mankind where all have an equal humanness but function differently in our roles. The nature of God's immutability lead us to believe, with historical Christianity, that the ordering of the relationships within the Trinity is eternal.

As there is a functional order within the roles of the Trinity, there is an order of emphasis that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit serving in relation to creation. For example, in salvation we find the Father in the role of electing (1 Peter 1:2), the Son in the role of redeeming (1 Peter 1:18) and the Holy Spirit in the role of regenerating (Titus 3:5).

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The limitations of analogies

Many analogies have been suggested to illustrate the Trinity over the past two millenniums. Some of the more notable include:

The analogies of time (past, present, future), matter (solid, liquid, gas), the sun (itself, its light and its heat) and space (height, width, depth) distort a fair representation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Each of these analogies lead toward the heresy of modalism, that is one God who acts in different roles (or modes) as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have been compared to our relationship to our own self-image. The very act of thinking, it is pointed out, requires a type of plurality within a person (e.g. who is talking and who is listening?) and so with the act of loving or hating oneself (who is loving and who is being loved?). The "fellowship" of the three divine "persons" is analogous. An improved illustration is that person's intellect, heart, and will exist within the unity of the each person. Each "aspect" of a person is distinct, yet inseparable from the others, and together they constitute the single personality of that person. However, each of us is distinctly one person so this describes how one person relates to himself, not how three relate in one Being.

Analogies from mathematics have represented God as $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$ or as one cubed (1^3). A very common geometric illustration is a triangle, with the Father at the top of the triangle. Several variations exist of the triangle illustration, showing all three as God but yet distinct from each other.

All illustrations necessarily fall short of communicating God. What illustration can be created to fully represent a single human, much less God Himself? It is impossible to look at what is created and see anything more than a image of certain aspects of God. To describe God in words is difficult enough without confusing Him by using flawed analogies.

The major corruptions of the Trinity

Since the early church there have always been groups that have deviated from Trinitarian doctrine. While the groups change, the deviations are similar and can be listed.

1. Arianism

Arius was a fourth century church leader from North Africa who led a large movement opposing the Deity of Jesus Christ. Arianism taught that God was One and that Christ was the first of God's created order. Arius was vigorously opposed and the focus of the Council of Nicaea in 325.

This council produced the famous Nicene Creed: "We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, creator of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father as only begotten, that is, from the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father, through whom all things came into being, both in heaven and in earth; Who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, becoming human. He suffered and the third day He rose, and ascended into the heavens. And He will come to judge both the living and the dead. And [we believe] in the Holy Spirit. But, those who say, Once He was not, or He was not before His generation, or He came to be out of nothing, or who assert that He, the Son of God, is of a different

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hypostasis or ousia, or that He is a creature, or changeable, or mutable, the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes them."

Arianism survives today most notably in the Jehovah's Witnesses.

2. Modalism

Modalism taught that One God manifested Himself in three separate appearances, as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. With Modalism, God is one person, ignoring the distinction between the Persons of the Trinity.

Modalism, was also found under systems such as as modalistic monarchianism, Sabellianism and Patripassianism, all teaching that God is one person who revealed Himself in three ways at points in time, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is found most commonly today in Oneness Pentecostalism, the largest organization being the United Pentecostal Church.

3. Adoptionism

Adoptionism, also known as dynamic monarchianism, saw Jesus as a human endowed with unusual power by the Holy Spirit. The idea of the Holy Spirit as an empowering force can be found today in the original Worldwide Church of God and in Christadelphianism.

The importance of the Trinity

Christians consider the Trinity to be an essential doctrine of the faith because it is God's being. To worship apart from Trinitarianism is to worship another God. To deny the Trinity necessarily results in grave results to essential truths.

For example, if Jesus is not fully God, then He could not justly suffer for our sins as the perfect sacrifice. Our sin is first and foremost against God Himself. It is because of the Trinity that Jesus was worthy to pay the penalty for our sin.

This impact of a distorted view of the Trinity on the gospel can be observed by the strong correlation between a flawed view of the Trinity and a flawed view of grace. Every group that distorts the Trinity has a corresponding distortion of the gospel of God's grace. The Trinity is essential to the gospel theologically and in practice.

Also, we will not worship God the Son if we do not consider Him to be Divine. Our worship of God should grow according to our understanding of Him. Those who distort God by denying the Trinity lead to robbing God of worship. They not only are failing to worship the Son for themselves, they are leading others astray in worship. These things strike at the heart of what it means to be a Christian.

In addition, the imbalances we find in worship today come from wrong emphasis in our view of God. People who have exalted the role of the Spirit in worship become lost in a search for experiences with God. Yet if we diminish the truth that those who worship must do so in Spirit and truth (John 4:24), we can lose the joy and power of true worship.

Can a person become a Christian without a proper understanding of the Trinity? Yes, for several reasons. First, our salvation is not dependent upon our ability to understand God. Salvation comes

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by grace alone through faith alone in Jesus Christ, not through our doctrinal study. Second, how much doctrine can we expect a new Christian to understand? How many Christians in the New Testament could accurately explain the Trinity? How many in the early church could accurately explain the Trinity?

The development of the Trinity has come as a result of its denial. Those opposing the Trinity have forced God's people to understand the Scripture more clearly in this matter. We all should expect to develop in our understanding of God over time.

While a person can believe in Jesus Christ apart from an accurate understanding of the Trinity, a person cannot deny the Trinity and believe in Christ. To reject and oppose the Trinity is indeed a serious matter indeed. The ancient church rightfully declared these false teachers as enemies of God.

Trinitarian formulas in the New Testament

There are several places in the New Testament where the Trinity is referenced in one passage. Baptism is to be done in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit:

- Matthew 28:19: *"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in **the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit**"*

The Great Commission of Matthew 28 is the best Trinitarian text because it not only includes the three Persons in one reference but it unites them as one being. The word "name" is singular, signifying a unity of Being with authority.

Several other Trinitarian references in the New Testament show the relationship of the three Persons of the Trinity together in one passage. Unlike Matthew 28:19, these Trinitarian references do not prove the Trinity, but they nevertheless suggest that God is Three-in-One.

- Matthew 3:16-17: *And after being baptized, **Jesus** went up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the **Spirit of God** descending as a dove, and coming upon **Him**, and behold, **a voice out of the heavens**, saying, "This is My beloved **Son**, in whom **I** am well-pleased."*
- John 14:16: *"**I** will ask the **Father**, and **He** will give you another **Helper**, that **He** may be with you forever"*
- 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: *Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.*
- 2 Corinthians 13:14: *The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, and the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit**, be with you all.*
- Ephesians 4:4-6: *There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.*

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- 1 Peter 1:1-2: *who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood.*
- Jude 20-21: But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith; praying in the **Holy Spirit**; keep yourselves in the love of **God**, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our **Lord Jesus Christ** to eternal life.

Evidence of Christ as God from Jesus Himself

The pivotal proof of the Trinity in Scripture is the Deity of Christ. While not necessarily so, in practice, once the Deity of Christ is accepted, the doctrine of the Trinity follows.

1. Jesus accepts title of God (John 20:28; Matthew 16:16)

Jesus would be greatly remiss in allowing Thomas in John 20:28 to stand uncorrected in assigning Jesus the name of God. If Jesus were not God, He should have done what Peter did in Acts 10:25-26 and distinguish Himself as only a man. Rather, Jesus confirms Thomas' exaltation of Him.

2. Jesus claims to do what only God can do (Mark 2:5-7; John 5:25ff.)

The scribes were correct in asking "who can forgive sins but God alone?"

3. Jesus claims attributes that only God has:

- Eternality (John 8:58; John 17:5)
- Omnipresence (Matthew 18:20; 28:20)
- Omniscience (Matthew 16:21; Luke 6:8; 11:17; John 4:29)
- Omnipotence (Matthew 28:19-20; Mark 5:11-15; John 11:38-44)

By ascribing these attributes to Himself, Jesus equated Himself to God.

4. Jesus claims to be the "I am." John 8:58

God declared Himself to be eternally pre-existing in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14; Deuteronomy 32:39; Isaiah 41:4; 43:10). Jesus uses the same term to claim to be also eternally existing. By doing so, Jesus does more than ascribes eternity to Himself, He assumes a name of God for Himself.

5. Jesus identifies Himself with God: John 10:30; 17:5

Jesus is one with God in more than simply a sense of cooperation, such as believers in Christ are one. Jesus is one with God in essence. Thus He is glorified with God (John 17:5) and this is why the Jews, understanding this claim, attempted to stone Him for making Himself out to be God (John 10:32).

Jesus' words, "I and the Father are one" brings together the distinction of persons with the unity of being. One does not mean one in person for the word "one" is in the neuter form, not in the masculine. It speaks of essence.

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6. Jesus accepts worship: John 5:23; John 9:38; Matthew 28:9

Worship of any created thing is condemned in the Scripture (Romans 1:25). By accepting worship Jesus separated Himself as the Creator and co-equal with God.

Evidence of Christ as God from Other New Testament Passages

Many other New Testament references explicitly call Jesus "God" or describe Him as God. Each of these stand alone in the proof of the Deity of Christ, but taken together they are overwhelming evidence.

- The word [Jesus] was God: John 1:1
- Jesus is God with us: Matthew 1:23 (cf. Isaiah 7:14)
- The church of God: Acts 20:28
- Jesus is God over all: Romans 9:5
- Jesus is the Creator: Colossians 1:15-18
- Jesus has the fullness of Deity: Colossians 2:9
- Jesus is our great God and Savior: Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1
- Jesus is worshipped: Hebrews 1:6; Philippians 2:10 (cf. Rev. 19:10)
- Jesus is called "God" by the Father: Hebrews 1:8
- Jesus is the True God and Eternal Life: 1 John 5:20
- Jesus is the Alpha and Omega: Revelation 22:13....1:8, 1:17. 2:8; 21:8 (cf. Isaiah 41:4; 44:6)

Evidence that God in the Old Testament is Jesus in the New Testament

Many times the New Testament describes Christ through quotations or allusions to the Old Testament. In many cases, those references in the Old Testament are speaking of God. This is very compelling evidence that equates Jesus in the New Testament with God in the Old Testament.

- Eternal Creator: Psalm 102:25-27....Hebrews 1:10-12
- Creator: Isaiah 40:28....John 1:3
- Savior: Isaiah 45:22; 43:11....John 4:42
- Raises the dead: 1 Samuel 2:6....John 5:21
- Means of salvation: Joel 2:32....Romans 10:13
- Judge: Joel 3:12....John 5:27; cf. Matthew 25:31ff.
- Light: Isaiah 60:19-20....John 8:12

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- I AM: Exodus 3:14....John 8:58; cf. John 18:5-6
- Shepherd: Psalm 23:1....John 10:11
- Glory of God: Isaiah 42:8....John 17:1, 5
- First and Last: Isaiah 41:4; 44:6....Revelation 1:17; 2:8
- Redeemer: Hosea 13:14....Revelation 5:9
- Bridegroom: Isaiah 62:5; cf. Hosea 2:16....Revelation 21:2
- Rock: Psalm 18:2....1 Corinthians 10:4
- Forgiver of sins: Jeremiah 31:34....Mark 2:7, 10
- Creator of angels: Psalm 148:5....Colossians 1:16
- Confessed as Lord: Isaiah 45:23....Philippians 2:10
- Jesus is the Mighty God: Isaiah 9:6....John 3:16

The term "Lord" in the Old Testament refers to God and it is used in the New Testament to refer to Jesus. One occurrence is Matthew 3:3, quoting Isaiah 40:3, which clearly refers to Jesus as the Lord as God in the Old Testament.

Evidence of the Holy Spirit as God

The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity. Once the Deity of Christ is accepted, the Deity of the Holy Spirit appeared to follow. Yet some who deny Christ's Deity have taught that the Holy Spirit is an impersonal force used by God.

However, the Holy Spirit, known also as the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Jesus Christ is credited with the attributes of God in the Scripture. In more than 90 places, the Bible calls the Spirit of God the "Holy Spirit." Holiness is a basic characteristic of the Spirit. Insulting the Spirit is as sinful as trampling the Son of God under foot (Hebrews 10:29). The Spirit is inherently holy in His essence, rather than being assigned holiness as with the tabernacle or the temple.

The Spirit also has the infinite attributes of God:

- Eternality: The Spirit is "eternal" (John 14:16; Hebrews 9:14).
- Omnipresence: The Holy Spirit is omnipresent according to Psalm 139:7-8, being in heaven and in Sheol (139:8). God's Spirit fills many people at the same time (1 Corinthians 6:19).
- Omniscience: The Spirit of God is omniscient and "knows the thoughts of God" (1 Corinthians 2:11). The Spirit knows all things and is able to teach all things (John 14:26).

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- Omnipotence: The works of God, such as creation, are ascribed to the Holy Spirit (Job 33:4; Psalm 104:30). Also, the miracles of Jesus Christ were done "by the Spirit" (Matthew 12:28). In Paul's ministry, the work that Christ accomplished was "through the power of the Spirit" (Romans 15:18-19).

Holiness, eternality, omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence are incommunicable attributes of God's essence, showing the Holy Spirit has the basic nature of God.

In Acts 5:3, Peter rebukes Ananias for lying to the Holy Spirit. In the next verse, Peter describes the lie as being not to men but to God. This passage teaches that the Holy Spirit is both a Person and is equal to God. No one lies to a force and the Holy Spirit is more than representative of God. According to Acts 5:3-4, the Holy Spirit is God. This type of interchange of the Holy Spirit and God is also found with 1 Corinthians 3:16 (temple of the God) and 1 Corinthians 6:19 (temple of the Holy Spirit). Again, in Hebrews 10:15-17 the Spirit is described as saying what the Lord said. The equating of the Holy Spirit with God is also found in Acts 13:2 and in Hebrews 3:7-11.

That the Holy Spirit is a Person, not a force, can be found in the masculine references to Him. The Greek word for "spirit" (PNEUMA) is a neuter word, yet there are places where it is changed to a masculine word when the word is used to refer to the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14). Furthermore, there are many references to the Holy Spirit involved in personal activities, such as speaking (Acts 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 21:11; 1 Timothy 4:1; Hebrews 3:7), being grieved (Ephesians 4:30), teaching (John 14:26), bearing witness (15:26), convicting (16:8) and guiding (16:13).

Conclusion

Because God is uniquely three Persons in one Being, there are no analogies that can completely communicate the Trinity. Because the concept of three Persons dwelling in one Divine Being is unfamiliar to mankind, it is difficult to communicate this doctrine. The difficulty of man's understanding does not negate the importance of the Trinity. God is complex and what more important undertaking exists than to focus our attention on God's Being?

Just as understanding the attributes of God enable us to live a godly life, so the appreciation of the Trinity enables us to live in holiness. The joining of unity with diversity can be seen in our lives in small ways.

One distinct way unity exists among persons is in marriage. In marriage the "two shall become one flesh" which "God has joined together" (Matthew 19:5-6). This unity is not identical to God but is one way man experiences unity in a unique fashion. To not appreciate our unity in marriage can lead even to divorce.

Another way the Scripture describes our dwelling in unity is in the church. The analogy of the body is found in 1 Corinthians 12:12-13: *"For even as the body is one and {yet} has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ. For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body."* There is a unity that exists in the church that is also unique to any other entity. Christ's prayer in John 17:21 "that they may all be one" was answered in the coming of the Holy Spirit who baptized us into one body.

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The appreciation of unity of the church will help us follow 1 Corinthians 1:10, "*Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.*" An appreciation of the unity of the church will also help us to abhor the sin of factiousness (Titus 3:9-11).

Both the institutions of marriage and the church that God established have a unique unity with diversity. Thus it should not surprise us that God also has unique unity with diversity. Our understanding of the unity and diversity of God strengthens our marriage and strengthens our church. But most importantly, it will help us know God better, which is foundational to living well.