



# A Closer Look at the Trinity

## The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most important beliefs of Christianity. It is central to the Christian understanding of God and is accepted by all Christian groups.

## An Explanation of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is the belief that there is only one living and true God. Yet, the one God is three distinct Persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These three have distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being. They enjoy eternal communion and are coeternal and coequal.

The doctrine of the Trinity denies tritheism. Tritheism is the belief that there are three gods. There is only one God. The doctrine of the Trinity also refutes modalism. Modalism is the belief that God is only one Person who appears in different modes at different times. The three Persons of the Trinity exist simultaneously. They are distinct and eternal Persons in the one God.

While the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible, its truth is expressed in many biblical passages. The Bible recognizes the Father as God, the Son as God, and the Holy Spirit as God.

## The Doctrine of the Trinity in Early Church History

Many people who reject the doctrine of the Trinity argue that it developed after the time of the apostles. Most critics of the Trinity point to the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381 as the events that introduced the doctrine of the Trinity into the church. This claim is not supported by the historical record. This can be shown by examining

the writings of Christians before the Councils of Nicea and Constantinople.

Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church at Corinth around A.D. 96. In this letter, he explains God in terms compatible with the doctrine of the Trinity. He writes, "Do we not have one God, one Christ, one Spirit of grace which was poured out on us?" (Cyril Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers*, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970, p. 65). Clement also writes, "For as God lives, and as the Lord Jesus Christ lives and the Holy Spirit (on whom the elect believe and hope) . . ." (Ibid., p. 70). In addition, the Trinitarian formula of Matthew 28:19 is quoted twice in *The Didache*, a church manual written around A.D. 90-100.

Ignatius of Antioch wrote several letters before his death in A.D. 117. He affirmed both the humanity and deity of Jesus Christ in his letter to the Ephesians. "The source of your unity and election is genuine suffering which you undergo by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God" (Ibid., pp. 87-88). In the same letter he also writes, "There is only one physician—of flesh yet spiritual, born yet unbegotten, God incarnate, genuine life in the midst of death, sprung from Mary as well as God, first subject to suffering then beyond it—Jesus Christ our Lord" (Ibid., p. 90). In his letter to the Romans, Ignatius also refers to Jesus Christ as "our God" (Ibid., p. 103). Another early Christian named Justin wrote his *First Apology* about A.D. 155. In this writing, he declared that the Son is divine (Ibid., p. 285).

The doctrine of the Trinity is also implied in Athenagoras' *Plea to Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius* in A.D. 176-77, "The Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son by the unity and power of the Spirit" (Ibid., p. 309). Athenagoras repeats his Trinitarian position later in his *Plea*, "We speak of God, of the Son, his Word, and of the Holy Spirit; and we say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are united in power" (Ibid., p. 326).

Irenaeus of Lyons wrote his work *Against Heresies* in the late second century. He writes, "Christ Jesus our Lord and God and Savior and King, according to the pleasure of the invisible Father" (Ibid., p. 360). At about the same time, Tertullian argued that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one God in his treatise *Against Praxeas* (Justo L. Gonzales, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970, pp. 182-183). Other early Christians also affirmed their belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, including Origen (A.D. 185-254) and Novatian of Rome (mid-third century) (Ibid., pp. 226, 242).

## **Biblical Evidence for the Doctrine of the Trinity**

The Bible recognizes the Father as God. Psalm 89:26 (NIV) says, "He will call out to me, 'You are my Father, my God, the Rock my Savior.'" Peter in his first epistle writes, "who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (1 Pet. 1:2, NIV; see also Matt. 6:9; 7:11; Rom. 8:15; 1 Pet. 1:17).

The Bible calls Jesus (the Son) God. John 1:1 (NIV) says Jesus is God, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The phrase "the Word was God" cannot legitimately be translated "the word was a god" as do the Jehovah's Witnesses in their *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1984). The lack of the definite article in the Greek text simply identifies the word God as the predicate of the sentence. The claim by Jehovah's Witnesses that it indicates that Jesus is an inferior deity to the Father is false. Such a claim is not only contrary to Greek grammar but would have been unthinkable to a first century Jew. The Jehovah's Witness position actually advocates a form of polytheism that consists of a big god and a little god.

When Thomas addresses Jesus as "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28, NIV), Jesus does not correct him. Paul and Barnabas act very differently when the people of Lystra start giving them divine homage in Acts 14:8-18. They go to great lengths to convince the people they are not divine beings. According to John in the book of Revelation, the angel that he started worshiping also refused to accept divine obeisance. The angel insisted that John stop and said, "Do not do it! I am a fellow servant with you and with your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God" (Rev. 19:10, NIV)!

Titus 2:13 (NIV) declares that Jesus Christ is God, "We wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." It is very difficult to understand how this passage could refer to the appearing of the Father since John 1:18 (NIV) says, "No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known." Titus 2:13 indicates that Jesus Christ is both God and Savior. This same truth is also taught in 2 Peter 1:1 (NIV) where

Jesus Christ is called "our God and Savior." These passages declare that Jesus Christ is truly God.

The writer of Hebrews, quoting Psalm 45:6 says, "But about the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom'" (Heb. 1:8, NIV). In Hebrews 1:10, the writer quotes Psalm 102:24-25, a passage referring to God, and applies it to the Son. The inspired writer of Hebrews therefore identifies the Son as God.

The Bible identifies the Holy Spirit as God. Peter refers to the Holy Spirit as God in Acts 5:3-4 (NIV) "Then Peter said, 'Ananias, how is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit? . . . You have not lied to men but to God.'" The Bible describes the Holy Spirit as having attributes that only belong to God (Ps. 139:7-13; Luke 1:35; Rom. 15:19; 1 Cor. 2:10; Heb. 9:14). The Holy Spirit does the work of God (Gen. 1:26-27; Job 33:4; John 3:5-6; Acts 16: 6-7,10; Rom. 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:18; 2 Pet. 1:21). He also receives honor due only to God (Matt. 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14).

## **The Bible Describes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as Distinct Persons**

The Father and the Son are distinct Persons. The Bible distinguishes Jesus from the Father (John 1:14, 18; 3:16). Since the Father sends the Son, the two are distinguished from one another (John 10:36; Gal. 4.4).

The Father and the Son are described as Persons distinct from the Holy Spirit. Jesus distinguished the Holy Spirit from Himself and the Father (John 14:16-17). The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (John 15:26). The Holy Spirit is sent from the Father and by the Son (John 14:26; 15:26).

The Holy Spirit is a Person. Although the Greek word for "spirit" is neuter, the masculine pronoun is used when referring to the Holy Spirit in John 15:26 and John 16:13-14. The work of the Holy Spirit as Comforter, Helper, and Teacher suggests He must be a Person (John 14:16,26; 15:26). His name is mentioned with other people, which implies His own personality (Matt. 28:19; John 16:14-15; Acts 15:28; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). The Holy Spirit performs deeds that imply His personality (Gen. 6:3; Luke 12:12; Acts 2:4; 13:2; 16:6-7; Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 2:10-11). His personality is also indicated in that He is affected by the acts of others (Matt. 12:31; Acts 5:3-4,9; 7:51; Eph. 4:30).

The three Persons of the Trinity are eternal. The Person of the Son existed before His incarnation (John 1:1-3; 8:58; 17:5,24; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15-17; Rev. 14). Other biblical passages reveal the eternity of the Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:1-2; Heb. 9:14).

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a form of tritheism. Christians do not believe that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three gods, but that they are three Persons in the one God. While they are distinct Persons, they are one in essence. God is not three and one, but rather three in one (John 5:17,19; 14:9; 15:26; 17:21-23; 2 Cor. 5:19).

The three Persons of the Trinity are coequals. The Father is equal to the Son, who is equal to the Spirit (Rom. 8:11-14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 3:26; 4:4-6; Heb. 1:3; 2 Pet. 1:21). Several passages speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the same context (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; Titus 3:4-6). All three Persons of the Trinity raised Jesus from the dead (John 2:19; 1 Cor. 6:14; 1 Pet. 3:18).

## The Work and Teachings of Jesus Christ

The Old Testament not only predicted the birth of Jesus but also affirmed His deity. Concerning His birth, Matthew 1:23 (NIV) quotes Isaiah 7:14 and calls Jesus “Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.” The Virgin Birth also reveals Jesus’ divine and human natures. The preexistence of Jesus affirms His divinity (John 1:1; 8:58; 17:5,24; Phil. 2:5-11).

Jesus claimed equality with God the Father. In John 5:17 (NIV), He says “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” His Jewish listeners understood this as a claim of deity and sought to kill Him. When Jesus called God His Father (John 5:17-18) and Himself “the Son of God” (John 10:36), He was affirming His own deity. Jesus spoke of His special relationship with the Father when He referred to Him as “My Father” (John 20:17, NIV).

In John 5:23 (NIV), Jesus also claimed equality with God when He said, “that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him.” Likewise He also asserted His deity in John 10:30 (NIV) when He said, “I and the Father are one.” His Jewish listeners again picked up stones to stone Him to death because they believed that in claiming equality with God He had committed the sin of blasphemy. Jesus’ assertion of divinity is also seen in His “I am” sayings. In John 8:58 Jesus not only claims preexistence but equality with the God who is the “I AM WHO I AM” (Ex. 3:14, NIV).

While affirming the full equality of Jesus with the Father, the Scriptures do indicate that Jesus voluntarily submitted Himself to the Father. Philippians 2:6-8 (NIV) indicates that Jesus was equal with God the Father, even though He did give up His heavenly glory when He came to earth, “Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” This voluntary submission to the plan of the Father explains those occasions where Jesus revealed that the Father had sent Him (John 6:38; 12:44-45; 14:24; 17:3). It also clarifies what Jesus meant when He said, “the Father is greater than I” (John 14:28, NIV).

Jesus’ divinity is also evidenced by His actions. Jesus did things that only God can do. He forgave sins (Matt. 9:6), which was blasphemy to the Jews because only God

could forgive sins. He claimed all authority (Matt. 28:18). He claimed to be the only way of salvation (John 3:36; 14:6). He claimed authority to judge the world (John 5:22). Genesis 1:1 (NIV) indicates that “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.” Yet the New Testament reveals that Jesus created the world (John 1:3; Col. 1:16-17).

The only conclusion is that the Christian doctrine of the Trinity accurately describes the biblical testimony about God. Finite humans cannot rationally explain the doctrine of the Trinity. This should not surprise us since there are many things the Bible teaches about God that we cannot fully understand. For example, the Bible affirms the existence of God, the creation of the universe, atonement from sin, and the resurrection of the dead although none of the truths can be totally understood by finite minds. As with the doctrine of the Trinity, Christians do not accept these teachings because they can rationally explain them, but because the Bible teaches them.

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