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## The Trinity of God

by Jeremy Cagle

The doctrine of the Trinity is unique to the Christian religion. In fact, throughout the history of the church, it often has been a point of derision and ridicule by non-Christian religions and by cults calling themselves Christian. The following is a brief summary of what some of these groups teach concerning the Trinity.

### Islam:

Speak nothing but the truth about God. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was no more than God's apostle and His Word which He cast to Mary: a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His apostles but do not say: "Three." Forbear, and it shall be better for you. *God forbid that He should have a Son!*<sup>1</sup>

### Mormonism:

Many men say there is one God; the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are only one God. I say that is a strange God—three in one and one in three . . . It is curious organization . . . All are crammed into one God . . .<sup>2</sup>

### Christian Science:

...the theory of three persons in one God (that is, a personal Trinity or Tri-unity) suggests polytheism, rather than the one ever-present I AM.<sup>3</sup>

### Jehovah's Witnesses:

Satan is the originator of the trinity doctrine . . . sincere persons who want to know the true God and serve Him find it a bit difficult to love and worship a complicated, freakish-looking, three-headed God . . . The plain truth is that [the Trinity] is another of Satan's attempts to keep God-fearing persons from learning the truth of Jehovah . . .<sup>4</sup>

### Worldwide Church of God:

Christ is God! God Almighty His Father is god. They are two separate and individual Persons . . . I suppose most people think of God as one single individual Person. Or, as a "trinity." *This is not true.*<sup>5</sup>

Walter Martin in his book *The Kingdom of the Cults* summarizes this line of thinking when he says, "One prominent trait of all non-Christian religions and cults is their pointed denial of the Scriptural doctrine of the Trinity and the Deity of Jesus Christ."<sup>6</sup>

Yet, despite such opposition and ridicule, the Christian church from the New-Testament times to today has unashamedly taught the doctrine of the Trinity. It is the purpose of this article to explore this important doctrine.

## I. THE EXISTENCE OF THE TRINITY

The *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* provides the following definition for the word "Trinity:"

Trinity means that the one divine nature is a unity of three persons and that God is revealed as three distinct persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.<sup>7</sup>

These "three distinct persons" are seen in various places in the Old and New testaments. However, one must understand that these references do not refer to three distinct Gods. The God of the Bible, rather, is one God revealed in three persons. Deuteronomy 6:4, taken along with all the Scripture references below, makes this very clear, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!"

With this said, the majority of Old Testament passages concerning the Trinity refer to each member separately.<sup>8</sup> For instance, Exodus 15:11, Leviticus 10:3, and Joshua 24:19 speak of God the Father, describing Him as holy. Exodus 9:29 and Psalm 24:1–2 and 66:5–7 say that He is the ruler over all creation. Exodus 33:19, Nehemiah 9:31, and Psalm 86:15 state that He is gracious and slow to anger.

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Of God the Son, Psalm 2:7–9 says,

I will surely tell of the decree of the Lord:  
He said to Me, “You are My Son,  
Today I have begotten You.

“Ask of Me, and I will surely give the  
nations as Your inheritance,  
and the *very* ends of the earth as Your  
possession.

“You shall break them with a rod of iron,  
You shall shatter them like earthenware.”

Daniel 7:13–14 also describes God the Son, saying,

I kept looking in the night visions,  
And behold, with the clouds of heaven  
One like a Son of Man was coming,  
And He came up to the Ancient of Days  
And was presented before Him.

And to Him was given dominion,  
Glory and a kingdom.  
That all the peoples, nations and *men of every* language  
Might serve Him.  
His dominion is an everlasting dominion  
Which will not pass away;  
And His kingdom is one  
Which will not be destroyed.

In the Old Testament, God the Holy Spirit is also described. He is said to create the earth and individual people (Gen 1:1–2; Job 33: 4), to prepare Israelites for works of ministry (Ex 31:1–5), to provide direction (Jud 6:33–34), to inhabit believers (Ps 51:11), and to give revelation (Joel 2:28–29).

While the New Testament often references the members of the Trinity separately,<sup>9</sup> there are also several instances when it mentions all three members together. At the baptism of Jesus, for example, the Father praises the Son and the Spirit descends upon the Son in the form of a dove. Matthew 3:16–17 records the event:

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

Later in the book of Matthew, Jesus commands His followers to baptize “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (28:19).

Other New Testament passages that mention all three members of the Trinity are First Corinthians 12:3–5, Second Corinthians 13:14, and First Peter 1:2.

## II. THE ESSENCE OF THE TRINITY

The word *essence* means “the basic nature of something.”<sup>10</sup> To study the essence of the Trinity is to study each member’s “basic nature.” To do this, it will be helpful to consider one example from history and one from theology.

Historically, the greatest council in the Christian church from the time of the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15 until the Protestant Reformation was the Council of Nicaea, held in A. D. 325. The issue that brought about the formation of this council was the essence of the Trinity. The question was, is Jesus Christ as divine as God the Father, or is His divinity of a different nature?

The debate centered on two Greek words. Was Jesus *homoousios* (of the same substance) as God the Father, or was He *homoiousios* (of a similar substance) as the Father?<sup>11</sup> Justo Gonzalez sums up the two positions of the argument by saying,

Alexander held that the Word existed eternally with the Father; Arius argued that the Word was not coeternal with the Father... Arius claimed that, strictly speaking, the Word was not God, but the first of all creatures.<sup>12</sup>

The bishops who gathered for the Council of Nicaea eventually decided against Arius and claimed that the Word, Jesus Christ, was and is *homoousios* (of the same substance) as God the Father. At this famous council, they formulated what is today known as the Nicene Creed:

We believe in one God the Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
And of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
 The only-begotten Son of God,  
 Begotten of the Father before all worlds;  
 God of God,  
 Light of Light,  
 Very God of very God,  
 Begotten, not made,  
 Being of one substance with the Father;  
 By whom all things were made.<sup>13</sup>

The Council of Nicea came to the decision that God the Father and God the Son are of “one substance” – one essence.

That is the historical example. With respect to theology, a study of the attributes of God reveals the same thing. The attributes of God are “the characteristics or qualities of God that constitute him as what he is.”<sup>14</sup> God’s attributes display Who He is by revealing what He does. A brief examination of the attributes of each member of the Trinity reveals that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have the same attributes (though these attributes are expressed in different ways).

God the Father (Gen 1:1), Son (Jn 1:10), and Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2) were all involved in the creation of the earth. God the Father (Ps 55:22), Son (Heb 1:3), and Holy Spirit (Ps 51:10–12) also are involved in the process of sustaining what has been made.

Furthermore, the Scriptures testify that God the Father is sovereign (Isa 46:9–10), eternal (Isa 44:6), omniscient<sup>15</sup> (Job 34:21), omnipotent (Jer 32:17),<sup>16</sup> and possessing an unchanging nature (Heb 6:17–18). God the Son also is sovereign (Matt 28:18), eternal (1 Jn 1:1–2), omniscient (Col 2:2–3), omnipotent (Heb 1:3), and unchanging (Heb 13:8). In a similar fashion, God the Spirit is sovereign (1 Cor 12: 11), eternal (Heb 9:14), omniscient (Isa 40:13–14), and omnipotent (1 Cor 12:11).<sup>17</sup>

Since the members of the Trinity are the same God, each performs the same task in different ways. In the words of Stephen Charnock, “The Father, Son, Spirit, are one principle in creation, resurrection, and all the works of omnipotence.”<sup>18</sup> This sharing of attributes reflects the Trinity’s sharing of essence. As each member is sovereign, eternal, and omniscient, each member also possesses the same essence that makes Him sovereign, eternal, and omniscient.

As one theologian writes,

In addition to the fact that all three persons [of the Trinity] are distinct, the abundant testimony of Scripture is that each person is fully God as well . . . The three different persons of the Trinity are one not only in purpose and in agreement on what they think, but they are one in essence, one in their essential nature. In other words, God is only one being. There are not three Gods. There is only one God.<sup>19</sup>

The testimony of history and theology is that the God of the Bible is a Trinity. He is one God in three distinct persons – each possessing the same attributes and the same essence.

### III. THE ACTION OF THE TRINITY

While some of the actions of the Trinity have been discussed briefly in connection with the Trinity’s attributes, a further discussion of what each member does would be helpful here. While each member shares attributes, they perform these attributes in different ways. This section will discuss how each member of the Godhead<sup>20</sup> uniquely carries out His functions.

First, God the Father. That God has revealed Himself in the role of a Father is seen in Ephesians 3:14–15: “For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name.” Hebrews 12:9 gives another description of the Father: “Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?” James 1:17 gives a further portrayal of this member of the Trinity: “Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.”

The role of God the Father, then, is that of overseeing every event on the earth and in the heavens. In the words of Lewis Sperry Chafer, “The Fatherhood of God over creation is one of measureless extent.”<sup>21</sup> With respect to the history of the earth, this oversight has intimately expressed itself with three different people(s): Jesus Christ, Israel, and all who believe.

Jesus told His disciples that He would ascend to His

Father (Jn 20:17) and that no one knows the Father except the Son (Matt 11:27). Philippians 2:5–11 says that Jesus became a man and was crucified “to the glory of God the Father” (v. 11). The Fatherhood of God over Israel was the consistent theme of the Old Testament. In Exodus 4:22, the Lord calls Israel “My Son, My firstborn.” The Fatherhood of God over all who believe in Him is expressed in Jesus’ introduction to the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew 6:6, 8:

But you, when you pray, go into your inner room, close your door and pray to your Father who is in secret, and your Father who sees what is done in secret will reward you . . . for your Father knows what you need before you ask Him.

Second, God the Son. That God has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ, the God-man, is seen in John 1:1–4:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men.

Jesus Himself testifies to His Deity in John 14:1, 7:

Do not let your heart be troubled; believe in God, believe also in Me . . . If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; from now on you know Him, and have seen Him.

In the words of Charles Hodge, “No created being could speak as Christ here speaks. He begins by exhorting his disciples to have the same faith in him which they had in God.”<sup>22</sup>

If the role of God the Father is chiefly to *oversee* creation, the role of God the Son is chiefly to *save* it. The familiar passage of John 3:16 states that “whoever believes in Him, shall not perish, but have eternal life.” John 3:17 goes further and says the Son was not sent “to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him.”

In Second Corinthians 5:21, Paul writes that God the Father “made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, so that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.” God the Son came to earth in the form of a man, Jesus Christ, to be “offered once to bear the sins of many” (Heb 9:28).

Third, God the Spirit. That God has revealed Himself in the Holy Spirit is seen in passages such as First John 3:24, “The one who keeps His commandments abides in Him, and He in him. We know by this that He abides in us, by the Spirit whom He has given us.” First John 5:6 gives a more graphic reference to the Holy Spirit, saying, “It is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.” In Acts 5, when Peter confronts Ananias for lying to the Holy Spirit (v. 3), he goes on to state, “You have not lied to men but to God” (v. 4).

If the chief role of God the Father is to *oversee* creation and the chief role of God the Son is to *save* it, then the chief role of God the Spirit is to *sanctify*<sup>23</sup> it. John 16:7–8 states that the Holy Spirit “will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.” Furthermore, He will wash and renew Christians (Titus 3:5), baptizing them into one body (1 Cor 12:13) and marking them with a seal, guaranteeing their future inheritance (Eph 1:13–14).

In Romans 8:9, the Apostle Paul goes as far as to write that “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him.” As Sinclair Ferguson says, “Assurance of sonship is not reserved for the highly sanctified Christian; it is the birthright of even the weakest and most oppressed believer. This is its glory.”<sup>24</sup> Without the Holy Spirit, no Christian can belong to Christ, and, therefore, no one could be saved. But with the Holy Spirit, even the “weakest and most oppressed believer” is now a son of God (Rom 8:14–15).

#### IV. THE INTERACTION OF THE TRINITY

While the members of the Trinity are distinct in how they interact with the world and its inhabitants, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are also distinct in how they interact with one another. Theologian A. H. Strong illustrates this interaction by saying, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while equal in essence and dignity, stand to each other in order of personality, office, and operation.”<sup>25</sup> In other words, the members of the Trinity have roles; some members have leadership over other members, and some members submit to the leadership of the others.

We frankly recognize an eternal subordination of Christ to the Father, but we maintain at the same time that this subordination is a subordination of order, office, and operation, not a subordination of essence.<sup>26</sup>

One example is found in the Son's prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. Before His agonizing torture on the cross, Jesus Christ displayed His full submission to the Father's will by praying, "Father, if You are willing, remove this cup from Me; yet not My will, but Yours be done" (Lk 22:42). Jesus could have stopped His crucifixion at any time (as He tells Peter in Matt 26:53), yet He endured the suffering by submitting to the will of His Heavenly Father.

In John 6:38, Jesus explains His reason for coming to earth further by saying, "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me." Isaiah 53:10 gives a graphic prophecy about the nature of the Son's submission to the Father:

But the Lord was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering, He will see His offspring, He will prolong His days, and the good pleasure of the Lord will prosper in His hand.

The obedience of the Son to the will of the Father does not go unnoticed by the Father, however. Philippians 2:9–11, after describing Jesus' servitude, goes on to describe His reward:

For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

First Peter 3:22 says that the Son is now "at the right hand of God, having gone into heaven, after angels and authorities and powers had been subjected to Him." This reward is given because the Son was obedient to the will of His Heavenly Father.

Not only does the Son submit to the Father, but the Spirit submits to the will of the Father as well. John 14:16–17, 26 give the account of Jesus' telling His followers about the coming of the Holy Spirit to them:

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, but you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you . . . But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

The Holy Spirit came to inhabit believers (Acts 2:1–4) as a result of the Son's prayers to the Father.<sup>27</sup>

John 16:13 describes the Spirit's submission further by saying that He does not speak on His own initiative, but only what He hears.

But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

The Spirit speaks what He hears from the Father, as First Corinthians 2:12–13 explains,

Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, so that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.

The Spirit teaches believers because He tells them what He hears from the Father.

Just like the Son, the Spirit's role in the Trinity is one of submission. He is sent from the Father and He teaches believers what He has heard from the Father. This submission of Father and Son is essential to the very nature of the Trinity.

## CONCLUSION

While it may seem confusing that God would eternally exist in three distinct persons and yet still remain one God, it would be good to close here with a quotation from Wayne Grudem,

...Scripture does not ask us to believe in a contradiction. A contradiction would be "There is one God and there is not one God," or "God is three persons and God is not three persons" or even "God is three persons and God is one person." But to

say that “God is three persons and there is one God” is not a contradiction. It is something we do not understand, and it is therefore a mystery or a paradox, but that should not trouble us as long as the different aspects of the mystery are clearly taught by Scripture, for as long as we are finite creatures and not omniscient deity, there will always (for all eternity) be things that we do not fully understand.<sup>28</sup>

## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *The Koran*, trans. N. J. Dawood (Auckland, New Zealand: Penguin Books, 1999) 4:171. Emphasis added.
- <sup>2</sup> Joseph Smith, *Joseph Smith’s Teachings*, 372. Emphasis added.
- <sup>3</sup> Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures* (Boston: Trustees under the Will of Mary Baker G. Eddy, 1934) 256.
- <sup>4</sup> *Let God be True* (Brooklyn, New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1946) 101–102, 111.
- <sup>5</sup> Herbert W. Armstrong, *Just What Do You Mean – Born Again* (Pasadena, Calif.: Ambassador Press, n.d.) 16–17.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Kingdom of the Cults* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Bethany House Publishers, 1985) 145.
- <sup>7</sup> Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, & Cherith Fee Nordling, *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1999) 116.
- <sup>8</sup> Excluding the Old Testament references to God the Son (see the quotations from Psalm 2 and Daniel 7 below).
- <sup>9</sup> God the Father, Matt 6:9; Eph 4:6; God the Son, Col 2:9; Heb 1:3–4; God the Spirit, Matt 3:16; Rom 8:14.
- <sup>10</sup> *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, ed. by Michael Agnes (New York: Pocket Books, 2003) 223.
- <sup>11</sup> Justo Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1984) 179.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 161. The references to “the Word” here are references to Jesus Christ. (See John 1:1).
- <sup>13</sup> *The Creeds of Christendom*, ed. by Philip Schaff, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1983) 27–28.
- <sup>14</sup> Millard J. Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2001) 18. For more information on the attributes of God, see the article in this edition entitled, “The Attributes of God.”
- <sup>15</sup> Omniscience is “God’s knowing all things that are proper objects of knowledge” (Erickson, 80).
- <sup>16</sup> Omnipotence is “God’s ability to do all things that are proper objects of power” (*Ibid.*).
- <sup>17</sup> While Scripture does not directly state that the Holy Spirit is unchanging, this definitely is implied in all the attributes mentioned above. A being that is perfectly sovereign, eternal, omniscient, and omnipotent could not – by its nature – be anything but unchanging.
- <sup>18</sup> *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1996 ed.) ii, 86.
- <sup>19</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000) 233, 238.
- <sup>20</sup> “Godhead” is another name for “Trinity.”

<sup>21</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vols. 1–2 (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1976) 312.

<sup>22</sup> *Systematic Theology*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003 ed.) 507.

<sup>23</sup> Sanctification is “The divine act of making the believer actually holy” (Erickson, 175).

<sup>24</sup> *The Holy Spirit in Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1996) 185.

<sup>25</sup> *Systematic Theology*, (Valley Forge, Penn.: Judson, 1907) 342.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> For a further description of the Holy Spirit’s submission to the Father’s will, see Luke 11:13.

<sup>28</sup> Grudem, 256.