



Understanding  
the  
Trinity



...so we can know God better and love Him more





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# Understanding the Trinity

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*Understanding the Trinity: So We Can Know God Better and  
Love Him More*

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# UNDERSTANDING THE TRINITY

Have you ever tried to explain the Trinity to a child? (Children tend to ask the most difficult theological questions!) Perhaps you've struggled to find a human analogy to depict one God in three persons. Maybe you've concluded, as many have, that no earthly illustration can adequately demonstrate the mystery of God as three-in-one.

Or perhaps your challenge has been to explain your view of God to someone from a different religion. A Jehovah's Witness may have pointed out that the word "trinity" is not found in the Bible. A Muslim friend might have said, "I could never follow your religion because you Christians worship three gods!"

If a doctrine of the Bible is unclear to so many, can it really be that important? Why is a teaching that stretches the limits of human understanding necessary for a right knowledge of God? If you are already a Christian, is it really all that important to understand the doctrine of the Trinity?

A good understanding of the biblical teaching about the Trinity is essential for a growing relationship with God. Grasping what Scripture teaches about our triune God can lead us to greater gratitude for our salvation and deeper joy in our spiritual growth. Understanding the roles of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can help us love God more fully and serve Him more faithfully. A growing comprehension of God as the Trinity can lead to richer fellowship with Him now and greater anticipation of His presence in eternity.

## DEFINING THE TRINITY

So what do Christians mean when speaking of God as the Trinity? We mean that there is only one true God, and He exists eternally as three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each of whom is fully God. This understanding of one God in three persons has been held throughout church history and is affirmed in two of the earliest Christian creeds (the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed). The recognition of God as the Trinity is unique to Christianity among world religions. Some writers have noted that the Christian understanding of God as the Trinity must be true because no one would have invented so difficult a doctrine to grasp!

# THERE IS ONLY ONE TRUE GOD

Scripture teaches throughout that there is only one true God. God's instruction given to the Israelites through Moses was: "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4).

While the Israelites lived among people who worshiped many gods, the Jews were to recognize that there was only one Creator—the one true God—who alone was to be worshiped. God stressed His uniqueness as the one true God, the only Creator, through Isaiah the prophet:

Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me. I, I am the Lord, and besides me there is no savior. -Isaiah 43:10-11

And there is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none besides me. -Isaiah 45:21

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul taught that, while there may be many "so-called gods," for us ...

...there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. -1 Corinthians 8:5-6

The belief in only one true God is called *monotheism*. Christianity, Islam, and Judaism are all monotheistic religions in that each holds to belief in only one God.

When talking to Muslim or Jewish friends, it is important to stress that Christians are monotheistic. We do not believe in three gods, but one. We do, however, hold a very different view of the nature of the one true God.

## HE EXISTS ETERNALLY AS THREE DISTINCT PERSONS— FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT.

There is only one true God, and He is triune. He has always existed as three distinct persons, each of whom is fully God. A failure to grasp the truth that God "exists eternally" as three persons can lead to a serious misunderstanding known as "modalism." Early in Christian history, a man named Sabellius proposed that, while there was only one God, the one God chose to manifest himself as the Son when He entered the world as Jesus. Later, He came in the "mode" of the Holy Spirit. Sabellius' doctrine of modalism was easy to disprove by the early Christians since Scripture presents God acting as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit at the same time.<sup>1</sup>

For example, all three persons of the Trinity are active at the same time during Jesus' baptism (Matthew 3:16-17). Likewise, all three persons are seen acting simultaneously in Peter's description of Jesus' ministry:

...how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. -Acts 10:38

One evidence of God's eternal existence as more than one person is found in Genesis 1:26, where God speaks in first person plural: "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness."

The importance of God's eternal existence as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit was noted by a Scotsman known as Richard of St. Victor in the 1150s. Richard taught that God must have been three persons for all of eternity. Otherwise, in eternity past and prior to creation, He would have had no one to love. And God *is* love (1 John 4:8). Richard stressed that our triune God has always existed in a relationship of perfect, loving communion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Christians sometimes use the three states of water—frozen, liquid, and vapor—to represent the Trinity. However, since water is not in all three states simultaneously, this illustration is more in line with modalism.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 31.



**N**ow here's the wonder of the Son of Man:  
the loving relationship that the Son  
has always enjoyed with His Father *He now  
brings to us.*

Michael Reeves  
*Rejoicing in Christ, p. 52*

Out of His perfect love, our triune God chose to create in order to share His great love with us.

## THE FATHER IS GOD

There is little dispute about the person of the Father being God. In fact, many passages that distinguish between the Father and the Son refer to the Father as God. This is most clearly seen in the letters of the apostle Paul:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort. -2 Corinthians 1:3

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. -Ephesians 1:2

We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you. -Colossians 1:3

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. -1 Thessalonians 1:1

Many more passages in Scripture reveal that the Father is God. Departures from the doctrine of the Trinity tend to focus on the deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## THE SON IS GOD

Much of the controversy around the Trinity throughout history concerns the deity of Jesus. The issue led to one of the greatest church councils ever convened—the Council of Nicea in AD 325. The issue that gave rise to the council was the teaching of a popular church leader named Arius. Arius taught that, while Christ was a highly exalted being, He was a created being and was not God. Arius was famous for saying, "There was a time when the Son was not." The Council of Nicea was a council of three hundred bishops who met in response to Arius' teaching. The Council resulted in the Nicene Creed, a statement of faith that strongly affirms the deity of the Son, Jesus Christ.<sup>3</sup> Jesus' deity was not established at this point in time; rather, the Council affirmed what Christians have always believed. The Creed stresses that the Son is "of one substance with the Father."<sup>4</sup> As such, Jesus has always been fully God. All of the qualities and attributes of deity are as much present in God the Son as in God the Father.

Countless biblical passages teach the deity of Jesus Christ. One of the best known is John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1:14 notes that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." Jesus did not become God at His birth—rather, He became "flesh," taking a physical body like ours. God the Son had always existed with the Father. In His incarnation, He became a human being.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus makes claims about himself that could only be true of deity. His "I am" claims (John 6:48, 8:12, 10:7, 10:14, 11:25, 14:6, 15:1) connect Him to the divine name by which God revealed himself to Moses (Exodus 3:14). When Jesus said, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58), the Jews picked up stones to kill Him because they considered His claim to deity to be blasphemous.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix.

<sup>4</sup> James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Bloomington, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 185-187.

One of the clearest evidences of Jesus' deity is the fact that He accepted worship. All good Jews knew that only God was to be worshiped. When the Pharisees heard the crowd shouting praises to Jesus, they said, "Teacher, rebuke your disciples." Jesus replied, " I tell you, if these were silent, the very stones would cry out" (Luke 19:39-40). Jesus healed a man who had been blind from birth, and later asked the man about his faith. The man replied, "Lord, I believe," and he worshiped Jesus (John 9:38). On seeing the resurrected Jesus and observing the wounds from His crucifixion, even the disciple we call "doubting Thomas" believed, expressing his faith in words of worship: "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:28)

## THE HOLY SPIRIT IS GOD

While there are fewer passages that explicitly teach the deity of the Holy Spirit, it remains clear that the Holy Spirit is God. The Book of Acts records the attempt by Ananias and his wife, Sapphira, to deceive the apostles. Peter discerns the deception and says, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land?" Peter goes on to point to the deity of the Holy Spirit when he says, " You have not lied to man but to God" (Acts 5:3-4).

In explaining that the bodies of believers are temples of God, the apostle Paul writes, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16) God indwells His people as His Spirit takes up residence within us.

In a later letter to the Corinthians, Paul notes that "the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom." Our freedom to know and love God "comes from the Lord who is the Spirit" (2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

In his teaching about the origin of Scripture, the apostle Peter explains that God himself gave us Scripture as He worked through men by His Holy Spirit: "For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21). The writers who spoke "from God" were speaking as they were guided by God the Holy Spirit.

While a primary role of the Holy Spirit is to glorify Jesus (John 16:14), Christ gives great honor to the Spirit in His teaching on blasphemy. When the Pharisees made the awful accusation that Jesus was casting out demons by an evil power, Jesus replied that His works were empowered by "the Spirit of God." Christ went on to warn His hearers that "whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come" (Matthew 12:24-31). Here, Jesus beautifully exalts and honors the Holy Spirit. How can one be forgiven for blaspheming the Son, but not for blaspheming the Spirit? This could only be the case if the Holy Spirit is God.

# ONE GOD IN THREE PERSONS

In the one true God, who has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, there is perfect unity, love, and fellowship. While all three persons are equally God, they fill distinct roles. This causes some people to question their equality in deity. For example, in John 14:28, Christ tells His disciples that He is about to depart from them and says, "If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I." Some cite this verse as evidence of the Son's inferiority. In reality, it simply points to a distinction in roles between the Father and the Son. The Son willingly submits to the Father's plan, even to the point of dying on a cross to pay for our sins. Yet in the same conversation with His disciples, Jesus says to Philip: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). There is equality in being between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, yet distinction in roles.

**D**ifference in function does not indicate inferiority of nature.

James R. White  
*The Forgotten Trinity*, p. 66

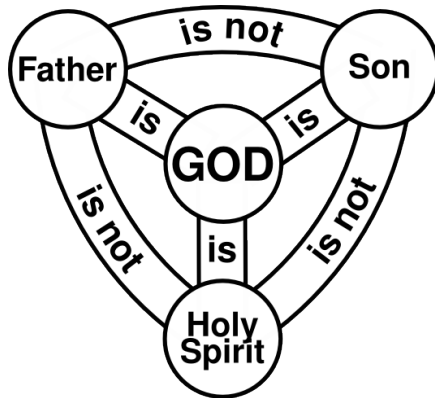
In John chapter 8, Jesus points to the distinction between the Father and himself when He says, "It is the Father who glorifies me" (v. 54). Yet Christ makes the strong claim to deity for himself in the same passage when He says, "Before Abraham was, I am" (v. 58).

The deity and separateness of all three persons of the Trinity are seen in Jesus' promise to His disciples concerning the Holy Spirit. Christ said:

And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. -John 14:16-17

Jesus continues by showing the perfect oneness of the Trinity when He says, "I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you" (John 14:18). The Son asks the Father to give the Spirit to His people. When the Spirit comes, Christ comes. This is why Jesus, just before ascending to heaven, could say to His followers, "And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:20).

The oneness and separateness of the three persons of the Trinity make it a difficult doctrine to illustrate. It seems impossible to find an earthly analogy to accurately depict the Trinity. One of the most helpful illustrations of the deity and the distinction of the three persons of the Godhead is one that has been used since the early centuries of the Christian church. Early Christians used this diagram to show that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each God, but they are distinct persons.



The Triune God

Without a good earthly analogy to explain the beautiful mystery of the Trinity, perhaps we are best to use the phrase of theologian J. I. Packer, who has described God as "the divine team."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> J. I. Packer, *Weakness Is the Way: Life with Christ Our Strength* (Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2013), 56-57.

# WHY THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IS SO IMPORTANT

The doctrine of the Trinity has long been considered an essential belief of the Christian faith, as is evidenced by the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. Why is it so important? The doctrine is important because its implications for our salvation and life as Christians are profound.

Our salvation is only complete and secure because the One who suffered and died on the cross in our place is God. If Jesus Christ had been a mere created being, even a sinless human, His death on the cross could not have atoned for the sins of all believers of all time. It might seem logical that one sinless human being could die in the place of another sinful human being. That might seem like reasonable justice to us. But how could the death of one person provide *eternal* forgiveness and salvation for *multitudes*? It only makes sense if that person is the Creator himself.

**O**ur salvation is only as good as it is  
*because* Christ is who He is. Make Him  
less than God and you make the gospel less  
than good.

Michael Reeves  
*Rejoicing in Christ*, p. 49

Because Jesus was a human being, He could take our place on the cross. Because He was God, His sacrifice was of infinite value. When we consider that Christ was fully God, and that He lived a sinless life on earth, and then suffered on the cross in our place, we can understand why Scripture says: "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1).



When we have embraced by faith Jesus' work on the cross for us, we can receive the liberating promise of freedom from the judgment we deserve. We can rest in the assurance that:

It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who is interceding for us. -Romans 8:33-34

Our salvation is complete because the One who died in our place is the Son of God, God the Son, Jesus Christ the Lord.

Belief in the Trinity also has profound implications for how we live on earth as followers of Jesus. For those of us who are Christians, the deity of the Holy Spirit means that God himself indwells us. This means that we are never alone. The one Jesus described as "another Helper" and "the Spirit of truth" has been sent to be with us forever (John 14: 15-17). We will never be without God's presence because our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19, 2 Corinthians 6:16).

This assurance of God's presence within the believer provides great incentive for pursuing a more holy life. The apostle Paul taught that a great responsibility comes with being a temple of the Holy Spirit. In light of the Spirit's presence in believers, he issued a command: "So glorify God in your body" (1 Corinthians 6:20). He urged believers to "abstain from sexual immorality," and to control our bodies in "holiness and honor." Otherwise, we are disregarding "not man but God, who gives His Holy Spirit to you" (1 Thessalonians 4:3-8).

The indwelling Holy Spirit also enables a believer to abide in Christ, and this is essential for an empowered life as a Christian. Jesus said:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. -Acts 1:8

Jesus explained that effectiveness in serving Him was impossible without an ongoing relationship of abiding—or remaining—in Him. He said, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). Abiding in Christ is only possible when God, the Holy Spirit, lives within us. The Spirit of Christ then empowers us to do the work of Christ.

God's abiding presence in the life of a Christian gives rise to another remarkable truth, one that is often neglected, yet has the potential to powerfully enrich our lives. This truth is that the three-in-one God, who has always existed in a relationship of perfect love and fellowship, invites us to enjoy communion with Him. The beautiful benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians reads: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). This fellowship, or communion, with the Holy Spirit is God's invitation to us to enjoy His presence. The recognition that God himself dwells in us by His Holy Spirit can bring fresh vitality to our Bible study, prayer, and worship. Recognizing God's presence can lead to greater peace and deeper joy, even during the most difficult times of our lives.

Sadly, many Christians neglect the presence of the Holy Spirit and live far short of the holy, empowered, fruit-bearing lives to which God calls us. In his *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, Dr. Richard Lovelace describes such a life of neglect, and points to a remedy:

The typical relationship between believers and the Holy Spirit in today's church is too often like that between the husband and wife in a bad marriage. They live under the same roof, and the husband makes constant use of his wife's services, but he fails to communicate with her, recognize her presence and celebrate their relationship with her.

What should be done to reverse this situation? We should make a deliberate effort at the outset of every day to recognize the person of the Holy Spirit, to move into the light concerning his presence in our consciousness and to open up our minds and to share all our thoughts and plans as we gaze by faith into the face of God. We should continue to walk throughout the day in a relationship of communication and communion with the Spirit mediated through our knowledge of the Word, relying upon every office of the Holy Spirit's role as counselor mentioned in Scripture. We should acknowledge him as the illuminator of truth and of the glory of Christ. We should look to him as teacher, guide, sanctifier, giver of assurance concerning our sonship and standing before God, helper in prayer, and as the one who directs and empowers witness.

We should particularly recognize that growth in holiness is not simply a matter of the lonely individual making claims of faith on the basis of Romans 6:1-14. It involves moving about in all areas of our life in dependent fellowship with a person: "Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh" (Galatians 5:16 NASB). When this practice of the presence of God is maintained over a period of time, our experience of the Holy Spirit becomes less subjective and more clearly identifiable, as gradually we learn to distinguish the strivings of the Spirit from the motions of our flesh.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life in Evangelical Theology of Revival* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 131.

## CONCLUSION

While human analogies may fail us when we attempt to illustrate the triune nature of God, we can rest assured in the authority of Scripture and its revelation about the Trinity. Christians throughout history have embraced the beautiful, mysterious truth that there is only one true God who exists eternally as three distinct Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—each of whom is fully God. And while a correct understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is critically important, we must realize that our relationship with God should be about much more than having accurate knowledge about His nature. We should grow in our appreciation for the remarkable fact that God himself came to the earth as a human being to bear our judgment on the cross so that we could be adopted as His own children. God himself indwells each follower of Jesus by the Holy Spirit, empowering us to live more holy, fruitful lives, and to be Christ's witnesses in this world. And our triune God, who has always existed in perfect love and fellowship, invites us to enjoy His presence now and throughout eternity.

# APPENDIX

## The Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man.

For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

AMEN.

## The Trinity

### A Puritan Prayer

THREE IN ONE, ONE IN THREE, GOD OF MY SALVATION,  
Heavenly Father, blessed Son, eternal Spirit,  
I adore thee as one Being, one Essence, one God in three  
distinct Persons,  
for bringing sinners to thy knowledge and to thy kingdom.

O Father, thou hast loved me and sent Jesus to redeem me;

O Jesus, thou hast loved me and assumed my nature,  
shed thine own blood to wash away my sins,  
wrought righteousness to cover my unworthiness;

O Holy Spirit, thou hast loved me and entered  
my heart, implanted there eternal life,  
revealed to me the glories of Jesus.

Three Persons and one God, I bless and praise thee,  
for love so unmerited, so unspeakable,  
so wondrous, so mighty to save the lost  
and raise them to glory.

O Father, I thank thee that in fullness of grace  
thou hast given me to Jesus, to be his sheep, jewel, portion;

O Jesus, I thank thee that in fullness of grace  
thou hast accepted, espoused, bound me;

O Holy Spirit, I thank thee that in fullness of  
grace thou hast  
exhibited Jesus as my salvation,  
implanted faith within me,  
subdued my stubborn heart,  
made me one with him for ever.

*(-continued-)*

*(-continued-)*

O Father, thou art enthroned to hear my prayers,

O Jesus, thy hand is outstretched to take my petitions,

O Holy Spirit, thou art willing to help my  
infirmities, to show me my need,  
to supply words, to pray within me,  
to strengthen me that I faint not in supplication.

O Triune God, who commandeth the universe,  
thou hast commanded me to ask for those things that concern  
thy kingdom and my soul.

Let me live and pray as one baptized into the threefold Name.

Arthur Bennett  
*The Valley of Vision*, pp. 2-3





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