

## What We Believe, Part 2: The Trinity

**1 Peter 1:1 ESV (Pg 588)** Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who are elect exiles of the Dispersion in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, **2** according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you.

We believe in one living and true God, infinite, almighty, perfect in holiness, truth and love, eternally existing in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; that these are co-equal in every divine perfection, and that they execute distinct but harmonious offices in the work of creation, providence and redemption.

- I. The most fundamental answer we could give, not to just **any** single question, but to **every** single question ever asked is this: **God is**. He exists. He is real. He is the wellspring and origin of all life, creativity and truth in all the universe. This means all life is God's life, all creation is God's creation, all truth is God's truth; no life, creation or truth exists which he does not omnipotently observe and govern.
  - A. But if God's existence is the answer, a question must arise: **"What is God?"**
    1. Demographically, only 7% of the world's population denies belief in any deity whatsoever and are considered to be convinced atheists.<sup>1</sup>
    2. That means that 93% of us believe in some form of higher power or god. But that 93% does not agree as to the nature of whatever being, force or power is out there, above and beyond us! So can we know which one of these belief systems are right? Or are they all versions of the same thing?
  - B. True Christians derive all information about spiritual realities only from the Holy Scriptures. Pastor Dave taught us last week about the uniqueness and authority of God's Word. We can trust the Bible. So the question to be answered this morning is this: what does the Bible tell us about what God is like?
- II. In the 4th century, this question was made prominent because of various competing explanations concerning the nature of God that had emerged.
  - A. They included Arianism, stating that Jesus was a **created** being, less than God but more than man. Jehovah's Witnesses still hold to a version of this. There was also Sabellianism (or modalism) which taught that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were the same person, with no real distinction from one another. You will still find this among "oneness" Pentecostals.
  - B. The church, recognizing these positions as aberrations, held a series of councils to articulate what the Bible actually teaches. They were examining what the Bible taught to stating it clearly. They weren't trying to "make up" a doctrine.
    1. This process was not quick. It took the better part of a century. The Scriptures were thoroughly examined. Every word in the original languages was scrutinized. Every argument was meticulously defended or repudiated.

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<sup>1</sup> Keysar, Ariela; Navarro-Rivera, Juhem (2017). "36. A World of Atheism: Global Demographics". In Bullivant, Stephen; Ruse, Michael. *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. Oxford University Press. ISBN 0199644659. (cited by [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics\\_of\\_atheism#cite\\_note-Demographics\\_Oxford\\_Keysar-5](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_atheism#cite_note-Demographics_Oxford_Keysar-5))

2. By the end of the process, three particular creeds were issued (commonly referred to as the Nicene Creed, Constantinopolitan Creed, and the Athanasian Creed). Each progressively clarified the nature of God, and particularly that of the Trinity (or Godhead), and the incarnation and divinity of Christ. If you are interested, we have copies of the Athanasian Creed available for you to take home in the foyer today.
  3. Over the next few weeks we are going to be discussing the unique distinctions of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit individually, but this morning we are going to discuss what the Bible teaches about the Trinity generally.
- C. The conclusion of the 4th century councils can be communicated in three short statements, which we will examine in turn biblically: (1) **God is 3 Persons.** (2) **Each Person is fully God.** (3) **There is one God.** **BULLET THESE**
- D. Even for Bible-believing Christians committed to the truth of those statements, this has proven to be impossible to understand. Why? Because, if true, this idea of 3 being 1, and 1 being 3 defies anything we have ever known in the created order, so we too often are tempted to oversimplify it or discard it altogether.
1. But we mustn't do either! Just because something is difficult or impossible to understand, doesn't mean it's not true! But we must believe what God Has revealed about himself and the trustworthiness he has demonstrated for all time as a God who cannot lie.
  2. **Isaiah 55:9 ESV For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are *my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.***
- III. Statement One: **God is three distinct Persons.** This means the Father is not the Son or the Spirit; the Son is not the Father or the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father or the Son. This truth is clearly seen in the Baptism of Christ. As Christ (the Son) is coming out of the water, the Father speaks from heaven, and the Spirit descends.
- A. The Spirit isn't being baptized and doesn't speak. The Father isn't being baptized and doesn't descend. The Son neither speaks nor descends. This distinction is shown throughout scripture. For example...
1. The Father speaks audibly from Heaven, not only at Christ's baptism, but again at his transfiguration, and once more in John chapter 12, days before Jesus is crucified. If the Father was not a person distinct from the Son, this would mean that Jesus pulled off an amazing act of ventriloquism!
  2. Also, Christ says that both he and the Father will send the Holy Spirit after his ascension in John 16. If there were no distinction between them, why would he not say, "I'll send myself in the **form** of the Spirit?"
  3. In John 17 and other places, Jesus also prays to the Father. Why would he do that if they were the same person, not distinct? We're also told in Romans 8 the Spirit intercedes for us to the Father.
- B. Anyone with a rational, logical mind can see that modalism (the belief that God is one person acting at different times in various modes) is a heretical, unbiblical teaching; based on the belief that God moves in different ways at different points in history, but there are multiple times in scripture (like the baptism) where all 3 persons show up at the same time! Look at this from the book of Acts...

1. **Acts 10:38 ESV** 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.
  2. “God *anointed* Jesus” (God acted upon his Son as distinct from himself).“*with* the Holy Spirit” He lavished The Holy Spirit (distinct from himself; one was poured out, the other one did the pouring) on Christ (a third person that was also distinct from his own person).
- IV. Statement 2: **Each Person of the Trinity is fully God.** This truth helps us understand that all of God’s attributes are equally true of all three persons for each is truly and fully God.
- A. Few people wrestle with the fact that the Father is fully God. In fact, people commonly interchange the titles “God” and “Father”. Difficulty often arises with grasping the divine nature of Son and Spirit. Are they God, equal to the Father?
1. What do the scriptures say about the divinity of the Son of God?
    - a) **John 1:1 ESV** In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and *the Word was God.* (“The Word” = Jesus; cf. 1 John 1:1)
    - b) **Colossians 2:9 ESV** For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily...
    - c) In John 20, after the risen Christ appears to Thomas for the first time, Thomas falls to his knees in worship, and, directly addressing Jesus, says, “My Lord and My God!” And Christ does not rebuke him for it! What a blasphemy Jesus permitted unless he was deserving of Thomas’ worship as the almighty, eternal, all-powerful God!
  2. What do the Scriptures say about the divinity of the Holy Spirit?
    - a) In Acts 5, Ananias and Sapphira sell a piece of property in order to give the some of the proceeds to the fledgling church, because thats what others are doing. But after they sell it, they regret their decision and decide to hold some of the money back for themselves, yet they lie and tell the church and it’s leaders that they gave it all, in order to look good. When the Holy Spirit exposes this wickedness to Peter he confronts them. **Acts 5:3b ESV** “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to *lie to the Holy Spirit ...4b ...You have not lied to man but to God.*”
    - b) **2 Corinthians 3:17 ESV** Now the Lord is the Spirit... According Wayne Grudem, “a good argument can be made from grammar and context to say that this verse is better translated with the Holy Spirit as the subject, ‘Now the Spirit is the Lord...’ In this case, Paul would be saying that the Holy Spirit is also Yahweh, the Lord of the Old Testament.”<sup>2</sup>
- B. But if both Christ and the Spirit are fully and equally God, how then do we account for the submission that is often portrayed in their relation to each other in the Bible? For example, why is Jesus so often described in the New Testament as submitting to and obeying the Father, if he is also fully God? Why does scripture say that the holy Spirit will bear witness to Christ, glorify Christ, and declare what is Christ’s in John 15-16, instead of glorifying himself?

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<sup>2</sup> Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine (pg 233); © 1994, Wayne Grudem, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan

1. This seems problematic because if the Son and the Spirit are not fully God, they cannot be God at all.
  - a) If they were created beings, even very powerful ones, they could not be God, because created things are not eternal (have been created at some point). An eternal nature is something clearly declared of all three.
  - b) If they were eternal, but subordinate in their nature (less Godlike), they could not be God because the bible tells us that God is perfect. Less than God equals less than perfect.
2. So we can conclude that the subordination that we see between Persons of the Godhead in scripture is a subordination in role, but not in essence. Again, Grudem puts it this way: “The only distinctions between the members of the Trinity are in the ways they relate to each other and to the creation.” In other words, they are “equal in being, but subordinate in role”<sup>3</sup>.
- C. The Son submits to the Father in order to please him and bring about his glory and his purposes. The Spirits constantly points to Jesus to glorify him and expand his kingdom. All of this submission and obedience is motivated by perfect, inexplicable, eternal love, leading to our next statement; the hardest.
- V. Statement 3: **There is one God**. How can 3 distinct persons, with 3 distinct roles, be understood as 1 being? While this is admittedly beyond our ability to understand perfectly, the love that exists within the Trinity is our best place to begin.
  - A. For all of eternity past God has never existed in isolation, but in community. That is one reason why he always works through close community. That is why men and women were not designed to be alone but that the “two shall become one flesh” in marriage. That is why Christ died and rose not merely to save individuals, but to build a worldwide, multi-ethnic church.
  - B. Because God is perfect the community of the Godhead is perfect. **“The Persons of the Godhead, being one, have one will. They work always together, and never one smallest act is done by one without the instant acquiescence of the other two. Every act of God is accomplished by the Trinity in Unity.” A.W. Tozer** <sup>4</sup>
    1. God did not create you, me, or anything else because he was lonely! He has experienced perfect love, harmony and pleasure within himself for eternity.
    2. But the different Persons of the Trinity are not simply one in purpose and in agreement, but one in their essential nature. God is only one being.
  - C. The Bible attributes every one of his activities revealed in scripture as a perfect unified act of one God, working through his three distinct Persons; from creation, to the deliverance of Israel out of Egyptian slavery, to the resurrection of Christ, to the subsequent redemption of mankind.
    1. But it would be an egregious heresy to say that all of these things were accomplished by 3 gods working in concert with each other because the Bible nowhere supports that position.
      - a) **Deuteronomy 6:4-5 ESV** “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, ***the Lord is one.***

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid; pp. 250-251

<sup>4</sup> The Knowledge of The Holy, from The Pursuit of God and Other Classics (p. 51); A.W. Tozer, Kindle Edition.

- b) **1 Kings 8:60 ESV** “that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; *there is no other.*”
2. In the New Testament, Paul asserts the same thing in Romans 3:30, 1 Corinthians 8:6 and 1 Timothy 2:5; as does James in James 2:19.
- D. This is the deepest mystery concerning the Trinity, but if we are committed to God’s word, we must believe by faith that God is one God, eternally existing in 3 persons, without denying or diminishing any part of his attributes.
- VI. But why does this doctrine of the Trinity even matter? Because the entire gospel of redemption for mankind hangs upon it!
- A. Consider the most famous verse in the Bible: **John 3:16 ESV** For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
1. Notice the verbs “loved” and “gave” in this passage and think for a moment about what they tell us. If God were 1 Person, this would make no sense at all. But it tells us that the One God’s perfect, eternal love compelled him to sacrificially give that which was by far most precious to him, One that was distinct from him, for the sake of poor, helpless sinners.
- a) There are many men who have heroically laid down their lives for a noble cause without so much as a moments thought.
- b) But who has ever willingly volunteered the life of their own child for any cause? Let alone one for the benefit of those so vile and undeserving as the world of sinful people!
2. It is only in the reality of a Triune God that we can ever understand the magnitude of what God did for our salvation! He did not sacrifice himself, but he watched as his perfect, righteous, innocent Son was torn apart for the benefit of the ungrateful wretches that killed him!
- B. But what does the Trinity tell us about the Holy Spirit in the Light of the gospel? The Son, distinct from the Father and Spirit, took on human flesh in order to fulfill the redemptive purposes of the One God. He remains, as Paul calls him “the Man, Jesus Christ” yet fully God, reigning at God’s right hand. But God’s primary redemptive purposes for us was that we would forever dwell with him and he with us (something not possible because of sin”).
1. Since God the Father is enthroned in the highest heaven, and the glorified God-Man is reigning at his side, this unending fellowship with God is accomplished through the agency of the Holy Spirit. John 14:17 Jesus reminds his followers about the Holy Spirit, that “he dwells with you and will be in you.”
2. His presence allows us to be comforted, convicted, instructed, transformed, enlightened, and empowered. Do you see how important the Trinity is to your salvation the life of a believer? If this one doctrine were not true, every other doctrine would crumble and the scriptures would make no cohesive sense.
- C. The verse we read at the beginning is one of several where the Apostles state the unique but mysterious inter-workings of the Triune Godhead. Peter says that we were elected to be recipients of grace...

1. “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father” This means that God’s eternal design, even before creation, was always to bring glory to himself by lavishing love on each one of us who believe.
  2. “in the sanctification of the Spirit” This means God the Holy Spirit’s role in both initially converting us, and as well as how he gradually but continuously transforms us into the image of Jesus.
  3. “for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood” This speaks of God’s exalting of Christ by raising up a holy nation of obedient people for him as Lord of All, accomplished by his sin-and-death-destroying perfect sacrifice on the cross.
- D. May we be a people who not only believe in the Trinity as expressed in scripture, but that marvel in the majesty of what it means for our salvation, and are prompted to unceasing worship.