

BIBLICAL DOCTRINE: THE TRINITY



The biblical teaching on the Trinity embodies four essential affirmations:

1. There is one and only one true and living God.
2. This one God eternally exists in three persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
3. These three persons are completely equal in attributes, each with the same divine nature.
4. While each person is *fully* and *completely* God, the persons are not identical.

The differences among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are found in the way they relate to one another and the role each plays in accomplishing their unified purpose.

The unity of nature and distinction of persons of the Trinity is helpfully illustrated in the diagram below.

God Is One God: Monotheism

There is nothing more fundamental to biblical theology than monotheism (the biblical belief that there is one and only one God): “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4). This verse, known as the *Shema* in Hebrew (from the opening verb of the verse, meaning “hear” or “listen”), is one of the most familiar and foundational verses in the OT. God rejects polytheism (belief in many gods) and demands exclusive devotion: “I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God” (Isa. 45:5; cf. Deut. 4:35, 39; 1 Kings 8:60; Isa. 40:18; 46:9). The NT affirms the deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as we shall see, but does not waver from OT monotheism (John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:4–6; 1 Tim. 2:5; James 2:19). Jesus quotes the *Shema* in a debate with the Jewish leaders (Mark 12:29), and Paul continues to teach that there is one God while recognizing Jesus as the divine-human Mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

Implications of Monotheism

Because there is only one God, idolatry of any kind is evil, foolish, wrong, and harmful. Worship of other “gods” robs the true God of the devotion and glory he alone deserves. Idolatry can take many forms. Idols are not only

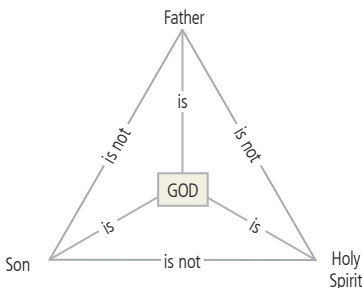
man-made objects but are *anything* allowed to compete with God for ultimate loyalty. According to Jesus, money can become an idol: “You cannot serve God and money” (Matt. 6:24). Greed, lust, and impurity can also become indicators of idolatry (Eph. 5:5; Col. 3:5). Idolatry is foolish, deceptive, and dangerous—and may even involve demonic activity (1 Cor. 10:19–20).

Because there is only one God, he alone should be the ultimate object of the believer’s affections. He alone deserves absolute allegiance and obedience. The Great Commandment that follows the *Shema* is the obvious implication of monotheism: “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut. 6:5). The one true God deserves all we are and have. He deserves wholehearted love because nothing compares with him.

God Is Three Persons: The Tri-unity of God

As the nature of God is progressively revealed in Scripture, the one God is seen to exist eternally in three persons. These three persons share the same divine nature yet are different in role and relationship. The basic principle at the heart of God’s triune being is *unity* and *distinction*, both coexisting without either being compromised. Anything that is necessarily true of God is true of Father, Son, and Spirit. They are equal in essence yet distinct in function.

The doctrine of the Trinity is most fully realized in the NT where the divine Father, Son, and Spirit are seen accomplishing redemption. But while the NT gives the clearest picture of the Trinity, there are hints within the OT of what is yet to come. In the beginning of the Bible, the Spirit of God is “hovering over the face of the waters” at creation (Gen. 1:2) and is elsewhere described as a personal being, possessing the attributes of God and yet distinct from Yahweh (Isa. 48:16; 63:10). Some interpreters think that the plurality within God is seen in the Hebrew word for God, *Elohim*, which is plural in form (though others disagree that this is significant; the word is used with singular verbs and all agree that it has a singular meaning in the OT). In addition, the use of plural pronouns when God refers to himself hints at a plurality of persons: “Then God said, ‘Let *us* make man in *our* image’” (Gen. 1:27; cf. Gen. 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8). The plurality of God also seems to be indicated when the Angel of the Lord appears in the OT as one who represents Yahweh, while yet at times this angel seems to be no different in attributes or actions from God himself (cf. Gen. 16:7, 10–11, 13; 18:1–33; Ex. 3:1–4:31; 32:20–22; Num. 22:35, 38; Judg. 2:1–2; 6:11–18). There are also passages in the OT that call two persons God or Lord: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness above your companions” (Ps. 45:6–7). David says,



“The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool’” (Ps. 110:1). The God who is set above his companions (Ps. 45:6) and the Lord of Psalm 110:1 are recognized as Christ in the NT (Heb. 1:8, 13). Christ himself applies Psalm 110:1 to himself (Matt. 22:41–46). Other passages give divine status to a messianic figure distinct from Yahweh (Prov. 8:22–31; 30:4; Dan. 7:13–14).

The OT glimpses of God’s plurality blossom into the full picture of the Trinity in the NT, where the deity and distinct personalities of Father, Son, and Spirit function together in perfect unity and equality (on the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit, see pp. 2515–2522). Perhaps the clearest picture of this distinction and unity is Jesus’ baptism, where the Son is anointed for his public ministry by the Spirit, descending as a dove, with the Father declaring from heaven, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:13–17). All three persons of the Trinity are present, and each one is doing something different.

The NT authors employ a Trinitarian cadence as they write about the work of God. Prayers of blessing and descriptions of gifts within the body of Christ are Trinitarian in nature: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (2 Cor. 13:14); “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone” (1 Cor. 12:4–6). The persons of the Trinity are also linked in the baptismal formula of Matthew 28:19–20, “baptizing them in [or into] the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” There are many other passages that reveal the Trinitarian, or at least the plural, nature of God (e.g., John 14:16, 26; 16:13–15; 20:21–22; Rom. 8:9; 15:16, 30; 2 Cor. 1:21–22; Gal. 4:4–6; Eph. 2:18; 4:4–6; 1 Pet. 1:1–2; 1 John 4:2, 13–14; Jude 20–21).

Differences in roles also appear consistently in biblical testimonies concerning the relationships between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The uniform pattern of Scripture is that the Father plans, directs, and sends; the Son is sent by the Father and is subject to the Father’s authority and obedient to the Father’s will; and both Father and Son direct and send the Spirit, who carries out the will of both. Yet this is somehow consistent with equality in being and in attributes. The Father created through the Son (John 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2), and the Father planned redemption and sent the Son into the world (John 3:16; Rom. 8:29; Gal. 4:4; Eph. 1:3–5). The Son obeyed the Father and accomplished redemption for us (John 4:34; 5:19; 6:38; Heb. 10:5–7; cf. Matt. 26:64; Acts 2:33; 1 Cor. 15:28; Heb. 1:3). The Father did not come to die for our sins, nor did the Holy Spirit, but that was the role of the Son. The Father and Son both send the Holy Spirit in a new way after Pentecost (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7). These relationships existed eternally (Rom. 8:29; Eph. 1:4; Rev. 13:8), and they provide the basis for simultaneous equality and differences in various human relationships.

Within God there is both unity and diversity: unity without uniformity, and diversity without division. The early church saw this Trinitarian balance clearly. For example, the Athanasian Creed (c. A.D. 500) says:

We worship one God in the Trinity and the Trinity in unity; we distinguish among the persons, but we do not divide the substance. . . . The entire three persons are co-eternal and co-equal with one another, so that . . . we worship complete unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity.

This unity and diversity is at the heart of the great mystery of the Trinity. Unity without uniformity is baffling to finite minds, but the world shows different types of reflections of this principle of oneness and distinction at every turn. What is the source of the transcendent beauty in a symphony, the human body, marriage, ecosystems, the church, the human race, a delicious meal, or a perfectly executed fast break in basketball? Is it not, in large part, due to the distinct parts coming together to form a unified whole, leading to a unified result? Unity and distinction—the principle at the heart of the Trinity—can be seen in much of what makes life so rich and beautiful. Woven into the fabric of the world are multiple reflections of the One who made it with unity and distinction as the parallel qualities of its existence.

Historical Misunderstandings of the Trinity

One of the most fundamental ways to misunderstand the Trinity is *tritheism*, which overemphasizes the distinction between the persons of the Trinity and ends up with three gods. This view neglects the oneness of the natures of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. At the other end of the spectrum is the heresy of *modalism* (also known as Sabellianism, named after its earliest proponent, Sabellius, 3rd century), which loses the distinctions between the persons and claims that God is only one person. In this view, the appearance of the three persons is merely three *modes* of existence of the one God. For instance, God reveals himself as Father when he is creating and giving the law, as Son in redemption, and as Spirit in the church age. A contemporary version of modalism is found in the teaching of Oneness Pentecostalism. Both tritheism and modalism fail to maintain the biblical balance between the one reality of God and his eternal existence in three persons. A third error is to deny the full deity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and to say that they were at some time created. This is the heresy of *Arianism* (after a teacher named Arius, c. A.D. 256–336), and it is held today by Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Practical Implications of the Trinity

What are some of the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity?

1. The doctrine of the Trinity makes definitive revelation of God possible as he is known in Christ: “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (John 1:18). No man can see God and live (Ex. 33:20; 1 Tim. 6:16), but God the Son provided an actual manifestation of God in the flesh.

2. The Trinity makes the atonement possible. Redemption of sinful man is accomplished through the distinct and unified activity of each person of the Godhead: “how much more will the blood of *Christ*, who through the eternal *Spirit* offered himself without blemish to *God*, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (Heb. 9:14).

3. Because God is triune, he has eternally been personal and relational in his own being, in full independence from his creation. God has never had any unmet

needs, “nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything” (Acts 17:25). Personhood becomes real only within realized relationships, and the reality of relationship can only exist where one has something or someone that is not oneself to relate to; if, then, God had not been plural in himself he could not have been a personal, relational God till he had begun creating, and thus would have been dependent on creation for his own personhood, which is a notion as nonsensical as it is unscriptural. Between the persons of the Trinity, there has always existed total relational harmony and expression; God is, from this standpoint, a

perfect society in himself. Apart from the plurality in the Trinity, either God’s eternal independence of the created order or his eternally relational personal existence would have to be denied.

4. The Trinity provides the ultimate model for relationships within the body of Christ and marriage (1 Cor. 11:3; 12:4–6; Eph. 4:4–7).

The doctrine of the Trinity is well beyond human ability to ever fully comprehend. However, it is central to understanding the nature of God and the central events in the history of salvation, in which God is seen acting as, in effect, a tripersonal team. Biblical Christianity stands or falls with the doctrine of the Trinity. ◀