

From Acorn to Oak
Who is God, and what is he like? Part 1: What is the Trinity?
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“I don’t know what all the fuss is about,” Jim objected to his friend, Bob. “All religions worship the same God; they just call him by different names.”

If I were in that conversation I would like to reply to Jim, “Sam, how do you know?” Before trying to answer the philosophical question I posed, he would with displeasure correct me with words such as, “I’m not Sam; I’m Jim.”

Precisely. Furthermore, if I’m describing Jim to someone else, and, calling him Sam, I portray him as short, fair complexioned, having deep facial scars, and cantankerous when Jim is in fact tall, dark, handsome, and kind would I be talking about the same person?

Of course not. Yet this is just what many people do concerning God. Further, Jim obviously has not been talking to any devout Muslims, Hindus, or Jews, none of whom would agree that their view of God is the same as the others, as their literature attests.

Most importantly for us, who hold that the Bible is God’s revelation of himself and his will for humankind, God discloses very specifically who he is and what he is like. We don’t know everything about him, but what he has revealed he expects us to know and share with others.

He has called us to introduce him to people who do not know him. In this and in subsequent articles, we’ll reflect on what God has said about who he is.

Unique to the Bible is the description of God as a trinity, three distinct and coeternal persons, Father, only begotten Son Christ Jesus, and Holy Spirit, who share one substance. While the word trinity does not occur in either the Old or the New Testament, both contain statements that, when considered together, provide the basis of this understanding of God. That he is one is clearly seen in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

Yet even in that same Old Testament, e.g., Genesis 1:26, we read God (the Hebrew word for whom has a plural ending) saying, “Let us make man in our image....” In Isaiah 61:1 we read “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” All three persons of the triune God are present in this Old Testament passage. The context indicates the Messiah is speaking, and indeed Jesus attributed this and the subsequent verses to himself in Luke 4:16-21 and Matthew 11:5.

Earlier the Prophet Isaiah said, “A voice of one calling: ‘In the desert prepare the way for the LORD; make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God.’” (40:3) In the New Testament Matthew quotes this same passage in 3:3 and says the voice is that of John the

Baptist, and Jesus Christ is the LORD who is God. Thus, these two passages conclusively demonstrate that Christ is divine and part of the Godhead.

Due to God's progressive revelation throughout the Bible, we have clearer indications of his triune character in the New Testament. Christ commands us in Matthew 28:19 to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In John 10:30 Jesus tells the Jews that he and the Father are one. That they knew he was not just talking about being one in agreement is seen in the very next verses where they picked up stones to kill him, because he "claim[ed] to be God" (v. 33; cf. 5:18). Jesus is the "only begotten" Son, meaning that he shares the same substance with the other two persons in the triune God. (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; and 1 John 4:9) Jesus' divinity is clearly taught elsewhere in the Bible as well (e.g., John 3:16; 8:58; and 14:9-11). In John 14:11 Jesus says that he is in the Father and the Father is in him as is testified by the miracles he was doing. We'll return to this subject in the third unit in this series when we consider more fully the subject of Christ.

In Ephesians 2:18 Paul explains that "through him [Christ] we both [Jews and non-Jews] have access to the Father by one Spirit." In this one sentence the apostle refers to all three persons of the Trinity as distinct. Would space allow, many other passages could be cited. In Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:9-11, and Luke 3:21-22 we also see all three distinct Persons of the Trinity involved in the baptism of Jesus.

While the Bible doesn't explain everything about the triune being of God, it gives us all we need to know, indeed most if not all we are able to comprehend with our limited and finite, in contrast to his unlimited and infinite, being. In accord with the Scripture's clear indication that the three persons of the Trinity are distinct, we see passages that refer to specific knowledge and work each uniquely performs. For example, the Father sent the Son and is the giver of every good and perfect gift. (John 17:3; James 1:17) Jesus also said that only the Father knows the day and the hour that Jesus will return. (Matthew 24:36-44) No one comes to the Father except by the Son, who is the way, the truth, and the life. (John 14:6) In the Son is redemption and the forgiveness of sins (Colossians 1:14); in him all things were created and hold together. (Colossians 1:16-17) The Holy Spirit convicts the world of guilt and enables people to say "Jesus is Lord." (John 16:8; 1 Corinthians 12:3) The Spirit also intercedes for us, regenerates our human nature, and produces fruit in our lives. (Romans 8:26-27; John 3:3,5-6; Galatians 5:22-23)

In the fourteenth chapter of John, Christ describes the Holy Spirit as one of the same quality, not a lesser being, whom both the Father and he will send to them. (14:26, 15:26) The Apostle Paul revealed that Christ and the Holy Spirit share the same essence in 2 Corinthians 3:17-18. "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

I suggest you keep this article and/or mark these Scripture texts in your Bible as a reminder for the next time a Jehovah's Witness or a Mormon knocks on your door.

Remember them also when you are talking with a Unitarian, or any other modern adherent of the ancient heresy of Arianism, the belief that Christ is not of the same essence as the Father. Keep them handy, preferably in your mind and heart, when you are explaining the Biblical teaching about God to a Muslim or any other non-Christian. In addition to these and other passages from God's Word, several symbols are useful for explaining the Trinity.

Some people say that the concept of something consisting at the same time of three distinct (though not separate) entities while at the same time being one in essence is either not understandable or nonsense that cannot be accepted. As we'll see below, such a concept is reasonable, but even if it were not understandable for humans, it still would make perfect sense that there are some realities that human beings with a limited ability to understand could not comprehend that God, who is unlimited, can understand and does implement. Philosophically, logic indicates that the finite cannot comprehend the infinite; consequently that which is limited by definition cannot comprehend the unlimited. Indeed, as he revealed through Isaiah, "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.'" (55:8-9) That statement is logical and makes perfect sense for people who are genuinely searching for the truth.

Nevertheless, to help us who are limited, God has placed many analogies in nature that enable us to understand spiritual realities. Most analogies breakdown at some point and do not fully clarify that which they are enlisted to illustrate or elucidate. Yet, several have been identified as illustrative of phenomena that have three distinct dimensions while sharing one substance or being one in essence, e.g., water, ice, and steam, and an egg with its yolk, the albumen and the shell.

Albertus Pieters in his book, *The Facts and Mysteries of the Christian Faith*, wrote of another analogy, the sun, with its ball of fire, light, and heat. I especially like this illustration, because one of its strengths relates to a key characteristic of the triune God, namely that all three distinct elements are continually present, as with the three Persons who constitute what in Christian theology is called the Godhead, the Trinity. From the ball of fire come light and heat. All three elements of the sun are continually functioning; it is not naturally possible for any one element to be present without the other two or any two without the remaining one, and all three constitute one luminary. Thus it is very reasonable to conceive of something as being one in essence or substance but wholly consisting of three distinct dimensions, elements, or parts at the same time.

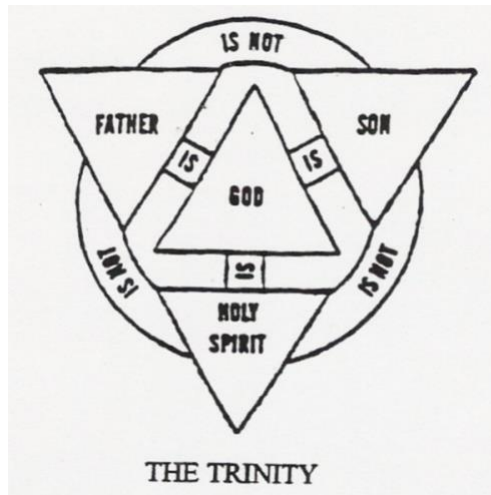
As we've seen above, the Bible teaches that all three persons in the Godhead are always present. Contrary to the ancient heresy of modalism in all of its versions, God is not one person who appears in three different forms or modes. He doesn't just wear three different hats, e.g., appearing in creation as the Father, in redemption as the Son but no longer the Father, and in sanctification as the Holy Spirit with neither the Father nor the Son present. For example, regarding creation, Scripture teaches that the Son was very much present (Colossians 1:16, indeed "all things were created by him and for him;" and

Genesis 1:1-2 where all three beings or persons of the Godhead are implied in the Hebrew word translated God, Elohim, and the Spirit is specifically mentioned.) All three persons are always together and functioning in their work. To a very limited but helpful extent, one can also observe some other ways the sun illustrates aspects of the triune God. The ball of fire suggests the Father; the light coming forth symbolizes or brings to mind one very important aspect of the Son, who said “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12); and the heat points to the power of the Holy Spirit who is sent by both the Father and the Son.

When teaching this analogy in other cultures, it’s important to keep in mind how cultural perspectives filter and shape concepts in human thinking. Thus, in cultures where polytheism is widely practiced, I’ve observed that some misunderstand and think that this analogy is referring to three gods emerging from the sun, which of course is not at all the teaching of the Bible. Therefore, it is vital to emphasize that the ball of fire is not actually the Father; its light is not literally the Son; and the sun’s heat is not a third deity called the Holy Spirit. We only refer to the sun with its three distinct elements in order to demonstrate that it is reasonable to comprehend how something can be three in one at the same time; i.e., how an entity can consist of three distinct elements and yet be one in essence. The sun is simply an analogy of how it makes sense to conceptualize something as being simultaneously three in one, having three distinct aspects always subsisting in one substance.

Analogies in the physical realm are limited in their usefulness to explain much greater and complex spiritual realities. Nevertheless, these above demonstrate that it is very reasonable and not at all absurd to hold to a concept of something continually having three distinct dimensions or parts while sharing a common oneness in essence or substance.

As the Bible repeatedly emphasizes, God is one. We are not polytheists, as some accuse us. The three persons in the Trinity, while distinct and perform some different functions, subsist as one. The whole being of God belongs to and is shared by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14), as illustrated by the accompanying shield of the Holy Trinity, found in medieval stained glass. The words, originally in Latin, read logically in any direction.



Many people, allowing their philosophical orientation to trump their theology, prefer to rename the persons in the Trinity to avoid using male terms, specifically the Father and the Son. However, they fail to discern that these terms are not the result of Christian gender bias but communicate in terminology understood by the Near Eastern cultures from much earlier times concepts God used in his revelation in the Bible. The title Father is crucial to the person and work of Jesus Christ. In Bible times people understood the king to be the son of their chief god. When Jesus referred to himself as Son and called God his Father and spoke of being one with him, he was making a strong statement as to his divinity, a point not lost on the Jews who then wanted to kill him. (John 10:29-39; cf. also 5:18) Calvin Theological Seminary professor John Cooper writes, “Most of the scores of occasions when Jesus speaks of...God as *Father*...ought to be read as allusions to the royal father-messianic son relationship that has deep roots in the Old Testament. Thus the God of Scripture is not merely the universal *Father*, an idea found in other religions. He is the Father of Jesus Christ, the Son. This is what distinguishes New Testament faith from all other religions.” (*Our Father in Heaven: Christian Faith and Inclusive Language for God*, 108-109) Thus, the title Father is not a simple accommodation to the patriarchal culture of the times. We’ll look further at this subject in later chapters.

This article is the first in an extended series on the six major doctrines in historic Christian theology. John Dewey, who to my knowledge was never accused of being a Christian, nevertheless is reported to have profoundly observed that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, to which I would add sound and Biblical theology. Therefore, the focus in this series will be on the eminently practical dimension of our theology. Christian theology arose from the attempts of thoughtful church leaders to bring together by subject the teachings of the Bible to answer the great questions of life and eternity that people have raised through the centuries. These same questions our children and grandchildren, teenagers, adult friends, and we ourselves still ask. Wherever we are in our development from acorns to oaks of righteousness (Isaiah 61:3), considering for the first time or reflecting for the 100th time on these key doctrines in

God’s Word, may the Holy Spirit bless and further equip us to “display his splendor” (61:3); to “make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28:19); and to “become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ” (Ephesians 4:13).

The source of the trinity graphic is *Seasons & Symbols: A Handbook on the Church Year* by Robert P. Wetzler and Helen Huntington (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1962), p. 73. Whenever using this graphic, please include the reference.