

The Trinity



The Trinity: The God of the Bible

Genesis 1:1-2, 26-27 | 1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.

26 Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.

What is the Hebrew word we translate "God" and why is it significant?

What does this tell us about the personhood of God?

What other passages in the Bible use the first-person plural pronoun to refer to God?

Genesis 18:1-5, 20-22 | 1 The LORD appeared to Abraham near the great trees of Mamre while he was sitting at the entrance to his tent in the heat of the day. 2 Abraham looked up and saw three men standing nearby. When he saw them, he hurried from the entrance of his tent to meet them and bowed low to the ground.

3 He said, "If I have found favor in your eyes, my lord, do not pass your servant by. 4 Let a little water be brought, and then you may all wash your feet and rest under this tree. 5 Let me get you something to eat, so you can be refreshed and then go on your way—now that you have come to your servant."

"Very well," they answered, "do as you say."

20 Then the LORD said, "The outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah is so great and their sin so grievous 21 that I will go down and see if what they have done is as bad as the outcry that has reached me. If not, I will know."

22 The men turned away and went toward Sodom, but Abraham remained standing before the LORD.

What is the technical term for “a vision of God”?

Psalm 110:1-4 | 1 The LORD says to my Lord:

“Sit at my right hand
until I make your enemies
a footstool for your feet.”

2 The LORD will extend your mighty scepter from Zion;
you will rule in the midst of your enemies.

3 Your troops will be willing
on your day of battle.
Arrayed in holy majesty,
from the womb of the dawn
you will receive the dew of your youth.

4 The LORD has sworn
and will not change his mind:
“You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek.”

Who is David?

Why would David not call his own son “my Lord”?

Who is David’s “adonai”?

Matthew 28:18-19 | 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Would Jesus have told his disciples to baptize believers in the name of someone who was not God? Why or why not?

How does the language indicate the nature of the relationship?

1 Corinthians 12:4-6 | 4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but the same God works all of them in all men.

When we see the word "Lord" in the NT, to whom does that most often refer? What about "God"?

Ephesians 4:4-6 | 4 There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope when you were called— 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

What is the defining statement of Jewish monotheism?

Did Paul consider himself a faithful Jew?

Mystery

What is the definition of the doctrine of the Trinity?

How is each person of the Trinity distinct?

How is each person of the Trinity fully God?

What is the clear teaching of Scripture regarding God?

Heresies

What is modalism?

What is the fatal flaw of modalism?

What is Arianism?

What was the great argument over at the Council of Nicea?

What is Tritheism?

The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

If we lose the doctrine of the Trinity, what else do we lose?

How is the heart of our faith wrapped up in the Trinity?

Discussion Questions

Is there a person within the Godhead to whom you most naturally relate? Who? Why?

Which do you tend to emphasize in your worship and prayers: the threeness or the oneness of God?

How would a better understanding of the Trinity change the way you relate to God?

Why is it so important for us to hold onto the doctrine of the Trinity?

Can you be a Christian (or be saved) and reject the doctrine of the Trinity?

Suggested Resources

Wayne Grudem | Systematic Theology

Colin E. Gunton | The Promise of Trinitarian Theology

Gerald Bray | The Doctrine of God

Richard Bauckham | God Crucified

Donald Bloesch | Essentials of Evangelical Theology

Robert Letham | The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology and Worship

Peter Toon | Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity

The Athanasian Creed

1. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;
2. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
3. And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
4. Neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.
5. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit.
6. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty coeternal.
7. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit.
8. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.
9. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible, and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.
10. The Father eternal, the Son eternal, and the Holy Spirit eternal.
11. And yet they are not three eternal but one eternal.
12. As also there are not three uncreated nor three incomprehensible, but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.
13. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty.
14. And yet they are not three almighties, but one almighty.
15. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God;
16. And yet they are not three Gods, but one God.
17. So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son Lord, and the Holy Spirit Lord;
18. And yet they are not three Lords but one Lord.
19. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord;
20. So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say; There are three Gods or three Lords.
21. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.
22. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created, but begotten.
23. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten, but proceeding.
24. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Spirit, not three Holy Spirits.
25. And in this Trinity none is afore or after another; none is greater or less than another.
26. But the whole three persons are coeternal, and coequal.
27. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.
28. He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.
29. Furthermore it is necessary to everlasting salvation that he also believe rightly the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.
30. For the right faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and man.
31. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds; and man of substance of His mother, born in the world.
32. Perfect God and perfect man, of a reasonable soul and human flesh subsisting.
33. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead, and inferior to the Father as touching His manhood.
34. Who, although He is God and man, yet He is not two, but one Christ.
35. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by taking of that manhood into God.
36. One altogether, not by confusion of substance, but by unity of person.
37. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and man is one Christ;
38. Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again the third day from the dead;
39. He ascended into heaven, He sits on the right hand of the Father, God, Almighty;
40. From thence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead.
41. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies;
42. and shall give account of their own works.
43. And they that have done good shall go into life everlasting and they that have done evil into everlasting fire.
44. This is the catholic faith, which except a man believe faithfully he cannot be saved.

Further Reading | The Trinity • Andy Holt

Although the word “trinity” never appears in the Bible, the doctrine of the trinity is, perhaps, the most important statement of the Christian faith. It lies at the very center of Christian theology, and is one of only a few doctrines that mark out historical, orthodox Christian faith. In other words, if you don’t believe in the trinity, you stand outside of orthodox Christianity.

Wayne Grudem defines the doctrine of the trinity this way: “God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 226) Let’s break this definition down into three statements and examine each more closely.

God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

God is three persons. This means that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. There is a distinction of personhood within the Godhead. The Scripture that most clearly demonstrates these distinctions is the baptismal formula given by Jesus to the disciples at the end of Matthew’s gospel: “...baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” By arranging the names in this way, Jesus is equating the three in status. He would not have, after all, given the disciples a command to baptize anyone in the name of a mere creature. It is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not Father, Son, and the archangel Michael.

John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” The Word, of course, is Jesus. John plainly states that Jesus was both with God in the beginning and that he was God. Jesus and God (whom we also call “The Father”) are the same in essence, and yet there is distinction in their personhood.

John 16:7 says this about the Holy Spirit: “But I tell you the truth: It is for your good that I am going away. Unless I go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” The Counselor is the Holy Spirit, and we see here a distinction between him and Jesus. The Holy Spirit is sent by Jesus (and he reveals, later, by the Father as well) once he returns to the Father. And so we see that the Scriptures testify that God eternally exists as three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Each person is fully God

Each person of the trinity bears the full essence and character of divinity. The Father is clearly God—we take that as a given. Jesus is called God in several locations throughout the NT: John 1:1, John 20:28, Hebrews 1, Titus 2:13, 2 Peter 1:1, Romans 9:5, Colossians 2:9.

Once we understand that God the Father and God the Son are both fully God, it becomes evident, from the Trinitarian expressions elsewhere in the NT that the Holy Spirit is also fully God. Jesus declared that the only unforgivable sin was to commit blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. How can one blaspheme that which is not God? We see, also, numerous instances in which the Spirit is placed alongside the Father and the Son: 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Ephesians 4:4-6, 1 Peter 1:2, Jude 20-21. So we see that the Scriptures testify that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully God.

There is one God

Scripture is clear that there is one, and only one, God. The core prayer of the Hebrew people is the Shema: Hear, O Israel, YHWH your God, YHWH is one. Over and over again, God attests to his own uniqueness through the prophets. There is no other god like him. The gods of the pagan nations are all worthless idols. Isaiah writes, “And there is no God apart from me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is none but me. Turn to me and be saved, all you ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other.”

The New Testament is also clear in its assertion that there is one God. For example, Paul writes to Timothy, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.” Nowhere in Scripture does it teach that there are three Gods. Rather, the testimony of the Scriptures is that there is only one God.

So What?

The doctrine of the trinity serves as a boundary marker for historical, orthodox Christian faith. To deny that either the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit are God is to place yourself outside of the faith of the Church and to reject the teaching of Scripture. What, you ask, is at stake if we reject the doctrine of the trinity?

When we lose the trinity, we lose the atonement for our sins. If Jesus is not God, how can he bear the wrath of God for our sins? How can he bear all of our sins in his body on the cross? "Could any creature, no matter how great, really save us?" (Grudem, 247)

When we lose the trinity, we lose justification by faith. We cannot possibly hope to be justified before God by putting our faith into a mere man, a created being. We cannot trust him to save us if he is just another human, regardless of the magnitude of his accomplishments or the majesty of his message.

When we lose the trinity, we lose worship. It is idolatry to worship a created being rather than the Creator. What hope is there that Jesus or the Holy Spirit will hear our worship and our prayers unless they are each God?

When we lose the trinity, we lose salvation. All three members of the Godhead are on display in the work of our salvation—the crucifixion and resurrection of the Son. God judged and poured out his wrath on the Son, who bore all the sins of humanity in his body when he died, but then was vindicated three days later when he rose from the dead by the power of the Holy Spirit. If God is not intimately involved at every step of this process, then we are entrusting our salvation to a creature rather than to the Creator.

