

Q. How many persons are there in God?

A. **There are three persons in one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.** They are the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

“No topic of study is more rewarding, or more challenging, than the doctrine of the Trinity. Nor is any topic of study fraught with greater possibility of error.”¹

The Trinity in Scripture

The first thing we need to understand that though the word “Trinity” is not used in the Bible, it does not mean that the Bible doesn’t teach that God is triune. Heretics are always quick to bring up the fact that “Trinity” is not found in Scripture; therefore, we need to know our Bibles so well that we are not derailed when these strawmen are presented to us.

The second thing we need to remember is that biblical revelation is progressive in that the Bible is the unfolding story of God’s coming kingdom and glory. Like an acorn that grows and flourishes into a giant oak throughout a lifetime, so too Scripture contains the truths about God in seed form that are increasingly unveiled throughout the course of redemptive history.² In fact, the Trinity can only and truly be understood in light of the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ in the NT. As Gerald helpfully Bray notes,

“The revelation of the Trinity, as opposed to the implied Unitarianism of Judaism, can be explained only by the transformation of perspective brought about by Jesus. The Trinity belongs to the inner life of God, and can be known only by those who share in that life. As long as we look at God from the outside, we shall never see beyond His unity... Jews may recognize God’s existence and know His law, but without Christ they

¹ Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991), 1.5. Whether or not he actually said it, Augustine is also known for his other famous quote on the Trinity: “Try to understand the Trinity and you’ll lose your mind; try to deny the Trinity and you’ll lose your soul.”

² Letham helpfully notes, “The evidence for the Trinity in the Old Testament is best seen in retrospect, much as we might read a detective novel and miss many of the clues, then reread it and, knowing the eventual outcome, recognize the evidence we overlooked the first time. In this sense, the Trinity is present in the Old Testament, but the evidence is scattered and somewhat opaque, awaiting the clearer light of the New Testament and its cumulative pointers.” In Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 67.

cannot penetrate the mystery of that divine fellowship which Christians call the Holy Trinity.”³

With these precautions in mind, we now look to the testimony of Scripture.

1. Genesis 1:1-2

"In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."

- Though it is true that the name אֱלֹהִים (*'elohim*) refers to God in His [unique and unparalleled] might and majesty, the Bible teaches that all three persons of the Godhead work together harmoniously⁴ in creation: the Father creates through the Son by the Spirit.
 - Amazingly, this is also how the triune God works together in effecting the new creation/regeneration.

a. The Father

- Revelation 4:11 – “Worthy are You, our Lord⁵ and God, to receive glory and honor and power, for You created all things, and because of [dia] Your will they existed, and were created” (LSB).

b. The Son

- John 1:1-3 – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him was not any thing made that was made.”
 - Cf. Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:2, 10

³ Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).

⁴ For the idea that creation is the glorious overflow of the brimming love within the Trinity, see Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 19-62. That is, creation is not only the canvas by which the God who is love (1 John 4:7-8) shares His love; it is also the very expression of it: “It was His overflowing love for the Son that motivated the Father to create, and creation is His gift to His Son”, for the Son is to be “the heir of all things” (Heb. 1:2). “And so the Son is not only the motivating origin of creation: He is its goal” (p.50).

⁵ In the NT, the general rule of thumb is that *theos* (“God”) refers to God the Father and *kurios* (“Lord”) refers to God the Son. The context here clearly shows that John is referring to the Father here, and the Son in chapter 5, both of whom receive divine worship. The Father is likely being addressed in 10:6. If Beale is correct, and the angel is referring to Christ, then the Creator is most certainly the Father. However, even if Schreiner and Osbourne are correct and the angel is not Christ, the Father is most likely the referent. See also 14:7.

c. The Holy Spirit

- Job 33:4 – “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life.”⁶
- Psalm 104:30 – “When You send forth Your Spirit, they are created...”.

2. Genesis 1:26a-27

“Then God said, ‘Let us [plural] make man in our image, after our likeness’...So God created man in His [singular] own image, in the image of God He created him [singular]; male and female He created them [plural].”

- Though some scholars take the “our” to refer to the heavenly counsel, there are many holes in this argument.
 - However, there is not even the slightest hint in Scripture that angels – also created beings – share God’s image. Since this is so, the “our” must not be referring to them.

→ The plural “our” is later worked out in Scripture as the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

3. Exodus 3:6

The covenant name of Israel’s God, YHWH, is also attributed to all three persons of the Trinity:

A. The Father

- Deuteronomy 32:6 – Do you thus repay the LORD, you foolish and senseless people? Is not He your Father, who created you, who made you and established you?”
- Isaiah 63:16 – “For You are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; You, O LORD, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is Your name” (cf. 64:8).

⁶ Interestingly, the word for “breath” (נְשָׁמָה, *n^oshamah*) is also used in Genesis 2:7 (“and [the LORD God] breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature”). This imagery plays a powerful part of Ezekiel’s vision in the valley of dry bones (ch. 37).

- Perhaps the clearest example is in a text that does not even use the name “Father.” In Psalm 110:1, “the LORD” is seen on His throne with “[David’s] Lord” seated at His right hand. The NT clearly and repeatedly makes clear that “the LORD” here refers to God the Father, and “the Lord” refers to God the Son.⁷

B. The Son

- Philippians 2:9-11 – “Therefore God has highly exalted Him [Christ Jesus] and bestowed on Him the name⁸ that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.⁹

C. The Spirit

- 2 Corinthians 3:17-18 – “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, *there* is freedom. But we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, just as from the Lord, the Spirit” (LSB).

With this in mind, a passage like Nehemiah 9:6-7 now takes on a more glorious, wonderful, and Trinitarian meaning:

“You are YHWH, You alone. You have made heaven, the heaven of heavens, with all their host, the earth and all that is on it, the seas and all that is in them; and You preserve all of them; and the host of heaven worships You. You are YHWH, the God who chose Abram.”

4. Deuteronomy 6:4

“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”

⁷ See especially Hebrews 1:13 [cf. vv.8-12]; Acts 2:34-35; Matthew 22:41-44 [cf. Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42]

⁸ Most scholars see that this “name” refers to “Yahweh” – the Lord – and not “Jesus,” even though Paul says “at the *name* of Jesus” all will bow. Jesus is the name bestowed at birth; “Lord” is bestowed after His resurrection.

⁹ Paul is here quoting Isaiah 45:23 (cf. Romans 14:11). Though YHWH is not explicitly used in v.22, it is clear that “God” in v.22 refers to the same “God” in v.18, which says, “For thus says YHWH, who created the heavens (He is God)...”.

- The word “one” (ἓν, *ekhad*) is also used in Genesis 2:26, and thus allows for the idea of unity and harmony and ‘oneness’ between two different persons.

5. Jesus’ baptism (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:32-34)

Jesus’ baptism effectively destroys the heresy of modalism,¹⁰ as all three persons of the Godhead are present and active at the same time.

6. Matt. 28:19

“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

- The singular article unites the three persons and shows that the [singular] “name” of God is fully shown to be “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”¹¹

7. 2 Corinthians 13:14

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”

- The blessings of God under the OT – most notably that in Numbers 6:24-27 – are understood to be Trinitarian in the new covenant.¹²

Application

Michael Reeves, “I could believe in the death of a man called Jesus, I could believe in His bodily resurrection, I could even believe in a salvation by grace alone; but if I do not believe in this [triune] God, then, quite simply, I am not a Christian. And so, because the Christian God is triune, the Trinity is the governing center of all Christian belief, the truth that shapes and beautifies all others. The Trinity is the cockpit of all Christian thinking....The triunity of God is the secret of His beauty.”

¹⁰ This doctrine of demons is also held by Oneness Pentecostals.

¹¹ In Greek grammars, this is known as the Granville Sharp rule.

¹² Frame also sees that many of the triadic uses of YHWH in the OT also contribute to the full-orbed understanding in God as Trinity in the NT. See John Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, PA: P & R Publishing, 2013), 436-439.

“Learning to praise the blessed Trinity holds broad implications for many fields of discourse, from metaphysics to epistemology, from ethics to aesthetics. That said, learning to praise the Trinity does not derive its importance or usefulness from its ability to serve other enterprises. Learning to know the triune God, to receive the triune God, to rejoice in the triune God – and learning to help others do the same – is an end in itself, because the triune God is the ultimate end of all things (Rom. 11:36).”¹³

“The main practical reason for learning how to think well about the eternal life of the Trinity is that it is the background for the gospel. The blessedness of God’s inner life is the only thing that is better than the good news. The life of God in itself is the source of all the riches that fund the economy of salvation. It is also the guarantee that God’s grace is based on His character rather than on anything outside of Himself.”¹⁴

Kevin DeYoung

The doctrine of the Trinity is the most important Christian doctrine that most people never think about. It’s absolutely essential to our faith, and yet for many Christians it just seems like a very confusing math problem. And even if we can figure out what *Trinity* means, it doesn’t feel like it has much bearing on our lives, much relevance to us.

The word *Trinity*, famously, is not found in the Bible, but the word does very well at capturing a number of biblical truths. There are actually seven statements that go into the doctrine of the Trinity:

1. God is one. There’s only one God.
2. The Father is God.
3. The Son is God.
4. The Holy Spirit is God.
5. The Father is not the Son.
6. The Son is not the Spirit.
7. The Spirit is not the Father.

¹³ Swain, Scott R., *The Trinity: An Introduction* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 22-23.

¹⁴ Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 83.

If you get those seven statements, then you've captured the doctrine of the Trinity—what it means when we say there is one God and three persons.

Christians are monotheists. We don't believe in many gods or a pantheon of gods but just one God, and this God expresses himself and exists as three persons. That language of *persons* is very important. The early church wrestled with the appropriate language, and *persons* aptly speaks to the personality of the three members of the Trinity and also their relationship with each other; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit coinhere as one essence, and yet there are distinctions. One is not the other, but they're equal in rank, equal in power, equal in glory, equal in majesty.

Even more confusing to people is the question "Why does this even matter? What difference does this make for anything in my Christian life?" In good Trinitarian fashion, I think there are three important things that the doctrine means for us.

First, the Trinity helps us to understand how there can be unity in diversity. This is one of the most pressing questions in our world. Some folks focus almost exclusively on diversity, on the fact that people are so different. They don't see any common ground. Others want to press for complete uniformity in thought, in government, and in expression. The Trinity shows us that you can have a profound, real, organic unity with diversity, so that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are working in complete union in our salvation. The Father **appoints**. The Son **accomplished**. The Spirit **applies**. We encounter God as fully God in the Father, in the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. And yet, their divine work is neither interchangeable nor redundant.

Second, when you have a triune God, you have the eternality of love. Love has existed from all time. If you have a god who is not three persons, He has to create a being to love, to be an expression of his love. But Father, Son, and Holy Spirit existing in eternity have always had this relationship of love. So love is not a created thing. God didn't have to go outside of Himself to love. Love is eternal. And when you have a triune God, you have fully this God who is love.

Finally, and most importantly, the doctrine of the Trinity is crucial for the Christian because there is nothing more important in all the world than

knowing God. If God exists as one God in three persons, if the one divine essence subsists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, if we are baptized into this triune name, then no Christian should want to be ignorant of these Trinitarian realities. In the end, the Trinity matters because God matters.

For Further Reading

1. Devotional

- i. John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*
- ii. Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*
- iii. Joe Thorn, *Experiencing the Trinity*

2. Systematic Theology

- i. Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 66-181.
- ii. John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 421-515.
- iii. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, pp. 269-333.

3. Academic

- i. Scott R. Swain, *The Trinity: An Introduction*
- ii. James White, *The Forgotten Trinity*
- iii. Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity*
- iv. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*
- v. Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God*