

The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

Lesson 1

Introduction to the Trinity



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The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

Lesson One: Introduction to the Trinity

Discussion Forum

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INTRODUCTION

As a Christian teacher of theology, I'm often asked about the Trinity. Students want to know what the doctrine of the Trinity means and how it can be found in Scripture. They're often surprised to learn that the word "trinity" never actually appears in the Bible. And yet, this doctrine is so central to our Christian faith that it would be impossible to call a church, "Christian," that doesn't affirm it. So, as we'll see in this lesson, although the term itself isn't in the Bible, we find the ideas of God's "oneness" and "threeness" throughout the Scriptures.

This is the first lesson in our series on *The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity*, and we've entitled it "Introduction to the Trinity." In this lesson, we'll focus on what Christians believe the Bible teaches about our triune God.

Question 1:

What do Christians mean when they say that God is three persons in one essence?

The word "trinity" simply means "tri-unity" — three in one. So, the doctrine of the Trinity can be defined in this way: God is three divine persons in one divine essence. This concept is also found in the related terms "Trinitarian" and "triune God." But, what do Christians mean when they say that God is three persons in one essence?

The Very Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

When we talk about the doctrine of the Trinity, the classic language is, we have one God in three persons — one substance in three persons. Well, what do we mean by that? Well, we're saying there is only one

God. So, this is a very important thing that Christians want to affirm. This is the great revelation we get throughout the Scriptures. There's only one God, not three. One. One God. But what we find is this one God reveals who God is in terms of Father, Son and Holy Spirit — the three *persons* — not three people but the three persons of the one God. So, we have the Father who sends the Son, the Son who, after his death and resurrection, goes to the Father, and they send the Spirit. So, we can think about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It doesn't mean they only suddenly began in the creation. No, we can go back before the creation; God was already Father, Son and the Holy Spirit — one God in three persons. But what we see in the world, in the creation, that God interacts with the world as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Jesus taught us to call God "Father." And Jesus taught us about the Holy Spirit. So, perhaps the most direct way unto understanding this is there's only one God in three persons.

Dr. Jeffery Moore

In Christian theology we talk about God as triune — the Trinity, one in three and three in one — because that's how the Bible talks about him. We don't try to fit God into this Trinity-shaped box, or whatever it is. You know, so many folks that don't understand God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who don't like the idea of Trinity, fuss about the fact the Bible doesn't use that term and so forth. But the term is irrelevant. The point is to talk about God in ways that are consistent with the way the Bible talks about God... And so we come up with terms like "essence" and "person" — when I say "we," I'm talking about Christians a long time ago who took words that existed in Greek and Latin — and now we use the words "person" and "essence," for example, to talk about the Trinity. God's essence is one; his person is three. To try to understand how those all fit together, we just go back to the Bible and find that the Bible talks about God as Father, and so we talk about this person of Father. It talks about God as Son. It talks about God as Holy Spirit... As long as we're constantly checking against what the Bible actually says, we'll stay in the right parameters and hopefully have some useful dialogue that helps us think about God's great love for us and how he wants to relate to us.

When we say that God is one divine essence, we're affirming that he is the one uncreated Creator. According to Romans 1:25, there is one uncreated Creator, and all other things in the universe are a part of God's created order. The doctrine of the Trinity is concerned with the persons of the Trinity within the one divine essence, or Godhead.

Question 2:

How can we begin to understand such a complex doctrine as the Trinity?

The Trinity is one of God's most complex doctrines. It's partly comprehensible, but much of it is incomprehensible, or what theologians call "mysterious." Still, it's one of the most fundamental beliefs of our faith. If we want to know and worship the one true God, we have to know and worship the triune God. So, with all of this in mind, how can we begin to understand such a complex doctrine as the Trinity?

Dr. Jim Maples

One wonders how such a complex doctrine as the doctrine of the Trinity became such a cornerstone of Christian theology, and in fact, the word "trinity" does not occur in Scripture. The concept, the idea, the thought of the Trinity is there implicitly and explicitly in Scripture... So, the Trinity is a doctrine that you cannot come to by reason. It's not unreasonable, as many have said, but it is a doctrine that comes about, knowledge of it comes about, only by revelation. You come to understand this only through what God has revealed to us... The work of the Trinity shows up in major doctrines and pieces of Scripture — things like the creation, the incarnation, the resurrection, redemption, sanctification — we see the Trinity at work in that in various, you know, what we call the "economic" Trinity, the work of the Trinity in various places. So, the understanding of that and the understanding of those doctrines is key to Christian theology, but the truth is that what holds that together is an understanding of the Trinity, which does come to us only through God's revelation and not through man's reason and understanding. And it seems somewhat unreasonable to so many people, but that's because they don't look to God's revelation for the understanding of such a key part of Christian doctrine.

Dr. Sukhwant S. Bhatia

I always say that for somebody to understand the concept of the Trinity ... they have to start with the concept of God. They have to understand God first. They have to understand the role that Jesus Christ played, why he came, and then move on to why he said the Holy Spirit will come. So, it's a proper understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity, for which you have to understand the Bible. You have to interpret it; you have to study it. I can't give a quick answer to someone and give an illustration, "Oh, Trinity is like the composition of water. You know, you can say it's H²O — it can exist in the form of a solid, exist in form of a liquid, exist in form of a gas, so it's same essence but different forms." Well, they don't want that kind of answers because I'm not speaking to somebody's head. It has the

matter of heart. So, for them to understand the concept, the Scriptures have to take over our thinking, our understanding, and the Holy Spirit's application of that to our lives before I can understand the concept. So, it's not a quick fix or a quick answer.

As we continue our introduction to the Trinity, we'll look more closely at three important subjects. First, we'll explore the Bible's revelation of divine oneness. Second, we'll look at what Scripture teaches us about divine threeness. And third, we'll consider the divine equality of the persons of the Godhead. Let's look first at God's divine oneness.

DIVINE ONENESS

When we speak of God's oneness, we most often talk about God's "divine essence." What we mean is everything that unites or is common to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit so that they are one, the same and equal. This understanding of the oneness of God in Trinitarian doctrine originated in the Old Testament confession commonly known as the *Shema*. We find the *Shema* in Deuteronomy 6:4 where we read these words:

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one (Deuteronomy 6:4).

The Hebrew word translated "one" here is *echad* (אֶחָד), most often understood simply as the numeral one. It means that God is numerically singular. So, when we say that God is one essence, we are affirming that there is only one God. There is no one else beside him.

Question 3:

What do Christians mean when they say that God is one?

In theological terms, we're saying that God is *one* spirit, divine being, divine nature, Godhead, or deity. These terms are found in John 4:24; Acts 17:29; Romans 1:20, and Colossians 2:9. He is also eternal, since he exists without a beginning or end. Even though we believe that the eternal God exists in three persons, this fact does not alter the basic teaching of Scripture that God exists as one divine essence, not three. This means that Christians are monotheists, believing in one God, not polytheists, believing in many gods. So, what do Christians mean when they say that God is one?

Rev. Clete Hux

When theologians talk about God being "one," they're talking about, how many gods are there. "One God by nature; one nature that is God," is, of course, from the Old Testament, the *Shema* — "Hear, O

Israel: our Lord our God is one.” And God, being who he is, eternal, uncreated, how could there be more than that? God is one.

Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

When Christians talk about God being “one” — the “one God” and the “one and only God” — they mean that there is only one God... The Old Testament seems to wrestle with the idea that, yes, if there are other gods, there are really no gods, because God ultimately is all-powerful and the only true God. That means that Christians are monotheists; they believe in only one God. And whenever we express God as being both three persons and one God, we never take away from the fact that God is one. There is one God, a God who loves and who shows his love as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, in three persons, but we only believe in one God.

Dr. J. Scott Horrell

Well, to say that God is one — which we believe, we’re *monotheists*, and so we believe that God is one — we go back to Genesis 1 again, “In the beginning *God* created the heavens and the earth,” everything. So, there’s one God. And we continue on through the five books of Moses, the Pentateuch, and we find Deuteronomy 4:39 and other passages repeating that. There’s one God who has created the heavens and the earth... So the great *Shema* of Israel — “Hear O Israel: the Lord is your God, the Lord God is one.” — is a very key text in all of this... And that little term “one,” *echad* in the Hebrew, is used about 960 times. It’s the main word for “one” in the Scriptures. But it doesn’t exclude God, as some groups want to say, to one person. A number of times *echad* is used as all Israel coming together as *one* man, or Adam and Eve becoming *one* flesh, or *one* bunch of grapes. It’s used many times like that. Also in the New Testament, as Jesus reiterates that. We believe that God is one, but he speaks of Adam and Eve, or the first man and woman, being made “*one* flesh.” Same terminology, again... He’s one, but there was not this idea of an individual isolated one God. It was a God with a certain plurality in that unity, and that flows into the New Testament, which, of course, repeats that God is one.

Question 4:

How do theologians explain the doctrine of God’s simplicity?

Because God is one, we can know that he is one divine essence. He isn’t made of matter, so he’s not made up of various parts. He’s not a mixture of different elements or components. Theologians often refer to this aspect of God’s oneness as God’s “simplicity.” The doctrine of divine simplicity means that God’s being is neither a

mixture nor divisible into parts. It originates in verses like Deuteronomy 6:4, where God is "one." It culminates in verses like John 4:24, which says that "God is spirit," and as spirit, he is indivisible. How do theologians explain the doctrine of God's simplicity?

Prof. Brandon P. Robbins

Theologians often talk of the simplicity of God, meaning that God is not complex. God is not made up of parts. Because we are finite creatures, we can only, kind of, talk about one thing at a time, so we have to use different terms, sometimes, to describe God. We have to say that he is all-powerful, and he is all-knowing. We've got to say he has different attributes, like God is love, and God is merciful, and God is just. But when we say, he's "simple," that means — in a way that we almost can't even conceive — he is one at the same time. His righteousness is his mercy. You know, his justice is his grace. He is completely simple and is not made up of individual parts like we are. He does not have hands and feet and eyes and those kinds of things and have different sections of him. He is a simple being.

Dr. William Edgar

The doctrine of simplicity has been disputed over the centuries... What it means is that he's — if I can put it this way — he's one kind of being. He does not add anything outside of himself to himself. He's not composed. He's not a bunch of parts added together the way some theologians think... The Bible says God is spirit. A spirit by definition is a simple being, not composed, not complex, not polytheistic. And again, this is ultimately a very comforting doctrine to us because it means our God is pure. He is not an amalgam of things that were put into his being or that he composed. He is what he is. That great verse when he revealed himself to Moses: "I AM that I AM." He didn't say, "I am all these following things..." but he is what he is. So, it's not that he is *simplistic* or has no interest or intrigue or personality or love or attributes, it is that his being is not an addition of various parts. He is pure spirit.

Dr. K. Erik Thoennes

The simplicity of God's being is another way of talking about the unity of his attributes. In God there's no division, there's no conflict, there's no dissidence. He's perfectly unified in all he is and all he does. He's never in conflict, say, between his wrath and his grace. He doesn't turn off his grace valve so he can open up his wrath valve. All his attributes are perfectly working all the time, perfectly interdependently, and so he is perfectly unified in who he is.

As we can see, Christians are monotheists. We agree with the other Abrahamic religions that there is only one God. There is no other. However, there is something very unique about Christianity. We believe that God is one divine essence, but we also believe that God exists eternally in three persons.

In this introduction to the Trinity, we've seen how the doctrine of the Trinity begins with the Old Testament's confession of divine oneness. Now let's see how the fullness of the doctrine culminates in the New Testament's confession of divine threeness.

DIVINE THREENESS

In the Great Commission of Matthew 28:19, Jesus said:

Make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

This is just one example of God's divine threeness. Jesus commanded his disciples to apply God's singular sacred name — Yahweh — to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit — all three persons of the Trinity. And in this singular name, his followers were to make and baptize disciples.

Question 5:

What passages in the New Testament teach us about God's three-in-oneness?

But what does it mean that God is three divine persons in one divine essence? Even though this doctrine is difficult for us to understand, and we will never comprehend all of its complexities, we can still find distinct instances of it throughout the New Testament. What passages in the New Testament teach us about God's three-in-oneness?

Dr. Jim Maples

In the New Testament we see manifestations of the Trinity at Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3, at the annunciation in Luke 1, but we see it explicitly in the baptismal formula in Matthew 28. In John 14–16, in the Upper Room Discourse, we see the Lord Jesus himself explicitly detailing interrelations and the functions of the various members of the Trinity — the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit — in their relation to Christians and the work that they do.

Prof. Mumo Kisau

We read in John 1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" ... "everything was made

through him and without him nothing was made that which was made.” So, here we’re introduced to the Word again... “And the Word became flesh.” And this is then the birth of Christ Jesus who is the Word — up in chapter 1, verse 1 of John we hear this Word who was in the beginning was with God and was God. And then we go quickly to chapters 14, 15 and 16, and Jesus himself then begins to talk about God the Holy Spirit. And he then begins to talk about “I and the Father are one.” So, we’re introduced to the Father; we’re introduced to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. In Matthew 28 ... it says that, “then go ye to the whole world and then baptizing, you make all the world my disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Dr. Brandon D. Crowe

The teaching on the Trinity is something that is not created by men, but it is a doctrine that is revealed to us on the pages of Holy Scripture... And there are many passages in Scripture that would not make sense if God does not exist as Trinity — texts like the Great Commission, Paul in 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Corinthians 8, the opening verses of 1 Peter, the teaching of the book of Hebrews, and on down the line... There are many passages in Scripture that simply would not make sense if we did not serve a Trinitarian God.

Question 6:

With respect to the Trinity, what is a person?

When we speak of three divine persons, we’re referring to the distinct persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We can define the word “person” as “a distinct, self-aware personality existing in relationship with other persons.” But, with respect to the Trinity, what is a person?

Dr. Daniel Treier

Understanding what “person” means when we talk about the Triune God is incredibly mysterious. Augustine, toward the end of his famous work on the Trinity, says that when we use a term for “person” we are simply answering, “Three what?” We need a kind of placeholder to say “three-something,” but we really don’t know exactly what we’re speaking of. In part, that’s because we often get the order of the analogy between divine and human persons reversed. We think of human persons because that’s the reality we know, and we tend to project that onto God. But, of course, the reality is the reverse. God’s personhood is what should define ours. And so, we need to acknowledge the mystery that we don’t know and can’t possibly

contemplate the fullness of what it means to be a person of the Triune God.

One thing that we can pretty substantially rule out is the modern concept of person as a distinct ego, an individual self-consciousness attached to a separated body and a particular personal name that no others share. If we were to apply that concept of the modern individual person to the persons of the Triune God, we would risk tritheism. We would have “God by committee,” as it were. A kind of divine community of modern individual persons is not the Trinity. That would be a kind of God by committee. So, whatever we mean by person, we don’t mean the modern concept of an individual, focused on, really, the concept of personality. If we’re going to try to think as biblically as we can about this reality, then we would want to think about the reality in certain New Testament passages when Father, Son and Holy Spirit speak to and about each other, and when, in John 17, we have the different persons being spoken of as “in” one another, and loving one another in some way that we can get a bit of a grasp of. That seems to suggest that the notion of communicative agency — of speaking and being spoken to and speaking and being spoken about — has something to do with this concept of person, that there is a reciprocal self-consciousness of the persons within the Godhead. The Father isn’t just conscious of the Father as a self, but is conscious of himself in relation to the Son and in relation to the Spirit, and so too, the Son is conscious of himself as the one begotten eternally by the Father speaking and so forth. So, “communicative agency” seems to describe the relation of Father, Son and Spirit as persons to each other, and they seem to have a reciprocal self-consciousness that undergirds the other major principle of Trinitarian theology, the unity of divine action *ad extra* — the unity of God’s action in his relations to the world. So, Father, Son and Holy Spirit speak to and about each other and are reciprocally self-conscious as a result, but Father, Son and Holy Spirit also speak to the world ultimately with one voice, and we hear that voice most clearly in the *Logos*, in Jesus Christ.

Dr. J. Scott Horrell

The idea of person *per se*, as a concept, is really a Christian concept that’s unfolded out of the doctrine of the Trinity. When we go to the Old Testament there’s really not, or in even other religions, there’s really not a concept of “person” as we talk about it today. Rather, the person is ... you can see it there, the *imago dei* and other things in the Old Testament. But it is when the early church fathers began to realize, well, the Father is a person and the Son is a person, you have two persons but one God. And then Tertullian, “There is one substance and three persons.” Well, he was using a Latin word,

persona, which often meant the masks in a play. The problem was, is it just one person putting on different masks? The Greek term was *prosopon*. And the same idea sometimes was carried, and the Fathers were saying, “That’s not enough. There’s more going on between the Son and the Father than that.” And so we come to the Council of Nicaea in 325, which essentially framed the doctrine of the Trinity. It doesn’t use the word “person” there, but the thought is going on behind all of that as we get into the fourth century, that *prosopon* and *persona* are not strong enough words. There’s a greater density to the reality of the Son, and now the Spirit, as well as the Father... The point in all of this is that the idea of person was in its embryonic stage in Western civilization with the birth of the doctrine of the Trinity. We get to the Council of Chalcedon a little bit later — that in 451 — when the doctrine of Christ speaks of there being two natures, fully divine, fully human, in one person, one personal consciousness. But what does “person” mean? Clearly it means there is a self-consciousness and an “I/Thou” relationship with another. Those factors enter in. But Western history through Boethius and on down through the centuries, has struggled with what is the idea of person. Some would like to say it was all settled by Tertullian or Athanasius or by the Chalcedonian definition. But not so. It has been a flexible idea. We come to the thirteenth century, Richard of St. Victor, or Bonaventure even more, talking about the Father-Son relationship and this love between them and filling out a little bit more and a little bit more. But the idea of person, then, has a certain flexibility in it as we walk down through Christian history.

Question 7:

Why do some people accuse Christians of worshiping three gods?

Some people misunderstand the “threeness” of the Trinity as a form of polytheism called “tritheism.” Tritheism simply means the worship of three gods. Unlike Trinitarian doctrine, tritheism doesn’t distinguish between “essence” and “person.” Rather, it assumes that each person has its own essence. But in the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, three divine persons exist in one divine essence. Why do some people accuse Christians of worshiping three gods?

Dr. Thomas R. Schreiner

Some people think that Christians worship three gods because when they hear Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all to be worshiped equally, they have no categories apart from saying, if they’re three distinct persons then we have three different gods. But the genius of Christian doctrine, the mystery of our faith, is that there is one God, one essence, one Being that the three persons share in equally. It’s very

clear from reading the Scriptures that that is so, because we read in the Old Testament that there is only one God. Isaiah for example is very clear about that. And the New Testament writers reaffirm that as well. We see that in the apostle Paul. We see that in Jesus' teaching. We see that in the book of Revelation. Yet at the same time, these same writers affirm that Jesus is fully God, the Holy Spirit is fully God, and the Father is fully God. So, what we find in Christian teaching is that we have three distinct persons, three distinct hypostases, if you will, but one essence, one being. That's not the same as saying that there are three Gods. So, we must be careful to follow the scriptural teaching itself in this regard instead of bringing in alien, philosophical influences that dictate our doctrine of the Trinity.

Dr. Stephen J. Wellum

Sometimes Christians are accused of worshiping three gods. I think the reason for this is because we affirm very strongly the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. You can't understand the New Testament without acknowledging that the Scripture teaches very clearly, the Father is God at the same time it teaches that the Son is also God. We think of John 1: "In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God" — speaking of his relation with the Father — "the Word was God." So you have the affirmation that the Word, who is identified as the Son, is God. You have other references as well to the Holy Spirit as God. Probably the most common example is Acts 5 where the apostle Peter, in speaking with Ananias and Sapphira, speaks about sinning against God and lying to the Holy Spirit, so that we have the Holy Spirit and God's name interchangeable, so that Scripture teaches that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all God. Now, when you have that affirmation, automatically people then begin to think, well, we're talking three gods. In fact, some have accused Christians of that. Particularly, in our day, Islam accused Christianity of that. Often in speaking with Muslims they say, the Christian view of the Trinity is an affirmation of three gods or tritheism. Nobody in the history of the church has ever affirmed this because alongside the affirmation that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, is from Genesis to Revelation the affirmation that God is one. There is one living and true God so that the only way that we can make sense of the full revelation of God is to say there is one God, there is no other. The Father, Son and Spirit share in that one Godhead. The language of the church has been, they "subsist" in that one Godhead as three persons, and that is why we do not affirm that there are three gods — one God, yet in three persons — that which is taught in Scripture, affirmed by the church and distinguishes us, really, from all of our religious competitors in that fashion.

Question 8:**Why do we believe that God's divine threeness does not violate the doctrine of God's simplicity?**

Tritheism violates the biblical doctrine of divine simplicity — that God is indivisibly one — but the doctrine of God's *threeness* does not. This can be difficult to grasp until we recognize that although God is three divine *persons*, he is only one divine *essence*. And his essence cannot be divided into parts. He is indivisibly one. So, we should never confuse the Trinity with tritheism. Why do we believe that God's divine threeness does not violate the doctrine of God's simplicity?

Rev. Valery Zadorozhny, translation

God's simplicity is a very interesting notion because, on the one hand, the Bible says that God is inconceivable. That is, a man cannot analyze him and sort him out. And on the other hand, theology contains the concept of God's "simplicity." And, as we know, we may say that God has revealed himself as Trinity, but these three persons are one — they have one essence. That is, he cannot be broken down into what we'd call "parts." If we take any created thing, it necessarily consists of parts. A solution consists of water and something else; there are many molecules in it. And God is one. So, in this sense, he is simple.

Rev. Dr. Paul R. Raabe

God, the first person, has always been the father of his son, and his Son has always been the son of his father. And that goes back forever. And there has always been the Spirit of the Father and the Spirit of the Son, and the three are inseparable. They're always with each other. Not only with each other, but a lot of times, you can say the Son is in the Father; the Father is in the Son. They interpenetrate, so there are not three different gods. There is only one Godhead, one divine nature that's indivisible, and three persons.

The Very Rev. Dr. Justyn Terry

If you go to a place like Matthew 10 and you hear Jesus talking about whoever receives ... one of my disciples, in my name, they receive me, and whoever receives me, receives the One who sent me. So, what we're seeing there — the disciple who has the Spirit of God in them — it's not just receiving that disciple, they receive the Son of God. And when they receive the Son of God, they receive the Father. That's clearly not three separate people. It's one God in three persons. I know we're getting complicated here. I'm going to back off, but what we're trying to say is, it's one God in three persons — Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Now that we've approached our introduction to the Trinity by exploring the important concepts of divine oneness and divine threeness, let's consider the final portion of this doctrine, the divine equality of the three persons of the Godhead.

DIVINE EQUALITY

Throughout history, Christians have consistently understood that the persons of the Godhead are equal in every respect. They are each uncreated and have all the same abilities and attributes. They are equal in power and glory. And it has been this way for eternity. But what does this divine equality look like?

Question 9: Has God eternally existed in Trinity?

All Christians believe that God is both uncreated and eternal. There was never a time when God didn't exist. He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. But has God always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? In other words, has God eternally existed in Trinity?

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

One question about the doctrine of God is whether he's always existed in Trinity. It's a complicated question. The short answer would be, yes. God is eternal and does not change, and that would imply that his being does not change over time, and as his being is a Trinitarian being, therefore, he would have always been Trinitarian...

Systematically, God's eternal Trinitarian nature is very important, because if we're going to argue that love is at the very essence of God, that love is an eternal attribute belonging to God, then we need to bear in mind that love is a relational attribute. Love takes place between persons, and therefore, it is important that God has a multiplicity of persons in order to be eternally love.

Rev. Vernon Pierre

God has always been who he is, and that means he's always existed as one God and three persons. So, we might say God has always had perfect community; he's always existed in perfect love. John 1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It's saying something — that God has always been there, and he's always existed in the way that he's expressed himself, which is as Trinity.

Question 10:

Was Christ a created being or has he always existed?

Sometimes anti-Trinitarians cite verses like Colossians 1:15 to argue that God hasn't always existed as Trinity. This verse says that Christ is the firstborn over all creation. Since Christ was "born," they argue that, unlike the Father, he must have begun to exist. They believe he is a created divine person rather than an uncreated divine person equal to the Father. Was Christ a created being or has he always existed?

Dr. Carl R. Trueman

When we look back to the Old Testament, we see hints there of the existence of Christ and of the Holy Spirit. One objection, of course, would be that Christ is referred to as "the firstborn over all creation" in Paul's letter to the Colossians. Of course, when you look at the term "firstborn" and trace it back in the Old Testament, you see that "firstborn" is not a statement about chronological priority. It's actually a statement of what we might call "ontological" priority or supremacy. So, for example, when Moses goes to Pharaoh, he calls the people of Israel God's firstborn, not meaning they were the first tribe on the face of the earth, but they are supreme in God's eyes. So, exegetically, while some challenges have been raised to the eternity of the Son, in fact, when you look at the text, of which Colossians is perhaps the classic text, they don't bear the kind of weight that the anti-Trinitarians wish to place upon them.

Dr. Lynn Cohick

We take a look at the first chapter of Colossians, 1:15-17 ... we see there Paul explaining how Jesus Christ is God's image. He represents God the Father. Paul also speaks of Jesus here as the firstborn over all creation, and that can kind of throw us because it sounds like maybe Paul is saying Jesus is the first created being. This is what Arius, for example, argued in the early church — that Jesus was the first of the creation. That's not what Paul is getting at here. This language of Paul references back to the Old Testament where Israel is called God's firstborn son. Jesus stands now as God's way of saving the people, of saving the world. So Jesus represents the way in which God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are accomplishing our salvation. And Paul connects Jesus, then, with creation. Notice here that *in* him, creation happened, and *through* him, then, creation stands, exists, continues. So, that's what Paul is getting at in that lovely passage in Colossians. There's another passage in 1 Corinthians 8 where Paul will talk about God the Father and also Jesus Christ the Lord. Again, he's not suggesting here that Jesus is a secondary deity, like one of the angels. He is establishing here that both the Father and the Son are worthy of our worship and that they together, along with

the Holy Spirit, accomplish our salvation. The context here in chapter 8, and also chapter 10 of 1 Corinthians, deal with the sin of idolatry. These Corinthians were getting awfully close to committing idolatry, to falling back into their old ways, and so Paul is establishing for them, “we have one God and one Lord,” and that Lord, Jesus. The language comes straight from the Old Testament, and it’s the language of worship. So, Paul is expecting the Corinthians to worship God the Father and God the Son, and that’s how we can be confident that Jesus is part of creation as it happened, that Jesus is God, has always been God, and that Paul, one of the earliest Christian authors, establishes that fact.

Dr. Gareth Cockerill

In the Colossians passage, verse 15, he’s called the firstborn of all creation. That certainly does not mean he was created. It means he is the prince, the one sovereign over, and eventually the heir. And Paul also says there that all things were created for him, not only by him, but *for* him — that really, that’s a kind of a mind-blowing kind of thing — and that in him all things consist. If we look at the opening verses of Hebrews, the very first thing it says, even before it says “creation,” is that God has appointed him the “heir of all things.” And there’s a sense in which, as the Son of God, heirship is the natural outcome of sonship. If you’re a son, you’re an heir. And so, as the Son, he is the full revelation of God, fully identified with God in creation, but also the heir of all things... And so, it is the outworking of his sonship through his incarnation, his redeeming work on the cross, his taking his seat at the Father’s right hand, that he enters into his heirship of all things which he has created.

Question 11:

How do the Trinitarian formulas in the New Testament help us see the equality of the Holy Spirit with the other members of the Godhead?

The Scriptures are clear that Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is uncreated and eternal, just like God the Father. He is equal to the Father in power and glory, sharing equally in all the attributes of the Godhead. And the same thing is true of the Holy Spirit as well. In fact, every Trinitarian formula found in Scripture mentions the Holy Spirit as an equal member of the Trinity, together with the Father and the Son. How do the Trinitarian formulas in the New Testament help us see the equality of the Holy Spirit with the other members of the Godhead?

Dr. Dennis E. Johnson

The Trinitarian formulas of the New Testament help us to understand that the Holy Spirit is fully divine and fully personal. To take two

examples, in the Great Commission, Jesus commands us to baptize people in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. One name — Father, Son and Spirit — so, we have one God, three persons. And Jesus is really echoing or alluding to the blessing that Aaron and his sons as priests were to give, were to place upon Israel in the Old Testament, that blessing that we know so well: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you ... the Lord turn his face toward you and give you [his] peace.” And then the comment in Numbers 6 is, “Thus they will put my name on [my people].” Well, we’re putting the name of God, making the claim that we now belong to him in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. So, we see the Spirit is fully divine, equal with the Father and the Son, and fully personal, no less than the Father and the Son. Or if we take Paul’s benediction at the end of 2 Corinthians 13: “The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit...” Again there’s a blessing in the name of the triune God, grace extended to us through the sacrifice of the Son ... motivated by the love of God the Father and then applied to us by the Holy Spirit as he has fellowship with us and communes with us. He brings home to our hearts what the Son has accomplished for us in grace, which is what the Father has purposed for us in love.

Dr. Steve McKinion

There are a number of important Trinitarian formulas in the New Testament, in the Gospels, as well as in the Epistles, and they help us to see how these New Testament writers, the apostles, understood the work of God in Christ... At the end of Matthew there is the command from Jesus to go and to make disciples of all nations, and he tells them that they’re to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit — very formulaic. Paul in his epistles does the same thing where he’s regularly talking about God and the Son and the Spirit, always in formulaic terms. What these formulas enable us to do as Christians and as theologians is to understand that the apostles are preaching to us the work of God that is triune, that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are all at work in salvation just as the Father and the Son and the Spirit were all at work in creation. What this tells us about the Spirit then is that he has a very important role in God’s work, in the economy of God. When God determines that he will create, it’s not just the Father and the Son, it’s the Spirit that we even find in Genesis who is hovering over the waters of the deep for example. In the incarnation, it’s not just the Father sending the Son and the Son being born of a woman, it is the Spirit who comes on Mary so that she can conceive and bear the Son. When it comes to Jesus being lifted up on the cross, he is commending his Spirit. He is giving his Spirit, giving up his Spirit. So, in all of these formulas we have a summary of God at work in Christ, to reconcile the world to

himself, and the Spirit is active in every aspect of God's work — creation, revelation, incarnation, ultimately our own salvation, our regeneration — the Spirit is at work.

Dr. Uche Anizor

The New Testament has a few, a very few explicit statements where it groups the Spirit with the Father and the Son. We find one, for instance, in 1 Peter 1. But I think the most important statement we find is Matthew 28. This is the Great Commission, and Jesus says to baptize “in the name of the Father, the Son and the Spirit” — the singular name. And so, when we're baptizing in the singular name, what we're doing is we're according honor to Father, Son and Spirit. Now, if it was true that the Spirit was not God, or equally that the Spirit was not a person, it would seem an odd thing to baptize ongoingly into the church's future, to be baptizing people in this singular name that includes this non-divine being. And so, I think we can surmise from the baptismal formula of Matthew 28 that the Spirit is being given honor alongside with the Father and the Son and that it's not inappropriate — it's certainly not inappropriate if Jesus is commanding it — it's not inappropriate to worship the Spirit. And so, what does this mean then? It means that the Spirit is God. And any pneumatology that wants to be a proper Christian pneumatology has to recognize that the Spirit is given the same honor as Father and Son.

Rev. Dr. Simon Vibert

There are at least two places in Scripture where the Trinitarian formulas are clearly articulated, and they help us in our understanding of pneumatology. The first would be the end of Matthew's gospel, the so-called Great Commission, where we are instructed to go into all the world and baptize people in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and that baptismal formula clearly indicates that it is in the one name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the three persons making up the Godhead coequally — the Trinity. Much more to be said about the purpose of that commission, but it might be worth also bearing in mind the prayer that we know as “the grace” in the end of 2 Corinthians: “For the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all.” Again, we have the three persons of the Trinity together there — the grace of God, the work of the Holy Spirit, the work of the Son — all operating together to make sure that we understand there to be one God made up of three persons.

CONCLUSION

In our introduction to the Trinity, we've looked at divine oneness — that God is one essence. We've also discussed divine threeness — that God is three divine persons in one divine essence. And we've touched on divine equality — that the members of the Godhead are all equal in their divine attributes and eternity.

There is only one God who exists eternally as three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And each person of the Trinity is fully equal in power and glory. The word “trinity” may never appear in the Bible, but we can be assured that the idea permeates the pages of Scripture. God has always existed in Trinity, and he always will.

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