

Is God Trinity?

By Charles Cutrera

A personal note: This brief paper is not an exhaustive treatment of the Trinity in the Bible. Much more could be written. What I have compiled here has been limited by my own time constraints and by my own imperfect knowledge of the Bible. However, the more I examine the Scriptures, the more confirmation of the Trinity I find.

For 2,000 years the Christian church has held as an essential teaching the doctrine of the Trinity. That is, there is one God in three persons. While church history is never infallible, and the final authority on any issue must be what the Bible teaches, the fact that millions and millions of followers of Christ have affirmed this teaching for 2,000 years should cause us to pause and carefully consider the matter before we conclude they were all wrong. *(This same reasoning has been used to defend marriage against those who say the Bible allows for homosexual behavior. We who defend marriage to be defined as one man and one woman for life have pointed out that for 2,000 years Christians understood the Bible to consider homosexual acts as sinful and contrary to God's design. Thus, to say marriage can be two men or two women is to say that millions of people before us did not understand the Bible correctly.)*

As we seek to understand God, let us be clear up front that we cannot fully know God. The Psalmist declares,

**Great is the LORD, and greatly to be praised,
and his greatness is unsearchable.** (Psalm 145:3 ESV)

His greatness is unsearchable! We cannot know Him fully. He is infinite and beyond our ability to fully grasp. But while we cannot know God exhaustively, we can know what He chooses to reveal to us, and Scripture reveals God to be three Persons in one Being.

“The word trinity means ‘tri-unity’ or ‘three-in-oneness.’ It is used to summarize the teaching of Scripture that God is three persons yet one God.” (Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p226)

The word ‘Trinity’ is not found in the Bible, but the concept is. This doctrine comes from a comprehensive look at Scripture, trying to make sense of the Bible’s teachings that:

1. There is only one God
2. God exists as three Persons
3. The Father is fully God
4. The Son is fully God
5. The Spirit is fully God

Below I will give support for the above five statements:

Statement #1: There is Only One God

This is evident in both Old and New Testaments:

- Deuteronomy 6:4 (Jesus cites this verse in Mark 12:29)
- Isaiah 43:10
- Isaiah 44:6-8
- Isaiah 45:5, 14, 21-22
- Isaiah 46:9-10
- Romans 3:29-30
- Galatians 3:20
- 1 Timothy 2:5
- James 2:19

Regarding the above references from Isaiah: I have shared some of these verses with polytheists (those who believe in the existence of multiple gods). I have received two different responses:

1. For them, the god of this planet is the only one we should worship.
2. These verses are directed against idolatry (making idols and worshipping false gods).

Response: 1 and 2 both require assumptions or additions to the text to be true. While these verses would certainly condemn idolatry, they are saying much more. God is declaring unequivocally in these verses that there is no other god in existence in all the universe, nor will there ever be another god in the future. They are strong, absolute statements of monotheism. If anyone disagreed, I would ask them to please consider these Isaiah passages carefully and ask themselves, if God wanted to say that He was the only God ever, how could he have said that more clearly than He does here?

Statement #2: God exists as three Persons

Scripture reveals God existing as a plurality of Persons:

Genesis 1:26

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness." (Genesis 1:26a ESV)

God refers to Himself as "us". He cannot be speaking to angels, because mankind was not made in the image of angels, nor were angels involved in creating man (see Grudem,

Systematic Theology, p227). God referring to Himself as “us” also occurs in Genesis 3:22, Genesis 11:7, and Isaiah 6:8.

Psalm 45:6-7

**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 beyond your companions;**

(Psalm 45:6–7 ESV)

Two different persons are both referred to as God. (Hebrews 1:8 applies this passage to Jesus).

If these verses were all we had, we might conclude the Bible teaches polytheism. But these verses must be understood in the greater context of Scripture, which, as already shown, clearly teaches monotheism.

Statement #3: The Father is God

This is evident in many passages of Scripture. Here are some passages that refer to God as Father (notice also how the Father is a distinct Person from the Son in these verses):

- **Matthew 6:9**
- **Mark 1:11**
- **John 3:16-17**
- **John 12:28**
- **Ephesians 1:3**
- **Philippians 2:8-11**
- **Colossians 1:3**
- **1 Corinthians 15:22-28**

Statement #4: Jesus is God

- **Matthew 1:23**, citing the messianic prophecy of **Isaiah 7:14**, says Jesus will be called Immanuel. As Matthew explains, Immanuel means, “God with us” (ESV), thus indicating Jesus is God.
- **Isaiah 9:6** the Messiah is “Mighty God” (ESV).

- **Isaiah 45:22-23** state that every knee will bow to God. But **Philippians 2:10** says that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow.
- **Mark 1:3** cites **Isaiah 40:3** about John the Baptist's ministry, saying "*Prepare the way of the Lord*" (ESV) . The "Lord" John is preparing the way for is clearly Jesus. But the word translated 'Lord' in Mark 1:3 is actually "Yahweh" (or Jehovah) in the original Hebrew of Isaiah 40:3, implying that Jesus is Yahweh. Yahweh (also can be translated Jehovah) is God's name from **Exodus 3:15-16**. That Jesus is God is even more clear when you look at the entire verse of **Isaiah 40:3**: *A voice cries: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord; **make straight in the desert a highway for our God.*** (ESV, emphasis added). So for John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Lord meant to "**make...a highway for our God.**" Since John prepared the way for Jesus, the clear implication is that Jesus is God.
- **Mark 2:1-11** - Jesus claims the authority to forgive sins (something only God can do) and then proves he indeed has such authority by miraculously healing the paralytic. Implication: Jesus is God.
- **John 1:1-4** Jesus is God and he is with God. (Note the distinction of Persons.)
- **John 8:58** - Jesus takes the Old Testament revelation of God from Exodus 3:14 and applies it to himself. He also implies that he has existed eternally, something that is only true of God. **Hebrews 13:8** also points to this.
- **John 14:9b** - Jesus says, **Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. (ESV)** How could Jesus say this unless He was God? My son could never say this in reference to me. And since the Father is infinite God, would not Jesus have to be infinite God as well? A finite being cannot represent an infinite one.
- **John 16:15** - All that the Father has belongs to Jesus. How could he claim this unless he was God?
- **John 20:28** Jesus accepts worship and being called 'God' by Thomas.
- **Romans 9:5** - Jesus is God over all. (The Jehovah's Witnesses, who reject Jesus as God, mistranslate this verse in their New World Translation of the Bible and leave out "who is" even though both words appear in the Greek).
- **Philippians 2:6**
- **Titus 2:13**

- **Hebrews 1:6** - Jesus is to be worshipped by all of God's angels. But Scripture is clear that only God may be worshipped. This implies Jesus is God.
- **Hebrews 1:8** - the Son is referred to as "God" and his throne will last forever.
- **Hebrews 13:8** - Jesus never changes. But being unchangeable is an attribute only true of God (see Malachi 3:6). This implies Jesus is God.
- **Revelation 1:8** - The "Lord God" says he is "the Alpha and the Omega". But in **Revelation 22:13** Jesus says he is "the Alpha and the Omega".
- **Revelation 1:17** - Jesus says he is "**the first and the last**" (ESV). But in **Isaiah 44:6** Yahweh says he is the first and the last.
- **Revelation 5:13-14**. Both the Father and the Lamb (Jesus) are worshipped. Yet the book of Revelation makes it clear that only God may be worshipped (see Rev 22:8-9). The strong implication is that the Lamb is God.

Statement #5 The Holy Spirit is God

- First, we must be clear that the Holy Spirit is a Person and not an impersonal force. He can be lied to (**Acts 5:3-4**) and grieved (**Eph 4:30**). He has a will (**1 Corinthians 12:11**). Thus, clearly He is a Person, as these things are not true of forces. You cannot lie to electricity. You cannot grieve gravity.
- The Spirit is referenced as being involved with the creation of the world (**Genesis 1:2**), but the creation of the world is something God did, implying the divinity of the Spirit.
- In **Acts 5:3-4**, Peter first states that Ananias has lied to the Holy Spirit but then goes on to say he has lied to God, implying the Spirit is God.
- In **Psalms 139:7-8**, the Spirit is given the attribute of omnipresence (being everywhere at once), an attribute that only belongs to God.
- **1 Corinthians 3:16**. The temple is where God dwells. But how are believers indwelt by God? By His Spirit, implying the Spirit is God.
- **Revelation 1:17-3:22**: In this passage Jesus is speaking to seven different churches, but repeatedly after Jesus speaks, it immediately references the Spirit as speaking to the

churches (2:7, 2:17, 2:29, 3:6, 3:13). This implies a unity of Jesus and the Spirit - that Jesus and the Spirit are one being - for if Jesus says it, the Spirit says it.

Finally, all the Trinitarian passages imply the Divinity of the Spirit. Trinitarian passages are passages that list Father, Son, and Spirit together. Examples include:

- **Isaiah 61:1** - a Messianic prophecy that Jesus applied to himself in Luke 4:16-21. Notice the reference to the Spirit (the Holy Spirit), the Sovereign LORD (the Father) and the speaker “me” (the Son).
- **Matthew 3:16-17** - The Father, Son, and Spirit are all seen as distinct at the baptism of Jesus.
- **Matthew 28:19** - Baptism is to be done “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (ESV). Note that there are three separate persons referenced at baptism, yet baptism is done in the “name” not “names”. This points to a three-in-oneness.
- In **Revelation 1:4-5**, grace and peace come from the Father (“him who is and who was and who is to come”) and “Jesus Christ” and “the seven spirits who are before [God’s] throne” (ESV). The “seven spirits” refers to the Holy Spirit. This does not mean that there are seven Holy Spirits, but as New Testament scholar Dr. Thomas Schreiner explains, “*We need to recall that Revelation is apocalyptic, regularly using numbers with symbolic import. Thus the number seven here designates perfection and the fullness of the Holy Spirit.*” In the New Testament, grace and peace only come from God. So this passage affirms the divinity of the Holy Spirit as well as the divinity of Jesus. (See Dr. Schreiner’s *ESV Expository Commentary* on Revelation for further explanation of this passage.)
- See also **2 Corinthians 13:14**, **1 Peter 1:2**, and **Jude 20-21** as examples of Trinitarian passages.

Since the Spirit alone is grouped with the Father and the Son, and the Father and Son are God, then these passages also strongly imply that the Spirit is God. If the Spirit is not God, then a verse like Matthew 28:19 would be akin to saying “baptize people in the name of the Father, Son, and the angel Gabriel.”

But Is Jesus God or the Son of God?

It is not a contradiction to say Jesus is both God and the Son of God. Otherwise, the Apostle John would be an unintelligent writer, since he refers to Jesus as both in his Gospel. Rather,

“Son of God” refers to his role - how he relates to the Father. It does not mean that the Father created the Son (as is the case with a human son and father).

ALTERNATIVES TO THE TRINITY

Alternative interpretations to the Trinity are **Modalism** and **Tritheism**.

Modalism teaches that there is one God who simply appears at different times in different forms (modes). So a modalist would say that God appeared as the Father at certain times, the Son at other times, and the Spirit still at other times, but there is really only one person, just like a one-man play where the actor wears different costumes and plays different characters at different times. Modalism takes John 10:30 to mean there is no distinction in persons. Modalism preserves the passages that clearly teach there is only one God, but it clearly fails to recognize the distinction in persons that are seen in several Trinitarian passages. In the Garden of Gethsemane, who is Jesus praying to if the Father and the Son are the same person? How can Father, Son, and Spirit all be distinct and appear simultaneously at the baptism of Jesus if modalism were true?

CONCLUSION:

In multiple places the Father, Son, and Spirit are three distinct persons. Thus, modalism cannot be true.

Tritheism explains the Father, Son, and Spirit as three separate Gods. While this maintains a distinction in persons, it clearly violates the multiple passages that teach there is only one God. It also violates the unity of persons seen in places such as John 10:30.

CONCLUSION:

Tritheism, or any form of polytheism, violates the clear teaching of Scripture in both Old and New Testaments and thus cannot be true.

Summary: Alternatives to the Trinity attempt to make sense of certain verses but end up denying the clear teaching of other verses. The doctrine of the Trinity is the only explanation that holds all the teachings on the Godhead in balance without denying any of them.

ARE THERE ANY GOOD ANALOGIES TO HELP EXPLAIN THE TRINITY?

Speaking of Modalism and Tritheism, we need to note that there are no good analogies to explain the Trinity. It is interesting that God uses various metaphors or analogies in Scripture to describe Himself and give us insight into who is (“**The name of the LORD is a strong tower**” (Proverbs 18:10a ESV), “**The LORD is my shepherd**” (Psalm 23:1a ESV), etc. But God never - never - uses an analogy to explain how He is three in one.

**To whom then will you compare me,
that I should be like him? says the Holy One.**
(Isaiah 40:25 ESV)

There is no good analogy for the Trinity because there is nothing like God. He is INCOMPARABLE. He is INDESCRIBABLE.

Various analogies have been attempted, but each falls short and actually promotes a false understanding of Trinity instead. Here are some of the (bad) analogies that have been used:

- Star with its heat and light. The heat and light are creations of the star, not the star itself. But the Son and Spirit are not created beings - The Spirit is uncreated eternal God, The Son is uncreated, eternal God. This analogy promotes a false teaching known as Arianism. **The Trinity is not like a star.**
- Three leaf clover, an egg with its white, yolk, and shell, parts of a tree (root, trunk leaves) The problem with all these analogies is that each part is not fully the thing. A shell is not an egg but only part of an egg. But the Father is FULLY God. Jesus is FULLY God. The Spirit is FULLY God. It is not as if each Person were $\frac{1}{3}$ God and added together they form God. These analogies promote a false teaching known as Partialism. **The Trinity is not like an egg. The Trinity is not like parts of a tree. The Trinity is not like a three-leaf clover.**
- Water is liquid, solid, gas. This is a bad analogy because the same water molecule cannot be in all three states at once. This analogy promotes Modalism, a wrong view of the Trinity discussed above. **The Trinity is not like water in three different states.**
- The same man could be a businessman, father, and husband, but he is still the same person. This analogy is another example of Modalism and denies that there are distinct persons. **The Trinity is not like one person with different roles.**

A Cup and the Ocean

There is one analogy that I find helpful: Imagine standing on the shore of the ocean with a cup. You cannot fit the ocean in the cup. You can, however, scoop up a very small amount of ocean water into the cup. By studying that water, you could know something truly of the ocean, but of course you could not know the ocean fully from that water in the cup. In the same way, we can know something truly of God based on what He has revealed of Himself, but we cannot know Him fully. And this is exactly what we should expect: the one true God is beyond my comprehension. If I could fully understand God, then he would not be the true God, for God is infinite and thus it is impossible for a finite creature to fully comprehend Him. Thus the mystery and incomprehensibility of the Trinity points to an infinite and eternal God.

A Mystery, not a Contradiction

Theologian Wayne Grudem comments,

“...Scripture does not ask us to believe in a contradiction. A contradiction would be ‘There is one God and there is not one God,’ or ‘God is three persons and God is one person.’ But to say that ‘God is three persons and there is one God’ is not a contradiction. It is something we do not understand, and it is therefore a mystery or a paradox, but that should not trouble us as long as the different aspects of the mystery are clearly taught by Scripture, for as long as we are finite creatures and not omniscient deity, there will always (for all eternity) be things we do not fully understand.” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p 256)

Louis Berkhof says,

“It is especially when we reflect on the relation of the three persons to the divine essence that all analogies fail us and we become deeply conscious of the fact that the Trinity is a mystery far beyond our comprehension. It is the incomprehensible glory of the Godhead.”
(Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p 89, as cited by Grudem, p256)

Were the Apostles’ teachings lost?

If the Scripture interpretations above are accurate, then Christ’s Apostles clearly taught the Trinity. This doctrine is the same thing the early church taught after the death of the Apostles, and thus the Apostles’ teachings were not lost.

So what? Why is this doctrine important?

1. *To know God as He really is.* If we want to know God truly, we must know Him as He has revealed Himself, and He has revealed Himself to be three persons yet one God.
2. *To correctly understand the Bible.* The doctrine of the Trinity helps us make sense of numerous passages of Scripture where the Persons of the Godhead are referenced.
3. *To experience God's love for me.* Jesus could not save us unless He was both fully God and fully man. Jesus, as fully God and fully man, was able to pay a debt I could never, ever pay. Furthermore, I am overwhelmed that God Himself suffered and died for me. God required justice and God Himself met the demands of justice. How great is God's love for me! (see Galatians 2:20)
4. *To be saved by Jesus.* Only God can save us. Grudem rightly says, "If Jesus is merely a created being, and not fully God, then it is hard to see how he, a creature, could bear the full wrath of God against all of our sins. Could any creature, no matter how great, really save us?...If Jesus is not fully God, we would rightly doubt whether we can really trust him to save us completely. Could we really depend on any creature fully for our salvation?" (Grudem, p247) Only the Jesus who is God is able to save.
5. *To understand the riches of our salvation.* If the Holy Spirit is God, we are awed to realize that under the New Covenant (see Jeremiah 31:31-34), God no longer dwells in a stone temple but in every follower of Christ!
6. *To understand how equality and role distinctions are possible.* Within the Trinity, we see complete equality with differences of roles. This helps us understand how both man and woman can equally be made in the image of God and of equal worth, yet have different roles. Jesus is fully God, yet He submits to the Father. Likewise, a wife can submit to her husband while being fully equal with him.
7. *To be on guard.* If any church teaches that Jesus is not God, that church is not following the real Jesus of the Bible.
8. *To worship.* Beholding God as infinite and beyond our comprehension should lead us to our knees in worship and adoration of the One infinitely greater than ourselves.