

The Biblical Doctrine of the Godhead

*Since the late second century A.D., controversy has existed concerning the nature of the Godhead. Is God a solitary person—simply manifested in three forms? Or do three separate **personalities** exist, each of whom possesses the nature of deity? Is the popular doctrine of the Trinity true or false?*

By **Wayne Jackson** | Christian Courier

Since the late second century A.D., controversy has existed concerning the nature of the Godhead. Is God a solitary person—simply manifested in three forms? Or do three separate **personalities** exist, each of whom possesses the nature of deity? Is the popular doctrine of the Trinity true or false?

Though the word “Trinity” is not explicitly found in the Bible, the teaching that there are three individual personalities of divine nature (known in the New Testament as the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) is thoroughly scriptural and has been generally acknowledged by the writers of “Christendom” since the apostolic age.

Around A.D. 190, Theodotus of Byzantium advocated the absolute personality of God. Asserting that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were **one person**, he sought to propagate his views in the church at Rome. He is said to be “the first representative of Dynamistic Monarchianism whose views have been recorded” (Newman 1931, 198).

Later, however, the “oneness” heresy found its fullest expression in Sabellius of Libya, who commenced the publication of his errors about A.D. 260. Sabellius denied the doctrine of the Trinity, maintaining that God is uni-personal and that the names Father, Son, and Holy Ghost merely designate the same person in different capacities.

As the Father, God created the world; as the Son, he redeemed it; as the Holy Ghost, he sanctifies the elect. These three, he said, are no more different persons than the body, soul, and spirit of man are three persons (Sanford 1910, 827).

In modern times, this doctrine has been taught by the United Pentecostal Church and other religious groups. It is, however, false.

In this article, we'll address two very important concepts.

First, we'll examine the Scriptures for what they teach regarding the concept of monotheism, i.e., there is **one** God—one unified **divine nature**.

Secondly, the divine nature, i.e., the nature or quality which identifies one as deity (as opposed, for example, to the angelic or human natures) is shared by **three** distinct personalities, and these personalities are characterized in the New Testament as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of the three personalities of the Godhead is **eternal** and **equal in essence**, though they may assume individual **roles** in their respective work (which may involve subordination).

Biblical Monotheism

Monotheism is the belief in one God, in contrast to polytheism, the notion that numerous gods exist. Unquestionably, the Bible affirms the concept of monotheism.

In the first commandment of the Decalogue, Jehovah charges, "You shall have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:3). Again, "Hear, O Israel: Jehovah our God is one Jehovah" (Deuteronomy 6:4). Or, "Jehovah, he is God; there is none else besides him" (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; 1 Kings 8:60; 1 Chronicles 17:20; Isaiah 43:11; Zechariah 14:9).

In the New Testament, Paul says that "God is one" (Galatians 3:20), while James notes: "You believe that God is one; you do well: the demons also believe, and shudder" (James 2:19).

Clearly, therefore, the **oneness** of God, in some sense, is a biblical truth. The question is: what does Scripture mean by **one** God?

In the Old Testament, the words *el*, *eloah*, and *elohim*, from related roots, are generic designations of God. The New Testament term is *theos*.

These appellations, when used of the true God, simply suggest the nature or quality of being divine—deity. The word “God” is not the name of a personality; it is the name of a **nature**, a quality of being.

When it is said, therefore, that there is but one God, the meaning is: **there is but one divine nature**. There is a **unified** set of traits or characteristics that distinguish a personality as God.

The Divine Three

It is also clear that the Scriptures teach that there is a personal distinction between those individuals identified in the New Testament as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and these persons are in some sense **three**.

Study very carefully the following passages in which the persons of the divine Godhead are distinguished: Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19; Luke 1:35; John 14:26; 15:26; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 2:18; 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; Jude 20-21; Revelation 1:4-5.

It is obvious that these inspired verses reveal three separate persons.

Furthermore, additional biblical data reveal that each of these three persons is God—i.e., each possesses the quality or nature of **deity**. The Father is deity (Ephesians 1:3), as is the Son (Hebrews 1:8), and so also the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4).

Any elementary student of logic knows perfectly well that the Godhead cannot be both one and three without a logical contradiction being involved—if the adjectives “one” and “three” are employed **in the identical sense**.

But the fact of the matter is, they are not used in the same sense. There is but **one** divine **nature**, but there are **three** distinct **personalities** possessing that unified set of infinite qualities. Thus, there is no contradiction at all.

Without a recognition of the above principle, some Bible passages would be difficult to harmonize.

For example, in Isaiah 44:24 Jehovah affirms that he “stretches forth the heavens **alone**; that spreads abroad the earth (who is with me?).” So, God was alone.

Yet in John 8:29 Christ said, “And he [the Father] that sent me is with me; **he has not left me alone.**” And so, Jesus was not alone, for the Father was with him; correspondingly, the Father was not alone.

The question is: how can God be both alone and not alone?

In Isaiah’s passage, God (the one divine nature) was being contrasted with the false gods of paganism; the personalities of the Godhead were not a consideration there. In John 8:29, the relationship of two divine personalities (Father and Son) was in view. Different subjects, but no discrepancy.

Similarly, when a certain scribe affirmed that “he [God] is one; and there is **none other** but he” (Mark 12:32), he was correct. He was declaring monotheism, as suggested above.

In another setting though, Christ, revealing a distinction between himself and the Father, said: “It is **another** that bears witness of me; and I know that the witness which he witnesses of me is true” (John 5:32).

Old Testament Evidence of Divine Plurality

The biblical doctrine of the Godhead is progressive. By that we mean that the concept unfolds, being gradually illuminated from the Old Testament to the New Testament. Nevertheless, the multiple personalities of the holy Godhead clearly are distinguished in the Old Testament.

“In the beginning God [elohim — plural] created [bara — singular]” (Genesis 1:1). In the plural form elohim, many scholars see a “foreshadowing of the plurality of persons in the Divine Trinity” (Smith 1959, 11). Adam Clarke declared that the term “has long been supposed, by the most eminently learned and pious men, to imply a **plurality** of Persons

in the Divine nature" (n.d., 28). Richard Watson wrote that *elohim* "seems to be the general appellation by which the Triune Godhead is collectively distinguished in Scripture" (1881, 1024).

Though some scholars call this plural form a "plural of majesty" (i.e., a suggestion of multiple majestic traits), Nathan Stone observed that the plural of majesty "was not known then" (1944, 12). Professor Harold Stigers noted:

"A multiplicity of personalities in the Godhead, implied in the creative process in the use of the titles 'God' (1:1) and 'Spirit of God' (1:2), is involved in the creative and redemptive work of God" (1976, 47).

Multiple divine personalities are alluded to in such passages as follows:

- "And God said, Let **us** make man in **our** image, after **our** likeness" (Genesis 1:26). (Note: this cannot refer to angels, as is often claimed, for angels are themselves created (Nehemiah 9:6; Psalm 148:2, 5), not creators; and the context limits the creating to God [v. 27].)
- "The man is become as one of **us**, to know good and evil" (Genesis 3:22).
- "Come, let **us** go down, and there confound their language" (Genesis 11:7). (Incidentally, "come" in the Hebrew text is plural, so that the divine spokesman must be addressing and acting in union with at least **two** others [Thiessen 1949, 126].)
- "And I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for **us**?" (Isaiah 6:8).
- "Remember also thy Creator [Hebrew plural] in the days of thy youth" (Ecclesiastes 12:1).

Numerous other passages reveal a distinction of personalities within the Godhead:

- In Genesis 18:21, Jehovah, temporarily assuming the form of a man, visits Sodom. Surveying the evil of that area, this "Jehovah" then "rained upon Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire **from Jehovah out of heaven**" (19:24). Two persons are clearly denominated "Jehovah."

- “Thus says **Jehovah**, the King of Israel, **and** his Redeemer, **Jehovah** of Hosts: I am the first, and I am the last; and besides me there is no God” (Isaiah 44:6). (Note: the language of this verse is applied to Christ in Revelation 1:17.)
- In Zechariah 11:12, 13, Christ prophetically says: “And I said unto them, if ye think good, give **me my** hire; and if not, forbear. So they weighed for **my** hire thirty pieces of silver. And **Jehovah** said unto **me** . . .”
- “Jehovah [the first person] said unto my Lord [the second person], Sit thou at my right hand” (Psalm 110:1).
- “Jehovah [the Father] laid on him [Christ] the iniquity of us all” (Isaiah 53:6).
- “The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against Jehovah, [the Father] and against **his anointed** [the Son] saying, Let us break **their** bonds asunder, And cast away **their** cords from us” (Psalm 2:2, 3).

This is but a fractional sampling of a vast amount of Old Testament evidence for the plural personalities of deity.

New Testament Evidence of Divine Plurality

There are many obvious indications of distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the New Testament.

For instance, there is the clear case of the baptismal scene of Christ, where Jesus is in the water, the Father is speaking from heaven, and the Spirit is descending as a dove (Matthew 3:16-17).

Then there is Matthew’s record of the “great commission” where baptism is “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

The term “name” (Greek *onoma*) stands for becoming the possession of, and under the protection of, the one into whose name an individual is immersed (Arndt and Gingrich 1967, 575), and its singular form here likely stresses the unity of the holy Three.

The multiple use of the article “the” before the words Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, however, according to a well-known rule of Greek grammar (Dana and Mantey 1955,

147), plainly demonstrates that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are separate **persons**, and not merely three manifestations of one person (Warfield 1952, 42).

There are other New Testament evidences revealing a distinction between the divine persons of the holy Godhead:

Christ is said to be a "mediator" between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). The word "mediator" translates the Greek *mesites* (from *mesos*, "middle," and *eimi*, "to go"), and so literally, a go-between.

Arndt and Gingrich note that the term is used of "one who mediates between two parties to remove a disagreement or reach a common goal. Of Christ with the genitive of persons between whom he mediates" (508).

Clearly, Christ cannot be a mediator **between** God and man if he is the totality of the holy Godhead.

In John 8:16-17, the Lord cited the Old Testament principle of multiple witnesses for legal documentation. He is countering the Pharisaic allegation that his witness is not true (v. 13). He reasons, therefore, that just as the law requires at least two witnesses to establish credibility, so the Lord is "not alone"; he bears witness of himself, and the Father bears witness of him.

If Jesus is the same person as the Father, his argument makes no sense!

Christ once taught: "I am the vine, and my Father is the husbandman" (John 15:1). In the same allegory he identified the disciples as "branches." The narrative thus has three principal features: husbandman (the Father), vine (the Son), and branches (disciples).

It is not difficult to see that there is as much distinction between the husbandman and the vine as there is between the vine and the branches.

"But of that day nor that hour knows no one, not even the angels in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father" (Mark 13:32). While Jesus was upon the earth, he knew not the time of the judgment day. The Father, however, **did know!** Thus, clearly the Father and the Son were not the same person.

Similarly, "And whosoever shall speak a word against the Son of man, it shall be forgiven him; but whosoever shall speak against the Holy Spirit, it shall not be forgiven him" (Matthew 12:32).

The contrast here between the Son and the Holy Spirit plainly shows that they are not identical in personality. These two arguments make it certain that Christ was neither the Father nor the Spirit.

In speaking of Christ's subordination to God, Paul says: "[T]he head of Christ is God" (1 Corinthians 11:3). Edward Robinson noted the use of "head" (Greek *kephale*): "Trop. of persons, i.e., the head, the chief, one to whom others are subordinate" (1855, 398).

Would it make any sense to speak of one being head of himself?

Jesus is said to be "the very image" of the Father's substance (Hebrews 1:3). Of the word "image" (Greek *charakter*), W. E. Vine observed:

In the New Testament it is used metaphorically in Heb. 1:3, of the Son of God as 'the very image (marg. – the impress) of His substance,' RV. The phrase expresses the fact that the Son is both personally distinct from, and yet literally equal to Him of whose essence He is the adequate imprint (1940, 247).

The following passages contain contrasts which reveal a distinction between the Father and the Son:

- Christ did not seek his own will, **but** the will of his Father (John 5:30).
- His teaching was not his, **but** the Father's (John 7:16).
- He came not of himself, **but** was sent of the Father (John 7:28; 8:42).
- He glorified him (John 8:54).
- The Father does not judge, **but** has given judgment unto the Son (John 5:22).

The Jews had neither heard the Father's voice, nor seen his form at any time (John 5:37; cf. 1:18). But they had both seen and heard Christ. Hence, he was not the same person as the Father.

There are many grammatical forms which show the distinction between the persons of the Godhead. In addition to plural pronouns (e.g., “**our**,” “**we**,” “**us**” [John 14:23; 17:11, 21]), prepositions frequently function in this capacity.

The Spirit is sent **from** the Father (John 15:26). In the beginning Christ was **with** (Greek *pros*) God (John 1:1). He spoke the things which he had seen **with** (Greek *para*) him (John 8:38), and he came forth **from** the Father (John 16:27). All created things are of the Father, and **through** Christ (1 Corinthians 8:6). **Through** Christ we have access **in** the Spirit **unto** the Father (Ephesians 2:18).

Conjunctions can also indicate a distinction. He that abides in the teaching of Christ has **both** the Father and the Son (2 John 9). Jesus rebuked the Jews: “Ye know **neither** me, **nor** my Father: if ye knew me, ye would know my Father **also** [Greek *kai*—as an adverb]” (John 8:19). Comparative terms reveal distinction.

Though Christ did not hold onto his **equality** with God (Philippians 2:6)—in terms of the independent exercise of divine privileges—nonetheless, in essence he was **equal** with God (John 5:18). In Christ’s subordinate position, though, the Father was **greater** than he (John 14:28).

Many verbal forms indicate that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are separate in personality. The Father **sent** the Son (John 7:29), and the Son **sent** the Spirit (John 15:26). The Father **loves** the Son (John 3:35) and **abides** in him (John 14:10). The Father **gave** the Son (John 3:16), **exalted** him (Philippians 2:9), and **delivered** all things unto him (Matthew 11:27). Jesus **commended** his spirit into the Father’s hands (Luke 23:46) and **ascended** unto him (John 20:17).

The Bible contains many such expressions which are meaningless if the Father, Son, and Spirit are the same person.

If we were so disposed, not only could we introduce a number of additional biblical arguments, but we could also show that the writers of the first several centuries of the post-apostolic age were virtually one in affirming that the Godhead consists of three separate, divine persons.

Concerning the matter of their being three persons in the Trinity, A. C. Cox wrote:

"Evidences, therefore, are abundant and archaic indeed, to prove that the Ante-Nicean Fathers, with those of the Nicean and the Post-Nicean periods, were of one mind, and virtually of one voice" (1855, 49).

Baptism in the Name of Jesus Only

Before concluding, we need to address the Oneness Pentecostal idea that only certain words may be spoken during a baptismal ceremony (e.g., "I baptize you in the name of Jesus Christ"). Oneness clergymen contend that should the statement be made, "I baptize you into the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit," it would be a violation of Scripture, and thus negate the validity of the immersion. This exhibits a lack of biblical information on this theme.

First, let us note the illogical consequences of such a doctrine. If a specific set of words is to be pronounced at the time of a baptism, **exactly what are those words?** A brief look at the New Testament will reveal that a variety of expressions are employed when the terms "baptize" and "name" are connected. Observe the following:

- "baptizing them into (eis) the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).
- "be baptized . . . in (epi) the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38).
- "baptized into (eis) the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 8:16).
- "baptized in (en) the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 10:48).
- "baptized into (eis) the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:5).

These passages contain five **variant** phrases. Which one is to be pronounced at the time of the baptism, to the exclusion of the others?

The truth of the matter is **none of them has reference to any set of words to be pronounced at the time of baptism.**

Second, the language is designed to express certain truths, not prescribe a ritualistic set of words.

If the phrase “in the name of Christ” implies the saying of those words in connection with the act to which they are enjoined, what would Colossians 3:17 require?—“And **whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus.**”

Accordingly, one would have to preface every word and act with the phrase “in the name of the Lord Jesus.” Such highlights the absurdity of the Oneness position.

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