



# A Closer Look at the Trinity

## THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IN THE BIBLE

The doctrine of the Trinity may be expressed in the following statements:

1. In the Bible there are three who are recognized as God (the Father is God; the Son is God; the Spirit is God).
2. These three are described as distinct persons.
3. This tri-personality of the Godhead is eternal.
4. This tri-personality is not tritheism, for while there are three persons, there is but one God.
5. The three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are co-equal.
6. While the term "Trinity" is not found in the Bible (it is attributed to Tertullian, third century Christian theologian), the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly expressed by numerous biblical passages.

We shall examine each of these points:

1. In the Bible there are three who are recognized as God (the Father is God; the Son is God; the Spirit is God).
  - (1) That **the Father is recognized as God** is clearly stated in many passages, such as Psalm 89:26 (NASB), "He will cry to Me, 'Thou art my Father, My God, and the rock of my salvation.'" First Peter 1:2 (KJV) says, "According to the foreknowledge of God the Father."
  - (2) **The Son is recognized as God.** He is expressly called God in John 1:1 (KJV), "The Word was God." This phrase cannot be translated any other way. The absence of a definite article before God in the Greek means "God" must be the predicate. There are no indefinite articles in Greek, however, to translate the phrase, "the Word was a god" as does the Jehovah's Witnesses *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (New York: Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1984). This would not only be grammatically incorrect but also an abomination to Jews.

Thomas' address in John 20:28 (NASB), "My Lord

and my God," was not rebuked by Jesus, thereby making it an assertion on His part of His claim to Deity. Contrast this with Paul and Barnabas' rejection of worship by pagans at Lystra who believed them to be Zeus and Hermes (Jupiter and Mercury) in Acts 14:8-18. Thomas' address cannot be translated as a sudden outburst of enthusiasm without charging him with profanity.

A direct declaration of Christ's divinity appears in Titus 2:13 (NASB), "The appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus." The Greek word for "appearing," meaning appearance or advent, is a term applied specially to the Son, and never to the Father. To refer to Christ as "great" is appropriate, but not if used of the Father. The same principles of interpretation can be used for the similar text 2 Peter 1:1.

The writer of Hebrews, quoting Psalm 45:6 in Hebrews 1:8 (NASB) says, "But of the Son He says, 'Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" In Hebrews 1:10 (KJV), the writer quotes Psalm 102:25, "Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth." Taken together, these verses identify the Son as God.

- (3) **The Holy Spirit is recognized as God.** He is spoken of as God in Acts 5:3-4 (NASB), "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? . . . You have not lied to men, but to God."

The Holy Spirit also has the attributes of God, such as truth, love, holiness, and omnipotence; He does the work of God, such as regeneration; He receives honor due only to God; and He is associated with God on an equal footing in the New Testament.

## 2. These three are described as distinct Persons.

- (1) The Father and the Son are Persons distinct from each other. Christ distinguished the Father from Himself (see John 1:14,18; 3:16). The Father and the Son are distinguished as the Sender and the Sent (see John 10:36; Gal. 4:4).
- (2) The Father and the Son are Persons distinct from the Holy Spirit. Jesus distinguished the Holy Spirit from Himself and the Father (see John 14:16-17). The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father (see John 15:26). The Holy Spirit is sent from the Father and by the Son (see John 14:26; 15:26).
- (3) The Holy Spirit is a Person. Although the Greek word for "spirit" is neuter, the masculine pronoun is used when referring to the Holy Spirit (see John 15:26; 16:13-14). The work of the Holy Spirit as Comforter, Helper, and Teacher suggests He must be a Person (see John 14:16,26; 15:26). His name

is mentioned in connection with other people, which implies His own personality (see Matt. 28:19; John 16:14; Acts 15:28; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Pet. 1:1-2). He performs acts suggesting His personality (see Gen. 6:3; Luke 12:12; Acts 2:4; 13:2; 16:6-7; Rom. 8:26; 1 Cor. 2:10-11). He is affected as a Person by the acts of others (see Matt. 12:31; Acts 5:3-4,9; 7:51; Eph. 4:30).

3. The tri-personality of the Godhead is eternal.

Numerous passages speak of Christ's preexistence and the eternity of the Holy Spirit (see Gen. 1:1-2; John 1:1-3; 8:58; 17:5,24; Phil. 2:6; Col. 1:15-17; Heb. 9:14; Rev. 13-14).

4. This tri-personality is not tritheism, for while there are three Persons, there is but one God.

Human words are often inadequate to describe the divine nature of the Godhead. The term "person" cannot be used in the ordinary sense in which we apply the word person to Ruth, David, and Sonya. The three Persons of the Godhead are not three Gods, and they are not three parts of God. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each possess all the attributes of God. However, the plurality is one of personal distinctions, not a plurality of essence. God is not three and one, but three in one (see John 5:17,19; 14:9; 15:26; 17:21-23; 2 Cor. 5:19).

5. The three Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are co-equal.

God is not only Father, but also the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is not only the Son, but also the Father and the Holy Spirit. God is not only the Holy Spirit, but also the Father and the Son. The three Persons are co-equal in virtue of the relationship they have with each other (see Rom. 8:11,14; 2 Cor. 4:4; Gal. 3:26; 4:4-6; Heb. 1:3; 2 Pet. 1:21).

6. While the term Trinity is not found in the Bible, the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly expressed by numerous biblical passages.

Several passages speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the same context (see Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; Titus 3:4-6).

### **THE WORK AND TEACHINGS OF JESUS CHRIST**

People who reject the doctrine of the Trinity argue that the term Trinity and the phrases "God the Son" and "God the Spirit" are not found in the Bible. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity must have been introduced later by the Emperor Constantine in the fourth century or by church tradition. However, the early church affirmed the doctrine in direct response to the revelation of God in the Bible as one, yet three. The doctrine of the Trinity first arose to explain the relationship between Jesus, the Son of God, and God the Father.

Concerning His birth, Matthew 1:23 quotes Isaiah 7:14 and calls Jesus "Immanuel," which means "God with us." The Virgin Birth reveals Jesus' divine and human natures.

Jesus' preexistence affirms His divinity (see John 1:1; 8:58; 17:5,24; Phil. 2:5-11).

Jesus taught His equality with the Father. In John 5:17 (NASB), He says, "My Father is working until now, and I Myself am working." Upon hearing this statement, the Jews understood Jesus to be making Himself equal with God and sought to kill Him. Jesus did not have to be called "God the Son" to claim equality with the Father; the Jews understood that claim when He called God "My Father" (John 5:17-18, KJV) and Himself "the Son of God" (John 10:36, KJV). Either Jesus was claiming equality with God or He was deceiving the Jews who thought He was, and we know there was no sin or deceit in Him (see 1 Pet. 2:22). He again claimed equality with God in John 5:23 (NASB), "He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent Him." He again asserted His deity in John 10:30 (NASB) when He said, "I and the Father are one." The Jews once again took up stones to stone Him because they understood Jesus to be making a claim of equality with the Father.

At other times, Jesus speaks of being sent by the Father (see John 6:38; 12:44-45; 14:24; 17:3). He also says at one point that "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28, NASB). These verses appear to teach that Jesus is less than God the Father. However, understood in light of Philippians 2:6-11, it is clear that Jesus is speaking of His glory in relation to the Father and not to His divinity. Jesus in His Incarnation gave up some of His heavenly glory, but not His divinity.

Jesus spoke of His special relationship with the Father with the phrase "My Father" (John 20:17, NASB). He never spoke of that relationship as "our Father" (except in the model prayer for the disciples).

Jesus' claim of divinity is seen in His use of "I am" sayings, especially John 8:58, where He makes a clear claim of not only preexistence, but also equality with the Father who is "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex. 3:14, KJV).

Jesus had powers that only God has. He forgave sins (see Matt. 9:6), which was blasphemy to the Jews because only God could forgive sins. He claimed all authority (see Matt. 28:18). He claimed to be the only way of salvation (see John 3:36; 14:6).

Jesus performed the works of God: creation (see John 1:3; Col. 1:16-17); resurrection of the dead (see John 5:28-29); judgment of the world (see John 5:22).

Jesus allowed people to worship Him, a blasphemous act if He were not God (see Matt. 2:11; 14:33; 28:9,17; John 9:38). The same Greek word translated worship, *proskuneo*, is used in verses that are clearly references to worshiping God

(see Rev. 7:11; 11:16; 19:4). Jesus allowed people to worship Him, but Paul and Barnabas would not allow people to worship them (see Acts 14:10-18). Either Jesus Christ is who He claimed to be, and what the Bible clearly represents Him to be, or Jesus is a fraud and a deceiver, and the Bible is a lie.

The only conclusion we can reach is that if God is one and Jesus is God, then the Trinity must be a biblical truth. We cannot rationally explain the doctrine of the Trinity. Neither can we rationally explain the existence of God, creation, the atonement, or the resurrection of the dead—but we accept these doctrines because the Bible teaches them.

### **THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY AMONG THE EARLY CHRISTIAN FATHERS**

Many people who reject the doctrine of the Trinity argue that the doctrine was the product of three centuries of development. Most point to the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 and the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381 as the times in which the doctrine of the Trinity was introduced into the Christian church. However, the conclusion of these two councils merely affirmed that the doctrine of the Trinity was a biblical teaching and that it had been accepted by the church since the first century. This can be clearly shown by examining the writings of the early Christian fathers during the first and second centuries.

Clement, a bishop of Rome, wrote a letter to the church at Corinth in about A.D. 96. Commonly called *Clement's First Letter*, the doctrine of God presented is clearly trinitarian, "Do we not have one God, one Christ, one Spirit of grace which was poured out on us?"—Cyril Richardson, *Early Christian Fathers* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1970), p. 65. Clement makes another trinitarian statement, "For as God lives, and as the Lord Jesus Christ lives and the Holy Spirit (on whom the elect believe and hope) . . ."—*Ibid.*, p. 70.

The trinitarian formula from Matthew 28:19 is quoted twice in *The Didache*, a church manual from A.D. 90-100, in connection with instructions on baptism.—*Ibid.*, p. 174.

Ignatius, bishop of Antioch, wrote several letters (which still exist) to different churches before he was condemned to death for his faith by the Romans no later than A.D. 117. Ignatius affirmed both the humanity and divinity of Christ in his letter to the Ephesians. "The source of your unity and election is genuine suffering which you undergo by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God"—*Ibid.*, pp. 87-88. Later in the same letter, he writes, "There is only one physician—of flesh yet spiritual, born yet unbegotten, God incarnate, genuine life in the midst of death, sprung from Mary as well as God, first subject to suffering then beyond it—Jesus Christ our Lord."—*Ibid.*, p. 90. In his letter to the Romans, Ignatius again refers to Jesus as "our God."—*Ibid.*, p. 103.

Justin, who wrote his *First Apology* about A.D. 155,

acknowledged that "the Son, who being the Word and First-begotten of God is also divine."—*Ibid.*, p. 285.

The trinitarian position is clearly implied in Athenagoras' *Plea to Emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Aurelius* in A.D. 176-77, "The Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son by the unity and power of the Spirit."—*Ibid.*, p. 309. Athenagoras repeats his trinitarian position later in his *Plea*, "We speak of God, of the Son, his Word, and of the Holy Spirit; and we say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are united in power."—*Ibid.*, p. 326.

Irenaeus, a bishop of Lyons in the late second century, wrote selections entitled *Work Against Heresies*. In it, he refers to "Christ Jesus our Lord and God and Savior and King, according to the pleasure of the invisible Father."—*Ibid.*, p. 360.

Tertullian (A.D. 160/70-215/20) explained how it is possible that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one God and that they, however, are different in his treatise *Against Praxeas*.—Justo L. Gonzalez, *A History of Christian Thought*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970), pp. 182-183. Other early Christians affirmed their belief in the doctrine of the Trinity, including Origen (A.D. 185-254) and especially Novatian of Rome (mid-third century) in his *On the Trinity*.—*Ibid.*, pp. 226, 242.

None of these early Christian fathers speculated on the philosophical nature of the Trinity. The doctrine of the Trinity was their way of explaining the biblical truth that God is one and yet the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God.

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