

## The Trinity

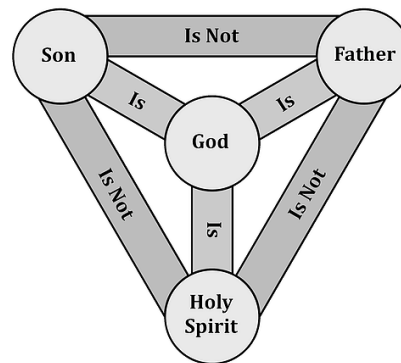
The word *Trinity* is not found in the Bible, but the theological idea most certainly is. This doctrine is at the bedrock level of the Christian faith. While you will not see it in lists of fundamentals of the faith, and it is usually left out of explanations of the gospel, it is crucially important. It demarcates true Christianity from cults derived from the false teaching of Arianism and similar doctrines that deny the uniqueness of God, or the deity of Christ or the Holy Spirit.

### Basic Propositions

The idea of the Trinity is very sophisticated, yet we can explain and understand it to some extent. We should not expect, however, to understand it fully, for our minds are finite and limited by sin. Furthermore, God is infinite and ultimately incomprehensible.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity says that God consists of a simple, undivided and unreplicated essence. At the same time, God exists in three distinct, eternal, co-equal persons who share the single divine essence. This boils down to the following basic propositions, which are pictured in the well-known Trinitarian shield:

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



Our church doctrinal statement says it this way: “We believe that the Godhead eternally exists in three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and that these three are one God; having precisely the same nature, attributes, and perfections, and worthy of precisely the same homage, confidence, and obedience.”

The only way to know or understand the Trinity is to read about it in God’s Word, the Bible. This is a revealed truth that cannot be discovered by the scientific method or reasoning apart from revelation. The doctrine is completely logical and reasonable, but it is not discoverable by mere human means.

### There is Only One God

Under this heading, are really two subheadings: the *uniqueness* of God and the *unity* of God. That is to say, there is one God in the sense of there is no other god in or outside of the universe; and the one God who does exist is a perfect and simple unity of essence—that is, he is a numerical unity of one and not two or three or five separate “essences.” He is not divisible or divided into multiple essences.

As to the *uniqueness* of God, Christian belief is *monotheistic* in that it believes in a single deity as opposed to a plurality of deities or *polytheism*. This is similar to Judaism and Islam which are the other two major monotheistic religions in the world.

The Scriptures teach this very clearly. See, for example, the following texts: 1 Corinthians 8:4; Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29; John 17:3; James 2:19; Isaiah 45:5-6. Certainly there are other false gods in the imaginations of people, or produced by the machinations of demons, but these are not the true God. The

first commandment, recorded in Exodus 20:3, emphasizes that God's people cannot have any other gods in a higher place than him. The reality is there are no other gods because God is unique; yet people imagine other gods or are duped into believing other gods and can subordinate or eliminate the true God relative to these gods. These gods can be of the supernatural variety, or they can be of the natural variety—like self, other people, things, etc.

Regarding the *unity* of God, Christian theologians mean that God has a single essence which permeates the entire Godhead in all three persons, and it does so entirely and eternally. Since the entire essence is shared by all members of the Trinity, they are all equal in essence. The essence is entirely present in all of the Godhead means that god is not a whole divided into three parts; nor does God have three parts that are added up to make up a larger essence. That is, you don't divide God by three and get three sub-persons with zero remainder.

This is related to the doctrine of God's *simplicity*, which says that God cannot be divided because He is a perfect Spirit unity. He is an indivisible sort of thing, but not without the possibility of internal distinctions.

God's unity is eternal. God has always existed this way. He did not morph or spawn from an earlier form into the three-ness form that He is now. There was no time when God was strictly monotheistic and then became Trinitarian (or worse, tri-theistic). The essence of God always existed in its current and eternal trinal form. He will not merge from three back into one at some point in the future.

All of this taxes the human mind beyond its limit. Yet it is the expression of doctrine that the church has expressed for most of its centuries.

There are a number of passages that show the unity of the persons of the Godhead. For example:

The Father and Son are one: John 5:17-18, 10:30, 10:38, 14:10-11, 20, 17:21, 23. The latter verses teach that the Father and the Son dwell in each other, or what is called mutual indwelling.

The Father and the Spirit are one: 1 Cor. 3:16 expresses that the church is the temple of God and the Spirit of God dwells in it. That is pretty close to saying that the Father and Spirit are a unity. A similar extrapolation results from 1 Cor. 2:11 where the Spirit knows perfectly the things of the mind of God.

The Son and the Spirit are one: 1 Peter 1:11 refers to the Spirit of Christ in the OT prophets, predicting the suffering and glory of Christ. Obviously there is a distinction between these two members of the Godhead, yet there is an essential unity between them. The Spirit takes that which belongs to the Son and discloses it to the apostles, and by extension, to His people (John 16:13-14). The fact that the Spirit knows all things is another support for the deity of the Spirit and the perfect unity of the Spirit with the Son, as with the Father (above).

God the Father, the Son and the Spirit are one: Romans 8:9 speaks about the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ when Paul talks about the indwelling Spirit as an evidence of true salvation. Each member of the Trinity indwells the believer (the Spirit, John 14:16; Jesus will come to the believer, 14:18; and the Father and Son will make their home with the believer, 14:23). If we spoke of the indwelling as "possession," the believer would be possessed by the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, but in the unity of the Trinity instead of a three-way struggle or tie or fractional division of labor or power.

## **God is Three Persons**

These persons are each *persons*. By this, we mean that none are energy fields or forces or impersonal "things." Rather, they each have characteristics of personal beings, including mind, will, and emotions. This does not mean that they are humans, which are another sort of personal being, as are angels.

In “Christendom,” it is almost universally accepted that the Father and Son are persons. It would be impossible to argue the Son is impersonal, as He lived as a human on the earth. The Holy Spirit suffers the most common attacks against His personhood.<sup>1</sup> But the fact that He is a person is well established by passages such as Ephesians 4:30 (the Spirit can be grieved), and Acts 5:3 (the Spirit can be told a lie). See also Isaiah 63:10.

### God is Three Equal Persons

Christian belief is *Trinitarian* in that it believes the single deity exists in three persons. This distinguishes it from the strict monotheism of Judaism and Islam, and from tri-theism. See the following passages, among others, which mention all three members of the Triune God: Matthew 3:16-17, 28:18-20; John 14:26, 15:26, 16:13-15; 2 Cor. 13:14.

There are also passages where two of the members of the Trinity appear. The Father and Son (John 1:18, 3:16; John 5:20-22); the Son and the Spirit (Matt. 4:1); the Father and the Spirit (Acts 5:4).

These three persons are each eternal, meaning that none of them began to exist at any point after the others. The Father has always been the Father; the Son has always been the Son; and the Spirit has always been the Spirit. There never was a time when they were not. One did not create the others.

These persons are equal in that they share fully in the divine essence. They are equally worthy of worship. They are equally “divine.” They do not partake of a mere portion of deity, but rather of all of it. This is why the Christian doctrine is a tri-unity = trinity, rather than three gods.

### God is Three Distinct Persons

While sharing a single, undivided divine essence, God is also three unmixed, distinct persons. Their relationship is best described in Scriptural terms, namely by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The terms Father and Son are very commonly misunderstood. They do not denote a superior/inferior or subordination relationship between the first and second members of the Trinity. They also do not denote a birthing or creating relationship from one to the other.

God has seen fit to reveal the personal relationship between the first and second members as a Father/Son relationship. It denotes the essential equality of the two, in that ontologically, the Son is “made of the same stuff” as the Father. Functionally, the Son does the will of the Father, willingly submitting to that will to accomplish the divine purpose.

The theological constructs of eternal generation for the Son and spiration/procession for the Spirit are an area that is so abstract and difficult to understand that I will leave them for other theologians to discuss.

Illustrations fail to capture this reality in a complete accurate way. As good as they are, they will inevitably fall short. For example, the illustration may indicate that God’s essence is divided, or there is a lack of unity, or there are two few “persons.”

### Trinitarian Harmony

This heading is intended to convey the idea that in God’s works, all three members of the Trinity work together in complete harmony. There is no competition or disagreement among them. Even when

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<sup>1</sup> The Watchtower (Jehovah’s Witnesses) teaches that the Spirit is an impersonal force or energy. “The Scriptures make clear that the holy spirit is a force that God uses to accomplish his will.” <https://wol.jw.org/en/wol/d/r1/lp-e/2009721>, accessed December 16, 2018.

one member of the Trinity is the focus of a certain work (like creation), the others are involved as well. Consider the following examples.

With respect to creation and sustenance of the universe, Scripture portrays God the Father as the main actor (Genesis 1:1, Revelation 4:11). But the Son was integrally involved in the creation as well (John 1:3, 10; Col. 1:16-17; 1 Cor. 8:6; Hebrews 1:2-3, 10). Then again, the Spirit of God was also (Genesis 1:2, Psalm 104:30).

The Son is the main actor in the salvation of mankind. But the Father planned it and worked in the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:23-24). See also Galatians 4:4-6. There, the apostle informs us that God sent His Son, and God sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. God is called “redeemer” in Isaiah 63:16 and He did redeem Israel from Egypt (Exodus 6:6; 1 Chron. 17:21). The Spirit of God is very active in the redemption of each and every soul who comes to God through Christ (Titus 3:5-6), but also in the very offering of Christ (Hebrews 9:14) and His resurrection (Romans 8:11).

The Holy Spirit is often thought of as the member of the Trinity most involved in the Christian’s sanctification because He indwells the believer (1 Cor. 6:19-20, 1 Peter 1:2). But this is also the will and action of the Father (1 Thess. 4:3, 5:23, Jude 1), for which Jesus prayed to the Father (John 17:17).

We see another marvelous harmony of the Triune God regarding the Christian’s prayer. Jesus teaches us to pray to the Father in the name of Christ (John 16:23). At the same time, the Holy Spirit makes intercession for God’s people when they pray, doing so by communicating with the God according to the Father’s will (Romans 8:26).

Similar harmonious operations of the Triune God are seen throughout God’s work in the world, in the church, in the future, etc.

### **Old Testament Evidence**

The “son” passages in the Psalms are not as strong as some have believed, so I don’t rely upon them. Why is this? A text like Psalm 2:2 indicates that God’s Son will be king. The sonship idea is connected with kingship (Psalm 89:27) instead of an idea of eternal generation or Trinity. Also, the idea is connected to the resurrection (Acts 13:33) in that if the Son is to be a divine-human king, He had to be raised from the dead to do so.

Despite this, there is still plenty of other OT support for a plurality that is consistent with the Trinity, some of which is almost explicit as to the “Threeness” of God. First there are plural grammatical forms when God refers to Himself. For examples: Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:7. These could be intended as “majestic plurals” but it doesn’t seem likely.

Second, there is a text in Psalm 45:6-7 which says:

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...

Therefore God, your God has anointed you...

In this text, the speaker is speaking to God regarding his throne, but then says that God, the God of this God, has anointed him. There are two persons that the writer considers as God. Hebrews 1:5 identifies God in the first line as the Son.

Third, there is the most often quoted portion of the OT, Psalm 110:1:

The LORD says to my Lord: “Sit at My right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”

Here again, there are two lords, one speaking to the other. In the New Testament, Jesus says this refers to the Messiah, Son of David, who is the Lord of David (Matthew 22:41-46).

Fourth, in each of the above texts where there is a New Testament quotation, we should realize that it is the Holy Spirit who inspired the text of Scripture, moving the authors to write this information (see 2 Samuel 23:1-2). So we have the third person of the Trinity speaking through the human authors about the second and first persons of the Trinity.

Fifth, another OT passage that mentions three divine persons is Isaiah 61:1-2, a passage that is about the Messiah, upon whom is the Spirit and whom the Lord has sent to bring good news. Luke 4:17-21 reveals that the first part of this passage was fulfilled at the first coming of Christ. A similar text is found in Isaiah 48:16.

Finally, the texts that describe the Angel of the LORD (Yahweh) are understood by many conservative interpreters, including this one, as manifestations of the Son of God prior to his incarnation. Visions like those in Daniel 10:5-6 indicate a glorious being who seems to be differentiated from a mere created angel. Zechariah 1:12-13 seems to indicate parity between the Angel and God the Father. This Angel made promises as if He were God; received sacrifices (Judges 6:21, 13:15-20); and was called God (Judges 13:22).

The above is some of the evidence for plurality in the Godhead. What about the evidence for unity? That is easier to come by. We turn to a single passage, the *Shema*, for it. The text is Deuteronomy 6:4:

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

The “one” is the common Hebrew word for one. So how can there be plurality in such a unity? In Genesis 2:24, a man and wife are joined together as “one” flesh (same Hebrew word). There is both unity and plurality in the unit of marriage. It would not be unreasonable to expect that there is an even higher unity in the Godhead, after which marriage is patterned.

We should pause to note the caution that without the New Testament, it is not possible to clearly see the doctrine of the Trinity. The so-called “germ” of the Trinity is present. The OT is compatible with Trinitarianism. But it is highly doubtful if the OT believer saw God as triune as we do. Perhaps the most that can be said is that the Trinitarianism is compatible with the OT, and the OT is preparatory for a fuller revelation of the Godhead, as mankind was ready to receive it.

## New Testament Evidence

The passage in 1 John 5:7-8 is most certainly *not* a good evidence to use in support of the Trinity. Space does not permit a full examination of this text, but suffice to say that the latter half of verse 7 and most of verse 8 are found in only a few very late Greek manuscripts. Therefore, I conclude that they are a spurious addition to the Greek text and cannot be used to support the doctrine of the Trinity.

But again, there are many other NT texts that can be assembled to show that God has to be Triune. First, there are the Triune occurrences and formulas, such as in Matthew 3:16-17, 28:18-20, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Romans 8:9 and 1 Peter 1:1-2. There are many verses that refer to two persons of the deity, among them Romans 5:5, 16:20, Phil. 2:1, Jude 21, and 2 Peter 1:17.

Second, the association of each of the members of the Trinity with the name God demonstrates this conclusion. Consider: the Spirit of God (Matt. 3:16, a total of a dozen times); the Son of God (Matt. 4:3, and about 40 other times); and God the Father (John 6:27, and at least 50 other times when God and Father are closely associated).

Third, the members of the Trinity are demonstrated to share deity through the attributes that only deity can share. For example, the Spirit knows the thoughts of God (1 Cor. 2:11), which are impossible for humans to know unless those thoughts are revealed. Jesus also demonstrated such omniscience.

## The Deity of Jesus Christ

There is very little debate about the deity of God in general, or God the Father. However, when it comes to the deity of the other members of the Trinity, there has been much debate over the centuries. A fuller treatment will be taken up in the chapters that cover Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, but some Scriptural proofs will be offered in this and the following section.

First, there are several explicit statements about the deity of Christ. For example: Christ is the eternally blessed God (Romans 9:5); Jesus Christ...is the true God (1 John 5:20); Jesus and the Father are one (John 10:30); Thomas acknowledged Jesus as his Lord and God (John 20:28). We can add to this strong expressions of the equality of the Son with the Father in the first chapters of John, Hebrews and Colossians. In the birth narrative, we are told that Jesus is Immanuel, which is translated "God with us" (Matthew 1:23).

Second, there are textual connections that prove the same. For example, compare Isa 6:1-10 with John 12:41. John says that Isaiah spoke of "his glory" which refers to "him" in John 12:37, which refers to Jesus Christ. In Isaiah 6, this is clearly Jehovah. This makes sense, for Jesus means "Jehovah saves" (Matthew 1:21). John is affirming that Jesus is Jehovah of the Old Testament, making clear the deity of Jesus Christ.

Third, there are the "I am" statements in John's gospel and elsewhere. There are a number of them that are connected to larger statements like, "I am the bread of life," but there are a couple that are explicit in their likeness to Exodus 3:14. One is John 8:58, and another John 13:19.

Fourth, there are implicit linkages that place the Father and Son on an equal plane. This is often seen in the introductions of Paul's letters, where he addresses the church "in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" or "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God" or "grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." It is unthinkable for a Jew in Judaism to elevate Jesus like this. The understanding of this truth about Jesus was one of the key things that came upon Paul at his conversion.

Fifth, the grammatical construction known as the Granville-Sharp construction is present in a couple of very strong texts. Consider them:

Titus 2:13 - "Looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ."

2 Peter 1:1 - Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have received a faith of the same kind as ours, by the righteousness of our God and Savior, Jesus Christ:

Granville Sharp (1735-1813) was a grammarian who published a book titled *Remarks on the Definitive Article in the Greek Text of the New Testament, Containing Many New Proofs of the Divinity of Christ, from Passages Which Are Wrongly Translated in the Common English Version*.

His most famous rule, now named for him, boils down to the following: when the Greek text has an article ("the," often left untranslated in English) followed by a noun form, then the copulative ("and"), and then another noun form, and when both noun forms are in the same case, are personal, are singular, and not proper names, then the nouns refer to the same person. The structure can be interrupted by modifiers without changing the result.

For example, see **Rev. 1:9**, which says "I John, your **brother** and **companion** in **tribulation** and in the **kingdom**..." The first phrase with "brother" and "companion" fits the rules of Granville Sharp. Those words both refer to John. But the second phrase with "tribulation" and "kingdom" do NOT fit the rules, because they are not "personal" nouns. These words obviously refer to different things.

Sharp criticizes the common English version, the King James Version, because it wrongly translates this Greek. For example, Titus 2:13 in KJV reads this way: “Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ.” The way this is translated suggests the appearing of two persons; in fact, there is only one person in view—Jesus Christ, who is called God. The same problem appears in the KJV at 2 Peter 1:1.

There are about 82 constructions in the Greek NT which fit this pattern. There are absolutely no exceptions to Sharp's rule in the New Testament. Further, there are no exceptions to the rule in Greek Christian literature for the 1000 years that one researcher investigated, with thousands of such constructions present in the literature.<sup>2</sup>

The two verses under consideration fit Sharp's rule and are therefore solid and explicit affirmations of the deity of Christ. Paul and Peter both explicitly call Jesus "God."

Finally, the response of the audience to Jesus' claims shows that they believed that he was claiming to be God. See, for example, John 5:18 and 10:31-33.

### **The Eternal Sonship of Christ**

One of the most misunderstood ideas in all of Scripture is that of the sonship of Christ. In what sense or what is Christ the “Son” of God? It is simplistically supposed that the term has to do with Christ's origin. The word is thought to show how Christ is subordinate to the Father, as an offspring is to a parent. Yet the entire notion of “son” in the Bible is rich with meaning that is not readily understood by assuming that the human relationship analogy fully explains the meaning of the term. Because this area of the Trinity is a common point of attack for cults, it behooves us to give significant thought in this area.

We must first establish in our minds that when the Bible uses the term *son* to refer to the Son of God, it is using the term in some kind of metaphorical way. This has to be the case, because we know some basic facts: God is not a man (Numbers 23:19); God does not and did not have a wife; God did not procreate an offspring which is another little deity; the Son of God did not have a beginning (Colossians 1:17); and the Son is not a mere man (see the section immediately above).

Some of those points may require elaboration. That God did not have a wife may confuse some Bible readers or those from other faith traditions. Jeremiah 3:20 is one of many passages that suggest that God's “wife” was Israel, but that she played the harlot against Him. This is obviously a figurative use of terms to express a close *relationship* between God and the nation of Israel, since a nation is not a literal wife. This reminds us to be careful about reading a word too literally, lest we miss the idea it is meant by its author to convey. Some have suggested that Mary was the wife of God or that the Holy Spirit was Mary's husband. This is simply a carnal notion. It was a miracle of the Spirit coming over Mary to conceive a child (Matthew 1:20, Luke 1:31), not a procreative act between a deity and a female human. Such a notion is the stuff of pagan mythologies. Furthermore, the Son was before Mary and is her creator. He thus cannot be an offspring of her as far as His deity is concerned.

By this point, we should understand that because *son* is used metaphorically, it does not refer to origin, generation, or subordination as in human procreation. It must refer to something else. But what? There are many hundreds of uses of the word and idea of *son* in the Scriptures, and most of them refer

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<sup>2</sup> Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, Zondervan, 1996, pp. 270-277. Please be careful in your use of this rule since it has often been misunderstood.

to a son born of a father and mother. But if we constrain ourselves to an examination of those uses that are metaphorical or non-literal in sense, we find some interesting information.<sup>3</sup>

According to S. Herbert Bess, there are four major non-literal uses of *son* in the Hebrew Bible, and these uses carry over into the New Testament.<sup>4</sup> They are:

1. A “son of” shows membership in a profession or guild. Examples include the sons of the prophets (1 Kings 20:35, 2 Kings 2:3-15, 2 Kings 4:1, 38, and in chapters 5, 6, and 9 also). Notice Amos 7:14 where Amos says that he was not a prophet, nor the son of a prophet. The NET translation actually makes this non-literal meaning part of its translation when it renders the text as “I am not a prophet by profession.” In this case, a man could have been called by God to be a prophet, yet not be the physical offspring of a prophet. He may have joined the “guild” late in his growing-up years. He still would be then a “son of the prophets” because he was a prophet-type person. There were also “sons of oil” (Zech. 4:14), “son of perfumer” (Nehemiah 3:8), “son of goldsmiths” (Nehemiah 3:31), “sons of gate-keepers” (Ezra 2:42), and “sons of the troop” (2 Chron. 25:13). In these latter examples, we should note two things. First, the Biblical text often does not translate “son of” literally in any translation. The non-literal use is so well understood that not even literal translations like the NASB or ESV retain the “son of” in the English. Second, as is often the case in various cultures, the son would follow in the father’s footsteps and so a trade could be carried on for generations in the same family. This could be of necessity, but it also may be somewhat genetic in that inherent skills are often passed down from generation to generation. See, for example, Genesis 4:20-22 where the Bible identifies three men who were the “father of” those who had certain notable skills.

2. A “son of” can show a state or condition. Those who are sons of exile, or sons of a foreign country, sons of affliction, sons of death, are people who are in a condition of exile, affliction, death, etc. See Proverbs 31:5, for example, where again the translations do not render the “son of” prior to the word “afflicted,” but it is present in the Hebrew text.

3. “Son of” can show certain character. In the Old Testament, we read of sons of valor, sons of the wise, sons of rebellion, sons of wickedness, son of murder, sons of foolishness, son of no name, son of smiting, sons of worthlessness, and sons of tumult (1 Sam. 14:52, Isa. 19:11, Num. 17:10, Psalm 89:22, 2 Kings 6:32, Job 30:8, Deut. 25:2, 1 Samuel 25:17, Jer. 48:45). Note that these terms really have nothing to do with the character of the mothers or fathers of such people. The sons of rebels, for example, may have been born to rebellious-type parents, or not. In the New Testament, there is the son of perdition (Judas Iscariot, John 17:12; and the Antichrist, 2 Thess. 2:3), son of consolation (Barnabas, Acts 4:36), sons of thunder (James and John, Mark 3:17), sons of peace (Luke 10:6), sons of Abraham who share the faith of Abraham (Gal. 3:7), and sons of disobedience (Eph. 2:2).

4. “Son of” can be used to explain that someone possesses a certain nature. We return to a verse mentioned above, Numbers 23:19, which says not only that God is not a man, but that he is neither the “son of man.” This means that he does not have the qualities or nature of a man. Ezekiel, on the other hand, does have those qualities, and is often addressed by God as “son of man.” Jesus used the same appellation for himself, indicating that he *does* share in the qualities of humanity. “Son of man” is poetically parallel (synonymous parallelism) in Psalm 8:4 to “man,” demonstrating that the phrases mean basically the same thing. See also Psalm 80:17, Job 25:6 in this same connection. If “son of man”

<sup>3</sup> For the following material in this section, I am indebted to S. Herbert Bess, “The Term ‘Son of God’ in the Light of Old Testament Idiom” in *Grace Journal*, Spring 1965, vol. 6, no. 2, pp. 16-23.

<sup>4</sup> Bess points out that though the language of the New Testament is different, many Hebrew or Semitic thought patterns are carried over and translated into the new language. Such is the case with the word “son.”



means sharing in the qualities of humanity, then should we not conclude that “son of God” refers to a person who shares in the qualities of deity?

Although the last category is most directly applicable to the meaning of “Son of God,” the third category is somewhat overlapping. The Son possesses the nature of God, and has the character of God.

The point of all this is to show that the Bible is chock full of non-literal uses of the word “son,” and these usages must inform our understanding of how God uses that term to describe His Son to us. He is saying that the Son is of like nature and character to Himself.

This understanding is confirmed when we examine how Christ’s enemies considered him. A quick examination of John 5:17-18 makes the point clear. Jesus had referred to God as his Father. The Jews understood this to mean that he was declaring himself to be equal with God. He identifies himself similarly in John 10:28-36 and adds there that he is one with the Father. The Jews therefore wished to put Christ to death because he was making himself out to be God. The leaders of Israel understood properly the term “son of God.” They hated him for it and eventually put him to death because of it (John 19:7, Luke 22:70). Believers in Christ share their understanding, but instead love Christ because of it and join in following Him because He gives eternal life.

Bess moves next to consider three terms that are misunderstood. The first is *firstborn*. The Jehovah’s Witness cult takes this in a super literal fashion and teaches that Christ was “born first,” and this supports their subordination of the Son to the Father. But Bess demonstrates conclusively that this term refers to rank, not origin. Here are the five uses of the term: Romans 8:29, Col. 1:15, and 18, Hebrews 1:6, and Rev. 1:5. As such, it does not refer to his being born first in the birth order. Rather, it refers to him ranking over all of creation and being heir of all things. This is like the Old Testament firstborn son, who *was* usually born first in birth order, and received a double portion of the inheritance. But even the birth order is not determinative here. Joseph received a double portion and was declared to be the firstborn, even though he was born second to last (1 Chronicles 5:1-2, Genesis 49:3). Of Joseph’s two boys, their grandfather adopted them as his own, but made the younger first in rank over the older (Gen 48:13-20). Jacob was born second but was firstborn in rank over Esau (Gen. 27). Christ is indeed firstborn—in the sense that he is “over all creation” (Col. 1:15). He cannot be firstborn “of” all creation in the sense of born first in birth order, because He is the one who created anything that was created (John 1:1-3).

We should note that in Colossians 1:18, Christ is called firstborn from the dead. Indeed he holds rank over all others raised from the dead, but this could also refer to Christ as being the first in birth order in the new creation, as in firstfruits from the grave (1 Cor. 15:20, 23). The other “firstborn” verses mentioned above can fit in either of these two categories without any damage to the deity of Christ or his eternal sonship.

The second misunderstood word is translated “only begotten.” It is used of sons who are the only child of their parents. For example, the widow of Nain had an only son who had died (Luke 7:12). Jairus had an only daughter (Luke 8:42). See also Luke 9:38. Consider Abraham. He had a son before Isaac, yet God refers to Isaac as the only son of Abraham (Genesis 22:2, Hebrews 11:17). Clearly in this case, “only begotten” does not necessarily mean “only one born.” It must mean that Abraham’s son Isaac was somehow unique; and indeed he was, for he was the son of the promise, through whom the Messiah would come and, before that, the one from whom the blessed nation would arise. So, again if the term is used non-literally as it is with Jesus, then it refers to status and not “being the only one born.” The cults emphasize the “born” part, but the point of the word is to emphasize the “only” or “unique” aspect.

The third misunderstood word is “begotten.” When used in the context of Christ, who did not have a natural origin through conception and birth, we are forced to understand it differently. And this is no stretch. The key passage in Psalm 2:7 refers to Christ as “my son; this day I have begotten you.” The day of his begetting was not some time in eternity past. Rather, it was the same as the day of his coronation as king of the world. The following verse is based on this declaration of sonship in that it refers to Christ’s inheritance (as son) of the world that will come under his rule. It is evident that on this special day, God is *declaring* the sonship of Christ, not establishing or creating the sonship. This declaration is powerful, open, and accompanied by proof that this King is God-like in his qualities. He is omnipotent (2:9) and worthy of homage (2:11-12). The New Testament uses this verse to refer to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 13:33-34). It therefore cannot be a reference to a doctrine of eternal generation or a reference to some origination point at the beginning of history. This in turn is associated with Romans 1:3-4 and the declaration of the sonship of Christ. He was so designated because He was in fact the Son of God.

We should note also that the Father/Son terminology has another Old Testament background. In 2 Samuel 7:14 in the Davidic Covenant, God says that the Davidic king will be a “son” to him, and that He Himself will be a Father to that king. Psalm 89:26-27 reflects the same truth. This terminology is regal in nature. The Son of God is the one fit to be King over all the earth, and that he shall be.

Finally, we must note that the sonship of Christ in his relationship to God is *eternal*. The meaning of *son* should make clear that there is no notion of a time when sonship began. Christ was not adopted as son, nor became son at the incarnation. Nor did he even become son at the resurrection. He simply was declared to be such by the Holy Spirit (Romans 1:3). Christ has always been the son of God, and will always be the son of God. He shares completely in the attributes of deity.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Deity of the Holy Spirit**

There are several explicit statements as to the deity of the Spirit. 2 Cor. 3:17-18 is one of them in which the apostle Paul attributes the transforming work of the Spirit in sanctification to “the Lord, the Spirit.”

There are also implicit acknowledgements of the deity of the Spirit. The most commonly cited are Acts 5:3-4 and Ephesians 4:30. Ananias and Sapphira lied to the Holy Spirit, which was the same as lying to God. Paul expresses by way of prohibition that it is possible for believers to grieve the Holy Spirit who seals us until the day of redemption. An impersonal being cannot be grieved, and it takes God Himself to seal the believer in order to mark the believer and preserve for final salvation.

Another somewhat indirect proof the deity of the Spirit is in 1 Cor. 3:16 in which the Spirit of God dwells in the church, and the church is God’s temple. If it is God’s temple, then God is indwelling the church, and He does so by His Spirit.

Textual connections can be extended from the prior section. We can connect Acts 28:25-27 with Isaiah 6 and John 12. In Acts 28, Luke writes that the Holy Spirit spoke through Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 6. Yet, it was the voice of the Lord that was speaking (Isaiah 6:8). So the Spirit spoke authoritatively through the prophet Isaiah those words of the Lord. Thus the deity of the Holy Spirit is also affirmed.

### **Credal Statements**

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<sup>5</sup> The interested reader is referred to a short book on this subject: George W. Zeller and Renald E. Showers, *The Eternal Sonship of Christ: A Timely Defense of this Vital Biblical Doctrine*. Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2007.

Statements written after the Scriptures were completed, while not inspired, can be very helpful in our understanding of various doctrines, including the Christian teaching about the Trinity. This is because faithful Christian theologians worked diligently to express various doctrines in accurate and succinct ways.

The Athanasian Creed says, in part: “We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance.”

The creed crafted by the first council at Constantinople (381 AD, an expansion of the 325 Nicene Creed) read like this about the Spirit:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds* (*æons*), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;

by whom all things were made.

The part about the Spirit reads this way:

And in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.

### Misused Verses

A number of verses are used as supposed proof texts that Jesus is not divine, and by extension, that the Trinity cannot be a true Biblical doctrine. We shall examine some of these in this section.

Matthew 24:36 (parallels in Mark 13:32 and Luke 18:19) is the passage where Jesus himself indicates that he does not know the day or the hour of His own coming back to the earth. Since he is not omniscient, it is claimed, he cannot be God. This seems to be a formidable argument, yet it ignores a key aspect of the personality of Jesus Christ, that is that he has two natures, hypostatically united into a single person. He is both perfectly God, and perfectly man. He has a divine nature, and a human nature. Though this divine-human union is more fully addressed in the section on Christology, it is certainly feasible to understand that not all of the infinite knowledge of the divine Logos was passed through to the human nature and human consciousness of Jesus. Although being fully God, Jesus was limited somehow in his exercise of divine attributes. The limitations were due to his voluntarily veiling his glory in bodily form, and to a voluntary submission to the will of the Father. Very frequently, though, he did have some kind of access in his human nature to the infinite attributes of the Logos. For example, he could know people’s thoughts; he could forgive sins; he could work miracles over nature.

In Mark 10:18, the context is that a rich man approaches Jesus and calls him “good.” Jesus tells the rich young ruler that there is no one good, that is, except God. This supposedly puts distance between Jesus and God. Yet, in the account, Jesus does not say that he is *not* equal to God, or that he is *not* good. The question is wrongly interpreted as, “Why do you call me good? I’m not good, because only God is good.” The question is rightly interpreted as, “Why do you call me good? Since there is only one truly good being, are you saying that I am equal to Him?” If in fact the rich man is correct that Jesus is good, there are some serious implications to that which he needs to deal with in his life. Namely, he needs to get into a right orientation or relationship to this good Lord.

Luke 2:52 says that Jesus grew in four areas: wisdom, stature, favor with God, and favor with men. The second (stature) and the fourth (favor with men) do not cause any problem with the deity of Christ

or the Trinity. These relate to his humanity starting out in the body of a baby and increasing in size. As he lived, his reputation increased as well. Speaking still from the human nature side of Christ, the other two aspects are not any more difficult. Jesus increased in wisdom as a human as he learned by experience (apart from sin) how human life works and how to actually live for God in the context in which he was. As he did this, like any man who grows in wisdom, he pleased His heavenly Father. Remember that Jesus took on human nature as an addition to what he already was. It was not a subtraction from what he was, though it may have *appeared* to be so in the sense that his fully glorious deity was not on display. If this were not the case, Jesus could not have experienced a basically normal life. He would have been so odd as a child that he would have been entirely out of place.

John 5:19 suggests to the unbelieving reader that Jesus is unable to do certain things (“he can do nothing of Himself”). But the text does not say that exactly. Instead, Jesus says of himself that he can do nothing “by himself” (NIV) or “on his own initiative” (NET). He does what he does in complete concord with God the Father. This makes perfect sense given what is said above about the total harmony in all the works of the Trinity. In verse 30, the idea is similar. In both of these words spoken by Christ, we recognize that Jesus has willingly subordinated himself to the will of his Father. This does not mean he is less *ontologically* than his father. It simply means that in the Trinitarian harmony, three perfectly united persons in their one essence have well-defined roles. This is a perfect example for mankind, for each of us must learn to please not ourselves, but God, and to do so by doing those things that are in agreement with the will of the Father. We must also recognize that the last part of the verse is actually a powerful argument for the deity of Christ. Notice that it says that what the Father does, the Son also does in like manner. Who in the world can do what the Father does? Unless that one is co-equal with the Father, it would be impossible for him to do such things.

The last phrase of John 14:28 supposedly support the notion that Jesus is lesser than the Father. Certainly at the time then present, in terms of the incarnation, the Father is greater in glory. Otherwise, the humiliation of the incarnation would mean nothing. As it stood, the glory of Christ was clothed in human flesh and he was made a little lower than the angels (Hebrews 2:7, 9). In returning to the Father, Jesus would be exalted by returning to the state of open glory that he had with the Father before the world was (John 17:5), yet this time with a glorified human body added to the deity of His own person. In the context, Jesus had told the disciples that if anyone had seen Christ had in fact seen the Father, and that there was a mutual indwelling of the Son and the Father (14:9, 10-11). This was a bold declaration of the equality of the Son and the Father.

John 10:30 is often cited in support of the unity of the Trinity. In reply, an opponent may cite John 17:11 in which the Lord prays that his disciples would “be one even as we are one.” In other words, those who oppose suggest, the oneness of John 10:30 between Father and Son is merely a oneness like believers have with the Father. Since they are not united in some odd Triune fashion, therefore Jesus is not united to the Father that way. In response, it should be noted that the Greek word “just as” can indicate comparison or similarity. It is unnatural to take it to mean “in exactly the same way.” For example, referring back to John 20:21 where Jesus said, “As the Father has sent Me, I also send you.” Obviously the Son was sent forth from heaven, but believers are not. The Son was far more than a human being, but believers are only human beings. The point is that there is a similarity of oneness. The strong unity that is shared between the members of the Trinity is a model for the strong unity that should be shared among believers, at the level and in the way that they can be united. Obviously that is a “lesser unity” than found in the Trinity, but it is a similar and real unity nonetheless.

But (still in connection to John 17:11), even if Jesus is saying his oneness with the Father is a mirror of the oneness of all believers' with the Father, the opponent of the deity of Christ would simply be missing another connection to the *humanity* of Jesus, namely that Jesus in his humanity is one with the Father very similarly to how believers are one with the Father. Of course, Jesus' oneness with the Father is *more* than that, but it is at least that.

John 20:17 certainly teaches a distinction between Father and Son. The Son is going to ascend to the Father. He says he is going to ascend "to My God and your God." Here again it seems that he makes the relationship between himself and his Father analogous to the relationship between believers and the Father. "My God" indicates subordination to the Father—which *is true* for Jesus in respect to his humanity as indicated above. But such a subordination is not true of the divine Logos, the second person of the Trinity, who was perfectly united with human nature in the one person of Christ. In fact, this Logos is called "God" in Hebrews 1:8-9 and Psalm 45:6-7.

Much of the confusion surrounding these verses is resolved when one has a proper understanding of the incarnation, in which Christ took on human flesh and of necessity existed for a time in a "lower state" than the glorious existence He had with the Father before incarnation, or before the world was (Hebrews 2:7-8 and Psalm 8:5). Since Christ is both human and divine (and he still is), there is of necessity a mysterious relationship between the divine and human in his person and how that connects to the Trinity. Only our God could conceive of, much less implement, such a bold intrusion of the supernatural into the natural realm!

One principle we are learning is that distinction between the persons of the Father and Son cannot be used as a lever against the equality of their essence. In other words, mere distinction is not sufficient to disprove the Trinity or the deity of Christ. If there were a true ontological subordination where the Son was of lesser essence than the Father at all times, then the opponent would have a point. But the mere fact of the incarnation and the resultant humbling of the Son does not require us to abandon the deity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity.

### **Errors Regarding the Trinity**

It seems as if the more important a doctrine, the more heresies there will be regarding it. The Trinity is at the top of the list, for if a person worships the wrong God, there can be no true salvation. It is a cruel and crafty trick of the Devil to twist people's beliefs about God.

*Partialism* is any view which divides the essence of God between the members of the Trinity, such that none are fully God, but only partially God. In contrast, each member of the Triune God is "very God of very God."

*Arianism* teaches that Christ is not deity, but that he was created by God and was not eternal nor shared the essence of the Father. He is more than a mere human, however.

*Modalism* teaches that God exists as a unitary God who appears or interacts with the world in one of three modes—Father, Son, and Spirit. These are three "faces" of God or three "offices." This is like a man who is at the same time a son, a father, and a husband, and in his interactions with others (say his father, his children, and his wife) is operating in one of those offices. According to modalism, God appears either as Father, as Son, or as Spirit.

*Oneness Pentecostalism* or the "Jesus only" view states that God is one divine being who manifests himself in various ways. It is a modern variation of the error of *modalism*. They hold other aberrant views, such as that water baptism is necessary for salvation, and that baptism in the Spirit is necessary, and is evidenced by speaking in tongues.

*Monarchianism* (or *modalistic Monarchianism*) is basically the same as modalism described above. A person who holds it would believe the deity of Christ, but would proclaim that God is one, as in oneness Pentecostalism or “Jesus only” theology. These believers baptize in the name of Jesus only and believe that Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit are all different names for the same unitary being.

*Sabellianism* is another word for modalism, used particularly in the eastern church tradition. It teaches that the Father, Son and Spirit are three different modes or aspects of God. It is opposed to the Trinitarian view that we have explained in these pages. This view holds Jesus to be divine, but there is not a plurality of persons in the Godhead.

*Patricianism* is the same as Sabellianism but is the more common term in the western church tradition. According to this view, the Father actually suffered on the cross.

*Adoptionism* (or *dynamic Monarchianism*) is also non-trinitarian and teaches that Jesus became God’s Son by adoption. The timing of this adoption varies. It could be at the baptism, resurrection, or ascension of Jesus. Since the adoption, Jesus is divine, but not like the Father.

*Unitarianism* says that God is a single person, not Triune. *Unitarian universalists* are a subset of this larger body of pseudo-Christian believers who believe that all persons will be saved in the end. They are extremely liberal in their theology.

*Polytheism* is the view that there are multiple gods. Whether in hierarchy or equality, or over different aspects of life or their own universes these views all share the idea that there are multiple beings that have divine power. The Scriptures are clear there is only one (Isaiah 44:6). Mormonism is guilty of a crafty form of polytheism, because though they believe in it, they try to make their doctrine look very much like Christian doctrine to the uninformed. But their doctrine is clearly polytheistic.<sup>6</sup>

### Advanced Terminology

If you read about this area of theology in more depth, you will encounter a number of Latin or Greek terms that will likely be hard for you to grasp.

*Ousia* is best translated as essence or substance. It is used to refer to the *one God* who exists in three persons: three *hypostases* in one *ousia*. The *ousia* is the general, the *hypostasis* is the particular.

*Homoousios* means “of one (or the same) substance,” a term which is used in the Nicene and Constantinopolitan creeds to refer to the fact that Christ is of the same substance as God the Father. The prefix *homo-* reminds us of the word *homogeneous*, of the same kind or alike.

*Hypostasis* means a subsistence or person. The Trinity is one God who exists as three hypostases or persons. We say that that Jesus Christ is one person who is the *hypostatic* union of the divine and

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<sup>6</sup> For example, “Joseph Smith, Mormonism’s founder, taught the doctrine of a “plurality of gods”—polytheism—as the bedrock belief of his church. He developed this doctrine over a period of years to reflect his belief that not only are there many gods, but they once were mortal men who had developed in righteousness until they had learned enough and merited godhood.” <https://www.catholic.com/tract/the-gods-of-the-mormon-church>.

See also [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormon\\_cosmology](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mormon_cosmology): “In Mormonism, the concept of divinity centers around an idea of “exaltation” and “eternal progression”: mortals themselves may become gods and goddesses in the afterlife, be rulers of their own heavenly kingdoms, have spirit children, and increase in power and glory forever. Mormons understand that there are many gods and goddesses in the cosmos, including a Heavenly Mother.”

Also, <https://www.lds.org/topics/mother-in-heaven?lang=eng>, “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches that all human beings, male and female, are beloved spirit children of heavenly parents, a Heavenly Father and a Heavenly Mother. This understanding is rooted in scriptural and prophetic teachings about the nature of God, our relationship to Deity, and the godly potential of men and women. The doctrine of a Heavenly Mother is a cherished and distinctive belief among Latter-day Saints.” All sites accessed 2/3/2019.

human into a single person. He possesses both divine and human natures, not mixed, alloyed, or fused, but existing in the single person.