

Trinity

The aim of this article

Why we believe there is “One God in three Persons” and how we understand it is what we want to write about in the following essay. In connection with a summary of the discussions about God’s triune nature of the first three centuries AD, we want to explain what we believe based on the New Testament.

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⚓ **1 Monotheism and Trinitarian Discussions of the First Three Centuries AD**

In Jesus God came very near to us and revealed himself as the triune God. **The Bible is the basis of the teaching about the Trinity**, although this term is not used. Building on the foundation of the monotheism of the Old Testament, the New Testament speaks about God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit and we can find statements about the relationships within God among the three divine persons.

In an effort to make the being of God and Jesus comprehensible, **Christian theology developed the concept of personhood**. The original understanding of the term “person” was not material, nor was it understood as describing an autonomous subject. Characteristic of a person is the ability to have relationships, to love and to communicate.

The revelation of God’s triune nature is a process in the history of salvation. In the time of the Old Testament God laid the foundation for the right concept of his nature. He revealed himself as the only God and throughout the whole Old Testament we find his exhortation to strongly hold on to **Monotheism**.

Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. (*Deuteronomy 6:4-5*)

Thus says the Lord, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the Lord of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god. Who is like me? Let him proclaim it. Let him declare and set it before me, since I appointed an ancient people. Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen. Fear not, nor be afraid; have I not told you from of old and declared it? And you are my witnesses! Is there a God besides me? There is no Rock; I know not any.” (*Isaiah 44:6-8*)

The New Testament revelation of God’s nature does not change anything here; **monotheism is an indisputable basis for the right understanding of the Trinity**.

During the Trinitarian discussions of the first centuries the right belief had to be defended against **different attempts to falsely explain God’s nature**

in a way that is comprehensible for our human minds.

Monarchianism tried to maintain the unity and uniqueness of God by explaining the three divine persons as three modes, three different ways in which the one-personal God appeared. Monarchianism, therefore, was called also *Modalism*. Another name for this teaching was *Patripassianism*. The person who coined this term certainly wanted to show the consequence of this teaching: it would mean to believe that God the Father suffered and died on the cross, which is an absurdity when believing in a God who is almighty and eternal. The chief-representatives of this teaching were Noetus from Smyrna and Praxeas in the 2nd century AD and Sabellius in the 3rd century AD (therefore called also *Sabellianism*.)

So it became necessary to explain the real difference between Father, Son and Holy Spirit more deeply.

Subordinationism tried to explain the Trinity as a hierarchical order: God the Father stands above all as one who is inaccessible. A well-known proponent of this teaching was Origen in the first half of the 3rd century AD. Subordinationism said that the Son and the Spirit are divine in nature but clearly subordinated to the Father. Arius developed this teaching further at the end of the 3rd and the beginning of the 4th century AD. *Arianism* taught that in the beginning the Son was created by the Father and then together with the Father created the world. The consequence would be that the Son is a created being and not God. A further proponent of this teaching was Eusebius from Nicomedia.

The Council of Nicaea, 325 AD dealt with this matter and declared that Father and Son are of the same nature (Greek: *homoousion to patri*). The Council of Constantinople, 381 AD confirmed the formulations of Nicaea and declared that the Holy Spirit is also of the same nature as Father and Son.

⚓ 2 About the Divine Nature of Jesus

The New Testament teaches that **Jesus is of divine nature, completely one and yet distinguished from the Father.**

...from their race (the Israelites), according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed for ever. Amen. (*Romans 9:5*)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. (*John 1:1-3*)

No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (*John 1:18*)

In these verses we find essential statements for our topic. Here it speaks about the eternal existence and divinity of the second divine person, the Son. **The "Word"** (Greek: *logos*) is the term John used for the Son. He writes that the Word **was God** and was **with God**, which expresses on the one hand the **equality of nature** and on the other hand the **difference between the persons**.

In Jesus the Word became human. Neither the Father nor the Spirit became human but the Son, the One begotten of the Father, who has his eternal proceeding in the Father and since he is begotten, has the same nature as the Father. Different variations of verse 18 exist in different manuscripts. Mostly we find the translation "the only begotten Son", but the translation of the New American Standard Bible, "the only begotten God", corresponds to the text of the oldest and most reliable manuscripts of this verse and is a further unambiguous testimony of the divine nature of Jesus.

You can find a detailed and comprehensive essay about “[Jesus’ Divinity](#)” as a separate topic.

⚓ 3 The Holy Spirit As a Person

If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you for ever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (*John 14:15-17*)

These things I have spoken to you while I am still with you. But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you. (*John 14:25-26*)

The Holy Spirit is called the “Helper”, a translation of the Greek word *parakletos*. The Spirit will teach and he will remind us of what Jesus said. Describing the **Spirit** in this way, Jesus reveals him as **a person and not as some kind of impersonal power**.

This passage contains **an unambiguous philological [1] proof that the Holy Spirit is a person**, which cannot be properly translated into English. In Greek the word “Spirit”, *pneuma* has neuter as its grammatical gender, but in the above quoted text the demonstrative pronoun (whom, Greek: *ekeinos*) referring to *pneuma* does not take the neuter but the masculine form (i.e. “the Holy Spirit *whom* the Father will send...”, not “*which* the Father will send”). Here the gender of the subject that is spoken about (he, a person), replaces the grammatical gender (it, a thing). The only possible explanation is that Jesus speaks about the Holy Spirit as a person.

In the Book of Acts we can find more hints that the Spirit is a person.

But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, and with his wife’s knowledge he kept back for himself some of the proceeds and brought only a part of it and laid it at the apostles’ feet. But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” (*Acts 5:1-4*)

How could someone lie to an impersonal power? You can lie to a real vis-à-vis, to someone with whom it is possible to have a relationship and who demands and deserves honesty. Therefore, it becomes clear that **the apostles believed that the Holy Spirit is a person**.

⚓ 4 About the Trinity

But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. (*John 15:26*)

Jesus sent the Helper from the Father—all three divine persons are mentioned here. In John 14:26 it was the Father who was to send the Spirit. In this way we can see that Jesus has the same authority as the Father. This is a strong proof for the divine nature of the Son and for the **deep unity of the three divine persons**.

When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (*John 16:13-15*)

This is another powerful expression of the unity within God and the activity of and interrelation between the three Divine Persons. These verses show **the distinction of the three divine persons on the basis of the revelation of the one God.**

✠ 5 The Proceedings of the Persons Within the Trinity

When do we speak of the eternal begetting of the Son and the proceeding of the Spirit? Are these only ways of expression or do these words really describe the inner being of God? We have to admit that our human language is far from perfect. The way we understand words is the result of our experience. God's eternal being is far beyond all human experience. As such, every human language is (and must be) a very insufficient tool to describe the eternal God. However, we do not have any other tool. In addition, even God used human language to reveal himself to us, knowing that his words would be misunderstood or even distorted.

Jesus came to reveal the Father. Therefore, his words cannot only be some ways of expressing himself according to the Jewish understanding. He came to reveal, that is to share information about God's being with us. Jesus spoke about his relationship with God as one between father and son. We can understand this as a picture. But this picture has the content that the Father begot the Son. The other way round is not possible. John called the second divine person "*Logos*", the Word. The existence of a word assumes that somebody speaks this word. **The Logos has His origin in the Father.**

There cannot be any difference between the three divine persons concerning their divine attributes. There cannot be any difference concerning omnipotence, omniscience or omnipresence. There cannot be a greater or a smaller person in God. **If we neglect the differences concerning their relationships, no difference remains at all,** in which case it would not make sense to speak about three divine persons. This way of thinking is a pre-form of Modalism in which it is denied that the three divine persons are an eternal reality within God, being instead only different modes through which God revealed himself to the world.

Furthermore, it is not possible to say that some biblical expressions concerning Trinity fit the Jewish way of thinking. John called Jesus the "**only begotten God**" (Greek: *monogenes theos*). **This term fits neither Jewish nor Greek thought.** This term bears in itself a logical contradiction. Either he is begotten or he is God. This term was hard to understand. Therefore, some copyists thought that they had to "correct" this expression in the manuscripts. Instead of correcting their own ideas they rather "corrected" the Bible. **This expression only makes sense if we refer it to the eternal begetting of the Logos within the Trinity.** The begetting of the Son is an eternal process beyond time and space. Similar to the sun which constantly emits its rays, the Father begets the Son in a process without beginning and without end. **The Father is the eternal origin of the Son.** Both take part in the one and only invisible God. The "priority" of the Father cannot be a priority in time. It cannot be a priority in importance or power either. **It is only a priority of origin.**

An essential principle concerning **the persons in the Trinity** is that they **differ only in their relation to one another, but in other things they are one.** Therefore, when we say that the Father loves us, this

includes the love of the Son and the Holy Spirit. When we say that the Son is present in the community of those who believe in him, we include the presence of the Father and the Holy Spirit as well. When we say that the Holy Spirit clothes us with power we know that he does this together with the Father and the Son. When the common operation of the three divine persons is attributed to one of the divine persons, it reflects something about the role of each divine person within the Trinity.

In summary, we see that the New Testament reveals that **Jesus is ONE with the Father and yet he is distinguished from him.** The expression "only-begotten" (Greek: *monogenes*) shows that the Son received his being from the Father. It is not a statement concerning his origin at a certain point in time, but one which describes the relationship between the Father and the Son. **The Father is the origin of the Son, the Son proceeds eternally from the Father, and hence he has the same eternal nature. The Holy Spirit is sent into the world from the Father and the Son. His being has the same origin, he is of the same eternal nature and in the same way he participates in the inner giving, receiving and unity of God.**

In **1 Timothy 6:16** Paul writes:

...who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light...

This passage does not only speak about how holy God is, but also how unfathomable he is. **Our inability as God's creatures to grasp his eternal nature with our human minds cannot be an argument against the reality of the Trinity.** God lives in a different dimension to what we know. He revealed Himself in a mystery, which grants us more than we are able to ask and to expect. Hence, we are thankful that he has showed us so much of himself. Even though we cannot understand him fully yet, the love and unity, which are his very nature, are given to us as clear guidelines for our life and conduct here and now. **God wants us to know him so that we can find a real and living relationship with him. The way to get there is open for everyone.**

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Footnotes

1. The study of language in written historical sources.

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