

Q: *“Was the Trinity Invented by the Early Church?”*



ANSWERS
to the
TRINITY DEBATE

A Short Overview

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INTRODUCTION

Is the Trinity an invention of the early church? Many voices claim that it is, but this short eBook explains why it is not.

Trying to understand a God who is beyond our comprehension is a difficult task, and some things will remain a mystery until we see Him face to face. However, we can (and should) know whatever God has revealed about Himself in His Holy Word. The Bible tells us enough about who He is, what He is like, and what He expects from us, so that we may know Him in all His grandeur. It also speaks about Him as three 'persons' in relationship with one another in one Godhead. The doctrine of the Trinity seeks to explain this concept from a scriptural perspective, and I will write more about this under the heading 'Answers from the Bible.'

Whilst it is true that the actual name 'Trinity' is not found in the Bible, and that the early Christians did not have a Trinitarian doctrine set in stone, it is equally true that they believed in the deity of the Lord Jesus Christ from the very beginning. It was the increasing pressure of heresy that finally forced church leaders to state more precisely what they believed in order to defend their faith with logical, reasoned arguments from Scripture.

During the first 300 years of church history, views about the identity of both Jesus and the Holy Spirit strayed from what the apostles had taught. Some groups began denying the full deity of the Lord Jesus while others viewed the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force. These contentions were finally put to rest in AD381 at the Council of Constantinople when, about 350 years after Christ's death and resurrection, the church finally declared that God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit are one God existing in three persons. It is this resolution that gave birth to the name 'Trinity' as a reference to the biblical Godhead. In the following I will take you on a quick journey through early church history before presenting evidence for the Trinity from Scripture.

ANSWERS FROM HISTORY

What can be known and understood about God depends primarily on two factors: (1) what God has revealed to us about Himself, and (2) whether we are prepared to examine the evidence rather than remain attached to erroneous, pre-existing beliefs.

Most Jews at Jesus' time were not prepared to examine the evidence clearly revealed in their own writings. Instead, they accused the first Christians of having two Gods: Jehovah and Jesus. Referring to a quote from the book of Deuteronomy, they insisted that there was only ONE God. "*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!*" (Deuteronomy 6:4). They were correct in their claim that there is only one God, but they recognised none of the passages that further explained that this one God is actually 'one in plurality.' I will further explain this claim under the next heading.

Judaism wasn't the only religion challenging early Christians. Pagan beliefs and philosophies also made inroads and began influencing their thinking. Let's take a quick look at the first 300 years of Christianity.

The main focus of theological discussion in the first three centuries centred almost entirely on the relationship between Father and Son, even to the almost complete neglect of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Apostolic teachings (AD33-100) clearly prove the full deity of Jesus Christ. We will examine relevant Bible passages in the next chapter.

The Apostolic Fathers (AD100-150) were also passionate about Christ's deity and pre-existence but did not form any theological definitions. Because of the claims Christ had made about Himself, the authority He had assumed, the miracles He had performed, and the glory He had displayed (particularly through His resurrection), early Christians were practically unanimous in their recognition of Him as being truly God.

However, it wasn't until increasing heretical pressure forced Christian leaders to state more precisely what they believed, that they began to develop distinct doctrines to defend their faith by way of apologetics. The development of the doctrine of the Trinity was therefore a gradual process.

One of the heresies leading to apologetic definitions was Dynamic Monarchianism, which taught that it was only divine power that came upon the man Jesus, who was therefore not God in the strict sense of the word. Another heresy was Subordinationism, which contended that Jesus was a separate entity altogether. This sect reasoned that Jesus could not share the divine essence because there could only be one God.

During the second and third centuries, the influence of Stoic and Platonic thought created confusion and caused many to deny the full deity of Christ. The aim of this heresy was to reduce Him to a created being, or else to view his body as an illusion. Gnosticism, for example, was a mixture of pagan philosophies (especially Platonism) and Oriental mysticism. Gnostics sects believed that all matter was evil and that Christ's body must therefore be an illusion. This type of thinking developed a strong influence among church leaders and was instrumental in developing more formal rules of faith.

Four different understandings of the Godhead emerged, all brought about by trying to reconcile the difficult concept of one God existing in three persons. These concepts contended for supremacy, but which one was correct?

The first view was developed by Sabellius during the early 3rd century. He taught a simplified version of the Godhead, which became known as Sabellianism, Modalism or Modalistic Monarchianism. Sabellius believed that there is one supreme monarch, God, who reveals Himself to mankind in three different modes. Father, Son and Holy Spirit are but different names for the one God who simply communicates in different modes: sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Holy Spirit. But

these three do not exist simultaneously. This view denies the reality of personal relationship, love and communication within the one Godhead.

The second view of the Godhead was first made popular by Arius around AD300 and found great acclaim among Christians. Called Arianism, Subordinationism or Unitarianism, this view contends that 'three-ness in one-ness' is self-contradictory and violates the biblical principle of a monotheistic God. The inherent one-ness of God's nature is viewed as properly identifiable only with the Father. The son is merely a created being, the spirit is an impersonal force, and neither the son nor the spirit share the Father's divinity. This view was rejected as heresy by the church at the Council of Nicaea in AD325 but has persisted among various groups to the present day. Jehovah's Witnesses are one such example.

A third view of the Godhead assigned deity to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit but then denied their unity. The end effect was the perceived existence of three separate gods.

The church struggled. Their attempts of extinguishing Arianism had not only failed, but the heresy had expanded. And to make matters worse, Macedonianism had emerged as another force, which subordinated the Holy Spirit in much the manner as Arianism had done with Jesus, the son. But one by one, the church rejected all of these views as heretical and formulated a fourth concept consistent with Scripture.

At the Council of Constantinople in AD381, Arianism was once again refuted as heresy, and the Nicene Creed was reaffirmed as true. The Council also assigned definite deity to the Holy Spirit. This meant that the major conflicts over Trinitarianism were finally resolved within the church, although debates regarding the person of Christ continued until Chalcedon in AD451.

ANSWERS FROM THE BIBLE

God can only be known to the extent He chooses to reveal Himself through His Word, and no amount of philosophical thought will provide a substitute. While some of God's attributes may be understood by observing nature, more specific knowledge can only be gathered from Scripture. The Bible tells us that God became flesh in the person of Jesus Christ and that Jesus, as the Son of God, modelled God among men. The only evidence we have in order to examine whether the Trinity is truly biblical is therefore the Bible itself.

As previously mentioned, Scripture never uses the word 'Trinity,' and the accusation that the early church invented this *word* is therefore correct. However, this does not mean that the *concept* of a Trinitarian God was invented. A systematic study of Scripture will simultaneously assert the following:

1. That there is only one God, and
2. That Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all spoken of as deity.

Both one-ness and three-ness of God are equally affirmed, and all three are spoken of as eternal. All three are of the same essence and therefore neither inferior nor superior to one another in this respect. Yet at the same time, the Son is said to be submissive to the Father, and the Spirit is shown as proceeding from both the Father and the Son. Scripture teaches that all three are identical in nature and that they cooperate in function without denying their distinctions as separate persons in the Godhead. As H. Wayne House (*Charts of Christian Theology & Doctrine*, Zondervan; Grand Rapids, 1992, p.46) puts it, God exists "undivided in divided persons," a concept that finds expression in the word 'Trinity.'

At this point you may ask, "But where are the Scriptures to support these claims?" You will find them on the following pages, divided into Old and New Testament sections.

The Trinity in the Old Testament

The Old Testament strongly proclaims, “*Hear, O Israel; the LORD our God, the LORD is one!*” (Deuteronomy 6:4). On the surface, this sounds like support for monotheism; the belief that there is only one single God. However, did you know that this verse can be translated differently? The Greek word used here for ‘one’ actually means ‘properly united,’ and therefore we read that a plural ‘Elohim’ is a ‘united’ Jehovah:

“Hear, O Israel, Yahweh/Jehovah our Elohim [plural] is one [properly united] Yahweh/Jehovah.” Or... ““Yahweh/Jehovah our Elohim is a united Yahweh/Jehovah.”

God is a unity, not a single entity. It is interesting to note that the same Greek word is used in Genesis 2:24 to speak of the one-ness of husband and wife (two as one):

“Therefore a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.” (Genesis 2:24)

The Old Testament also refers to a plurality within God when it records God speaking about Himself as “Us”:

“Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness;” Genesis 1:26

“Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil.” Genesis 3:22

“Come let Us go down and confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” Genesis 11:7

And maybe most convincingly, *“I heard the voice of the Lord, saying: “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”* Isaiah 6:8

An objection to these verses has been raised by saying that God is including the angels when referring to a plural ‘us.’ But this position cannot be upheld because angels were neither involved in creation nor are they spoken of in Scripture as having been made in God’s image. On

the other hand, Colossians 1:16 establishes that all things were created through and for the Son. The Psalms also speak of more than one person who is called God, and who is addressed as such by the Almighty:

"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of Your kingdom. You love righteousness and hate wickedness; Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You With the oil of gladness more than Your companions." Psalm 45:6-7

"The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'" Psalm 110:1

Not only do we read about God as "Us" and about God addressing another deity as God, we also read about an Angel of the LORD.

This 'Angel [messenger] of the LORD' is also called 'God' and 'the LORD', being a messenger that is distinct from God, yet is addressed as God. The following passages substantiate this claim:

"And the Angel of the LORD said to her [Sarah's maid Hagar]: "Behold, you are with child, and you shall bear a son. You shall call his name Ishmael, because the LORD has heard your affliction. He shall be a wild man; His hand shall be against every man, and every man's hand against him. And he shall dwell in the presence of all his brethren." Then she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, "Have I also here seen Him who sees me?" Genesis 16:11-13

"And the Angel of the LORD appeared to him [Moses] in a flame of fire from the midst of a bush. So he looked, and behold, the bush was burning with fire, but the bush was not consumed. Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn." So when the LORD saw that he turned aside to look, God called to him from the midst of the bush and said, "Moses, Moses!" And he said, "Here I am." Then He said, "Do not draw near this place. Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you stand is holy ground." Moreover He said, "I am the God of your father—the God of

Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." And Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God." Exodus 3:2-6

In Exodus, chapter 23, God commanded His people: "*Behold, I send an Angel before you to keep you in the way and to bring you into the place which I have prepared. Beware of Him and obey His voice; do not provoke Him, for He will not pardon your transgressions; for My name is in Him. But if you indeed obey His voice and do all that I speak, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. For My Angel will go before you and bring you in to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites and the Hivites and the Jebusites; and I will cut them off.*" Exodus 23:20-23

In the book of Judges we have another example of the Angel of the LORD being God Himself: "*Then the Angel of the LORD came up from Gilgal to Bochim, and said: "I led you up from Egypt and brought you to the land of which I swore to your fathers; and I said, 'I will never break My covenant with you.'" Judges 2:1*

So who was this Angel of the LORD? He was very obviously God, but He was also a distinct person other than the LORD Jehovah of the Old Testament who is Spirit and cannot be seen by men:

"But He [the LORD] said [to Moses], "You cannot see My face; for no man shall see Me, and live." Exodus 22:20

The New Testament finally reveals that it is Jesus who is the perfect image of the Father and who has declared Him to mankind:

"He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn [in the sense of chief] over all creation." Colossians 1:15

"No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him." John 1:18

Biblical scholars therefore agree that these Old Testament references to 'the Angel of the LORD' actually refer to Jesus, the Son of God in his pre-incarnate state. Hence, these appearances are called Christophanies.

And finally, here are a few Old Testament references to the Spirit of God:

He was present in the act of creation: *"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters."* (Genesis 1:1-2)

Isaiah records, *"Listen to Me, O Jacob, And Israel, My called: I am He, I am the First, I am also the Last [a claim Jesus made of Himself in Revelation, chapter 1]. Indeed My hand has laid the foundation of the earth, and My right hand has stretched out the heavens. When I call to them, they stand up together. All of you, assemble yourselves, and hear! Who among them has declared these things? The LORD loves him; He shall do His pleasure on Babylon, And His arm shall be against the Chaldeans. I, even I, have spoken; Yes, I have called him, I have brought him, and his way will prosper. Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; From the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit Have sent Me." Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, Who teaches you to profit, Who leads you by the way you should go." Isaiah 48:12-17*

King David said, *"O LORD, You have searched me and known me... Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence?"* Psalm 139:1,7

None of these Old Testament passages employ the name Trinity, and neither do they refer to the Holy Spirit as an individual person within one Godhead, but they do convey the concept of a God who is 'one in plurality.' God's revelation is progressive, and the concept of His being three in one is more clearly communicated in the New Testament by Jesus Himself and by His followers.

The Trinity in the New Testament

Jesus made it clear to His disciples that He was equal with the Father:

Jesus said to him [Philip], "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father in Me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me, or else believe Me for the sake of the works themselves." John 14:9-11

"All things that the Father has are Mine." John 16:15

"I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last," and, "What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia..." Jesus speaking to the apostle John in Revelation 1:11

"Jesus said to them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." In this passage, Jesus refers to the LORD of the Old Testament, the great I AM. John 8:58

Jesus alluded to his identity as this 'I AM' seven times by saying, "I am the Bread of Life ... the Light of the World ... the Door ... the Good Shepherd ... the Resurrection and the Life ... the Way, Truth and Life ... and the Vine.

Others also referred to Jesus as God:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John 1:1

"And Thomas answered and said to Him [Jesus], "My Lord and my God!" John 20:28

"Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood." Act 20:28

"...of whom [speaking of the Israelites] are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen." Romans 9:5

"In Him [Jesus] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." Col. 2:9

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

"Simon Peter, a bondservant and apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ: Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord, as His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness." 2 Peter 1:1-3

We have now seen that the New Testament clearly portrays Jesus as God. But what about the Holy Spirit?

Jesus promised that the Father would send the Spirit in His own (Jesus') name and that the Spirit would teach the disciples, reminding them of the things Jesus had said. Jesus clearly spoke of the Holy Spirit as a person because a force cannot teach or remind. The word 'He' is used regularly of the Holy Spirit, and He has several roles ascribed to Him:

TEACHER: *"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 things that I said to you." John 14:26*

THE ONE WHO IS TRUTH AND WHO TESTIFIES OF JESUS: *"But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me." John 15:26*

ADVISER: *"For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us, to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things..." Acts 15:28*

COMMANDER: *"Now when they had gone through Phrygia and the region of Galatia, they were forbidden by the Holy Spirit to preach the word in Asia." Acts 16:6*

GIVER OF GIFTS: *“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all. But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all...”* 1 Cor. 12:4-7.

BAPTISER: *“For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body [the bod of Christ]”* 1 Corinthians 12:13

ALL-KNOWING ONE: *“For what man knows the things of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God.”* 1 Corinthians 2:11

HELPER & PRAYER PARTNER: *“Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered.”* Romans 8:26

THE ONE WHO SEALS BELIEVERS: *“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”* Ephesians 4:30

This last verse once again shows that the Holy Spirit is a person, not a force. He experiences emotions and can be grieved. In the following passage we learn that He can also be lied to, and that He is equated with God:

But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Acts 5:3-4

In His baptismal formula, Jesus Himself included all three (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) in one, singular name, thereby establishing their equality and yet separateness:

"And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age." Amen." Matthew 28:18-20

CONCLUSIONS

This short eBook has dealt with the Trinitarian question by way of an overview. There are many more passages that substantiate the truth of this doctrine, and I encourage you to investigate this topic further.

In conclusion, I admit that the Trinity is not an easy concept to understand and that it cannot be fully comprehended by our finite minds. It is for this reason that it has caused much discussion and contention throughout history, both in and outside of the church. Satan also has an interest in undermining God's truth and is a specialist in twisting His word:

"Now the serpent was more cunning than any beast of the field which the LORD God had made. And he said to the woman, "Has God indeed said, 'You shall not eat of every tree of the garden'?" Genesis 3:1

That is why we need to diligently search Scripture in order to find truth. God has indeed revealed to us that He exists as three distinct persons, all of one substance, and all co-existing eternally in the union of one Godhead. While the name 'Trinity' has been invented by the early church to describe this Godhead, the existence of God in three persons is not an invention. It is one of the fundamental doctrines of the Christian faith.

My response to our initial question, whether the Trinity was invented by the early church, is therefore two-fold: 'Yes' and 'No.' 'Yes,' the actual word Trinity is not found in Scripture and was first coined by the early church, and 'No,' the concept of Trinity is definitely not an invention of the early church. It is a revelation from God and may be clearly deduced from Scripture.

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