

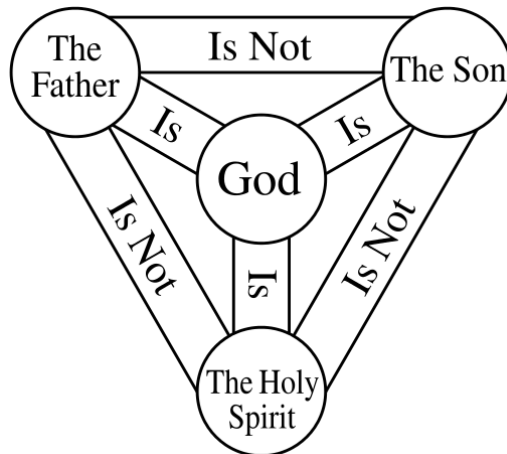
THOUGHTS ON THE TRINITY¹

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The people of Israel, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the early disciples were staunchly monotheistic; they were committed to the truth that there is one God and only one God (e.g., Deut. 4:34-35, 6:4, 32:39; 1 Ki. 8:59-60; 2 Ki. 19:19; Ps. 86:10; Isa. 37:20, 43:10-11, 44:6-8, 45:5, 14, 18, 22, 46:9; Joel 2:27; Mk. 12:29-32; Jn. 5:44; Rom. 3:30, 16:27; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 1:17, 2:5, 6:12-16; Jude 25; Rev. 15:4). He is a righteously jealous God who will not tolerate worship of any being or thing other than himself (Ex. 20:3, 34:14; Deut. 5:7, 6:14-15; 2 Ki. 17:35-36; Jer. 25:6). Except for Mormons, all groups I know that claim affiliation with Jesus Christ accept the fact there is only one God.

The oneness of God and his intolerance of idolatry raises the question of how Christians can justify the worship of three "persons": the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The classic answer is that "[w]ithin the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."² As R. C. Sproul puts it, "[T]here is one essence or being, not three, but there are three distinctive subsisting personalities in the Godhead. The names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicate personal *distinctions* in the Godhead but not essential *divisions* in God."³ This concept of God as a three-person being is commonly referred to as "the Trinity." It often is represented by this diagram:



The truth of the Trinity derives from the revelation in Scripture that there is only one God and that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct and divine. It is difficult to internalize partly because it is a unique attribute of God. All creatures exist as one-person beings, so we are

¹ This is a revision of chapter 2 of Ashby L. Camp, *Feet Firmly Planted: A Theological Handbook for the Church of Christ* (Tempe, AZ: Ktisis Publishing, 1999).

² James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 26.

³ R. C. Sproul, *The Mystery of the Holy Spirit* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1990), 72-73.

without a familiar comparison. We thus resort to imperfect analogies in our effort to formulate the truth in terms of our experience. We are like creatures in a two-dimensional universe seeking to understand a revelation about a three-dimensional object.

The Trinity is not logically contradictory, because "person" is different from "being" and thus one is not claiming there are three X's while maintaining at the same time that there is only one X, but it is still foreign to us. We accept the truth as revealed despite its unfamiliarity. As I often say, if the crew of the Starship Enterprise ran across "three-person beings" in some remote galaxy, I think people would consider it an intriguing and creative way to express the otherness of that world rather than insist it was foolishness.

It is important to recognize that in referring to the three distinctions within the one God as "persons," one is not saying that they are what we normally mean when we speak of persons. That would carry individualistic baggage that is not compatible with the unity of God. Theologian Fred Sanders expresses this caution well:

But then the question is, what do we mean by persons? Because just as when we call Jesus the Son of God, we don't mean that he's everything that might rush into our head when we say "son," right? Like we don't think about his divine mother or his being younger than the Father. Similarly, when we say that there are three persons in God, we shouldn't just rush to fill the word "person" with whatever we happen to already think about "person." I have lots of ideas about what persons are because I've met many of them. But when I talk about the three in God, and I use the one word to describe what they are and say they are "persons," it's very important not to rush to something like everything I know about people applies to them. . . . We shouldn't pour everything about our psychological experience of interpersonal relationships into God and say that's what's going on in there. . . . Christian teaching . . . is that there are three persons in relation in the one being of God; that's very different from saying there are three people involved in a relationship in God.⁴

Nearly all groups that claim affiliation with Christ accept the doctrine of the Trinity, but those that do not, such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons, tend to be aggressive in recruiting. They are quick to exploit uncertainty about the Trinity to undermine one's confidence in the reliability of the church's teaching. One needs to understand the biblical basis of this doctrine to withstand such false teachers, but more importantly, one needs to understand it because the Trinity is God's revelation of himself.

The Deity of Christ

The NT is clear that Jesus is divine.⁵ This is implicit in the fact he performs divine functions. He is acknowledged as the creator (Jn. 1:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2) and

⁴ Transcribed from Fred Sanders, "[Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: How Is One God Three Persons?](#)"

⁵ The case for Jesus' deity is adapted from Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 315-317.

sustainer (Col. 1:17; Heb. 1:3) of the universe, as the author of life (Jn. 1:4; Acts 3:15), and as the ruler of all things (Mat. 28:18; Rom. 14:9; Rev. 1:5). He forgives sins (Mk. 2:1-12; Lk. 24:47; Acts 5:31; Col. 3:13), grants salvation and eternal life (Acts 4:12; Rom. 10:12-14), dispenses the Spirit (Mat. 3:11; Acts 2:17, 33), and exercises eschatological judgment (Mat. 25:31-46; Jn. 5:19-29; Acts 10:42; 1 Cor. 4:4-5).

Christ's divine status is also implicit in the fact he is eternally existent (Jn. 1:1, 8:58, 12:41, 17:5; 1 Cor. 10:4; Phil. 2:6; Heb. 11:26, 13:8), possesses divine attributes (Jn. 1:4, 10:30, 21:17; Eph. 4:10; Col. 1:19, 2:9), and is accorded equal dignity with God (Mat. 28:19; Jn. 5:23; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2, 13:14; Gal. 1:3; 1 Thess. 3:11; 2 Thess. 2:16; Rev. 14:1, 21:22-23, 22:13, cf. 21:6). He is the perfect revealer of God (Jn. 1:18, 14:9; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:1-3), the embodiment of truth (Jn. 1:9, 14, 6:32, 14:6; Rev. 3:7, 14), and the object of saving faith (Jn. 14:1; Acts 10:43, 16:31; Rom. 10:8-13).

Jesus possesses jointly with God the kingdom (Eph. 5:5; Rev. 11:15), the churches (Rom. 16:16), the Spirit (Rom. 8:9; Phil. 1:19), and the throne (Rev. 22:1, 3). He is also the recipient of praise (Mat. 21:15-16; Eph. 5:19; 1 Tim. 1:12; Rev. 5:8-14) and prayer (Acts 1:24, 7:59-60; 1 Cor. 16:22; 2 Cor. 12:8), as well as the object of worship (Mat. 14:33, 28:9, 17; Jn. 5:23, 20:28; Phil. 2:10-11; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:8-14) and doxologies (2 Tim. 4:18; 2 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 1:5b-6, 5:13).

Numerous OT passages referring to Yahweh (God's proper name) are applied to Jesus in the NT. Texts referring to Yahweh's nature (Ex. 3:14; Isa. 44:6; Ps. 102:26-27) are applied to Jesus in Jn. 8:58, Heb. 1:11-12, and Rev. 1:17. In Isa. 8:12-13 Isaiah is told that instead of fearing what the Judeans fear, he is to sanctify Yahweh. Peter cites Isa. 8:12 and then commands his readers to sanctify Christ as Lord (1 Pet. 3:14-15). The statement in Ps. 102:25 about Yahweh's work in creation, the statement in Joel 2:32 that everyone who calls on the name of Yahweh will be saved, the statement in Isa. 40:3 about preparing the way for Yahweh, and the statement in Isa. 45:23 about worshiping Yahweh are applied to Christ, respectively, in Heb. 1:10, Rom. 10:13, Mat. 3:3, and Phil. 2:10-11. The triumph of Yahweh in Ps. 68:18 is cited in reference to Christ in Eph. 4:8.

In addition to all this, six divine titles are claimed by or applied to Jesus in the NT. These are Son of Man (Mat. 16:27-28, 24:30; Mk. 8:38, 14:62-64; Acts 7:56), Son of God (Mat. 11:27; Mk. 15:39; Jn. 1:18, 20:31; Rom. 1:4; Gal. 4:4; Heb. 1:2), Messiah (Mat. 16:16; Mk. 14:61-62; Jn. 20:31), Lord (Mk. 12:35-37; Jn. 20:28; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 8:5-6, 12:3, 16:22; Phil. 2:11; 1 Pet. 2:3, 3:15), Alpha and Omega (Rev. 22:13, cf. 1:8, 21:6), and, most notably, God (Jn. 1:1, 18, 20:28; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 2 Pet. 1:1).⁶

Perhaps the favorite proof text of those who deny the deity of Christ is Jn. 14:28. There Jesus told his disciples, "You heard me say to you, 'I am going away, and I will come to you.' If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is

⁶ Regarding the Christological significance of the titles Son of Man and Messiah, see, I. Howard Marshall, "Son of Man" in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 775-781; Larry W. Hurtado, "Christ" in Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall (1992), 106-117.

greater than I." When interpreted in its context, the clause "the Father is greater than I" leads one to embrace rather than deny the deity of Christ.

Jesus is not here denying his deity, that he is one with the Father in nature, essence, and being. He does not mean the Father is greater in the sense he is a higher type of being (ontological sense), as his oneness with the Father has been declared repeatedly (Jn. 1:1, 10:30, 14:9). Rather, he means the Father is greater in a positional sense in that the Father is in the undiminished glory of heaven in contrast to his incarnate state on earth. Jesus' departure to the Father was a departure to the glory he had with the Father before the world began (Jn. 17:5), so if the disciples had loved Jesus more fully, they would have rejoiced over his gain at returning to the "greater" sphere or state rather than thinking about their own loss.⁷ Thus, as James White notes, this verse actually implies Christ's deity because "the position into which the Son was returning is a position fit only for deity, not for mere creatures."⁸

Another text that is misused in the effort to deny the deity of Christ is Jn. 17:3. The fact Jesus said the Father was the only true God does not mean that Jesus is not God and is an inferior creature. From the beginning of the Gospel, John has made clear that Jesus is God, that he is divine, as Thomas will confess in Jn. 20:28. So Jesus' reference to the Father as "the only true God" is not intended to distinguish the Father from the Son and the Spirit in terms of deity, as though the Father is the only true God and the Son and the Spirit are not God. Rather, it is intended to distinguish the only true God, whose triune nature is not under discussion, from all false gods. Because the one God is a three-person being, each of the divine persons can be referred to as the only true God. Indeed, John in 1 Jn. 5:20 probably speaks of Jesus as "the true God." Jesus, God the Son incarnate, refers to the Father as "the only true God" in keeping with his heart and mission to glorify the Father.

The fact the Son was sent by the Father (Jn. 17:4 and elsewhere), and thus has a different function than the Father, does not mean he is inferior to the Father in nature. Nature and function are two different things. In eternity the Father, Son, and Spirit freely chose the roles they would take in the redemption of humanity. White puts it this way:

The Father chose to be the fount and source of the entirety of the work; the Son chose to be the Redeemer and to enter into human flesh as one subject to the Father; and the Spirit chose to be the Sanctifier of the church, the indwelling Testifier of Jesus Christ. Each took different roles of necessity – they could not all take the same roles and do the same things.⁹

These differences in roles *distinguish* the persons of the Godhead, but they do not make one of those persons *less than* or *inferior to* the others. This basic logical fallacy lies at the heart of many attacks on the Trinity. Another major confounding factor is the Incarnation. The fact the one person Jesus is a union of a fully divine and a fully human nature introduces a complexity in

⁷ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 508; Robert H. Mounce, "John" in Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, eds, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 10:570.

⁸ White (1998), 90.

⁹ White (1998), 66-67.

his relationship with the Father and the Spirit that can be misinterpreted as being contrary to the truth of the Trinity.

The Deity and Personhood of the Spirit

Scripture is clear that the Holy Spirit is a person, not a thing (i.e., not a force or an influence). This personhood is evident from the fact he has the qualities of a person, such as intellect (1 Cor. 2:10-11, 13; Rom. 8:27), feelings (Rom. 15:30; Eph. 4:30), and will (1 Cor. 12:11).

The Spirit also performs the actions of a person. He teaches (Jn. 14:26; 1 Cor. 2:13), testifies and bears witness (Jn. 15:26; Rom. 8:16), guides and directs (Jn. 16:13; Acts 13:4; Rom. 8:14), convicts or convinces (Jn. 16:7-8), and commands and forbids (Acts 8:29, 10:19, 16:6-11). He speaks (Acts 8:29, 10:19-20, 13:2; 1 Tim. 4:1; Rev. 2:7), performs miracles (Acts 8:39), calls for special service (Acts 13:2, 20:28), and intercedes for us with God (Rom. 8:26; Gal. 4:6).

In addition, the Spirit can be responded to as a person. He can be lied to (Acts 5:3), resisted (Acts 7:51), grieved (Eph. 4:30), insulted or outraged (Heb. 10:29), and blasphemed (Mat. 12:31).

The deity of the Spirit is evident from the fact he has characteristics that are unique to God. He is eternal (Heb. 9:14), all knowing (1 Cor. 2:10b-11), and ever present (Ps. 139:7). He also does works that are unique to God. He was and is involved in creation (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30), and he gives life to the dead (Rom. 8:11; cf. 1:4), which is a quality of God (Rom. 4:17). He produces rebirth or renewal (Jn. 3:5-6; Tit. 3:5), was active in the incarnation of Christ (Lk. 1:35), and is the author of divine prophecy (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

In a number of texts, the Spirit is equated with God. In Acts 28:25 Paul quotes Isa. 6:9 and ascribes the speaking of God in that text to the Holy Spirit. Christians are the "temple of God" because the Holy Spirit dwells in them (1 Cor. 3:16, 6:19; Eph. 2:22). In Acts 5:3-4 lying to the Holy Spirit is said to be lying to God.

The Spirit also bears divine names. He is called the Spirit of God (Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 6:11), the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9; 1 Pet. 1:11), the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), and the Spirit of God's Son (Gal. 4:6). The Spirit is referred to in parallel with the Father and the Son (2 Cor. 13:14; see also, 1 Cor. 12:4-6; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Pet. 1:2; Rev. 1:4), and he is included in the NT formula for baptism with the Father and Son (Mat. 28:19).

As the Son is *functionally* subordinate to the Father, so the Spirit is *functionally* subordinate to the Father and the Son. He is sent by the Father in the name of the Son (Jn. 14:26) in that he is sent by the Son from the Father (Jn. 15:26, 16:7). He testifies about Jesus (Jn. 15:26; Acts 1:8), speaks only what he hears (Jn. 16:13), and brings glory to Christ by taking what is Christ's and making it known (Jn. 16:14). He also convicts the world of sin, righteousness, and judgment in reference to Jesus' work and triumph (Jn. 16:8-11). As explained above, this difference in function among the persons of the Godhead in no way detracts from the truth of the Trinity.

Keeping the Persons Distinct

Some false teachers, ancient and modern, accept that there is only one God and that the Father, Son, and Spirit are fully God, but they deny that the Bible differentiates between these persons. They claim that the Father, Son, and Spirit are just different names given to the different roles played by the one God. In other words, they believe that the Father is the Son, the Son is the Spirit, and the Spirit is the Father.

Scripture leaves no doubt that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinctive divine persons. A few examples will have to suffice. John 1:1-2 says that in the beginning Christ (the Word) was *with* God, meaning with God the Father ("God" can also be used generically of the Godhead). The fact he was *with* the Father shows he is distinct from the Father. The distinction is equally obvious in Mat. 11:27.

Further, the Father loves the Son (Jn. 3:35, 5:20, 15:9, 17:23-24) and the Son loves the Father (Jn. 14:31), which is incomprehensible unless they are distinct "persons." The Father speaks of the Son as a separate person in the Transfiguration (Mat. 17:5), and the Father and Son even speak to one another in Jn. 12:28. It is impossible to miss that Jesus was speaking to another person when he prayed to God the Father (e.g., Mat. 27:46; Lk. 23:46; Jn. 17:1-3, 24).

Jesus continues as our High Priest and Advocate before the Father (Heb. 7:25; 1 Jn. 2:1), which requires that he be distinct from the Father. The distinction between Father and Son is also evident in the greetings in Paul's letters. He writes, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2).

The distinctiveness of the Holy Spirit is equally obvious. In Jn. 14:26 Jesus said that the Father would send the Spirit in his name, and in Jn. 16:7 he said that the Spirit would only come after he had returned to the Father. Since the Father *sends* the Spirit, the Father is not the Spirit; and since the Spirit *comes* only after the Son has *gone*, the Spirit is not the Son. The Father, Son, and Spirit are clearly separate persons. The fact the Spirit intercedes for Christians with the Father (Rom. 8:27) confirms his separate personhood.

Perhaps the best-known text distinguishing the three persons of the Godhead is the baptism of Jesus in Mat. 3:16-17. There Jesus is baptized, the Spirit descends, and the Father speaks from heaven. The distinctiveness of the divine persons is equally evident in the Trinitarian baptismal formula given by Jesus in Mat. 28:19. There Jesus commands the disciples to baptize in the name (singular) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Even the dullest cannot miss this.

The one text cited to claim that Jesus is the same person as the Spirit is 2 Cor. 3:17: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty." This, however, is an analogical (rather than a literal) equation of the Spirit with the Lord of Ex. 34:34, the text Paul is interpreting. One must follow the argument from 3:12 to appreciate this.

Paul says that since he and his companions are ministers of a permanent covenant (the emphasis of v. 11) that will never be surpassed in splendor, they are very bold or frank in conducting their ministry, as those who have nothing to conceal but every reason for fearless candor. Referring to Ex. 34:33-35, Paul contrasts this boldness with the timidity of Moses in veiling his face to prevent the Israelites from continuing to gaze at it until it lost completely its reflected glory. It seems Moses was not bold enough to allow the lesson of the old covenant's temporary nature to be taught in so stark a fashion as the Israelites watching his face's reflected glory be extinguished. Rather, he resorted to the indirect route of veiling his face's fading glory. In doing so, he attempted to make the same point, i.e., that the old covenant was not the appropriate object of extreme fixation (intense gazing) because it was not the final stage of salvation history.

Note that this is Paul's inspired interpretation of the OT text. He deduces that the glory of Moses' face faded, probably from the fact it is not mentioned again after Exodus 34 and the fact that in Ex. 40:35 Moses is hindered from entering the tent of meeting because of "the glory of the Lord that filled it." Paul then concludes that this fading of glory was at least partly the reason for the veiling.

Unfortunately, the minds of the Israelites were too hardened to receive Moses' indirect teaching. Instead, the veil became an obstacle to them seeing the truth of the temporality of the old covenant. Metaphorically speaking, the same veil was present in Paul's day when the Scriptures were read in Jewish synagogues. The Jews continued to be blind to the true meaning of the old covenant, failing to see it as a preparatory agency making them ready to receive Christ (see, Gal. 3:24). But whenever anyone (with Jews especially in mind) turns to the Lord, meaning converts to Christ, then the veil is removed, just as it was when Moses would go in before the Lord (Ex. 34:34).

The introductory formula used in 2 Cor. 3:17 shows that the verse is intended to be an interpretation of the "citation" of Ex. 34:34 in the previous verse.¹⁰ The point is that "the Lord" in Ex. 34:34 is in the role of (represents) the Spirit in the new covenant in that we experience the divine presence in the person of the Spirit and have the veil of obscurity regarding the old covenant lifted when we commune with the Spirit, i.e., when we become Christians. Gordon Fee puts it this way:

Once the literary device [signaling that Paul is interpreting the citation of Ex. 34:34] has been observed, much of the debate over Paul's language in this text tends to become irrelevant. By "the Lord" Paul does not intend either God or Christ; he intends the Spirit. That is, he is interpreting the text of Exodus in light of the present argument. The Lord in that text, he is saying, is now to be understood (not literally, but in an analogical way) as referring to the Spirit – not because this is the proper identification of the Lord in the Exodus text, but because in this argument that is the proper way to understand what happens to those who, as Moses, now "turn to the Lord."¹¹

¹⁰ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 311.

¹¹ Fee (1994), 311-312.

The text most frequently cited to claim that the Son and the Father are the same person is Jn. 10:30, where Jesus says, "I and the Father are one." However, this statement implicitly acknowledges that Jesus and the Father are not one person because the word for "one" is the neuter *hen* rather than the masculine *heis*, which would be used for a person.¹² The preceding verses make clear that Jesus means that he and the Father are one in purpose and action.

Another text commonly used to claim that the Son and the Father are the same person is Jn. 14:9-10, where Jesus says, "He who has seen me has seen the Father." As already noted, Jesus, because of his divine nature, is the perfect revealer of God (Jn. 1:18, 14:9; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:1-3). It is in that sense that one who sees him has seen the Father. It does not mean that he *is* the Father. Indeed, in the very words that follow Jesus distinguishes himself from the Father by saying he abides in him and does his works through him.

¹² Carson (1991), 394.