

The Trinity: One God in Three Persons

A Thematic Study

Key Passages

*"Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." — **Matthew 28:19, ESV***

*"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." — **2 Corinthians 13:14, ESV***

Introduction

Of all the doctrines in Christian theology, none is more central and none more uniquely Christian than the doctrine of the Trinity. God is one — absolute, undivided, indivisible — and yet within the one divine being there eternally subsist three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God; there are not three gods but one. This is not a contradiction to be explained away but a revealed mystery to be received with reverence, examined with rigour, and adored with worship.

The word 'Trinity' does not appear in Scripture, but the doctrine it names is thoroughly biblical. From the opening verse of Genesis to the closing chapters of Revelation, the triune God acts, speaks, saves, and sanctifies. This study traces the biblical testimony to the Trinity across both Testaments, examines the distinct roles of each person in the work of salvation, considers the key theological formulations that guard the doctrine from error, and reflects on the pastoral and doxological weight of knowing and worshipping a triune God.

I. The Foundation: The Unity of God

The Shema and the Oneness of God

Any biblical account of the Trinity must begin where Scripture begins: with the absolute oneness of God. The foundational confession of Israel is the Shema: 'Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one' (Deuteronomy 6:4, ESV). This is not a statement that can be set aside or softened. The God who reveals himself in Scripture tolerates no rivals and admits no division within his divine being.

*"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one." —
Deuteronomy 6:4, ESV*

The Hebrew word translated 'one' here is echad (אֶחָד), which denotes a unified oneness — the same word used of a husband and wife becoming 'one flesh' (Genesis 2:24). This is significant: echad is entirely consistent with a complex unity, though the primary assertion of the Shema is that there is one God and no other. Isaiah echoes and intensifies this: 'I am the LORD, and there is no other; besides me there is no God' (Isaiah 45:5, ESV). The New Testament affirms this monotheistic foundation without qualification — 'there is no God but one' (1 Corinthians 8:4, ESV).

The Trinity is not a departure from the oneness of God. The church has always insisted on one divine nature (ousia) in three persons (hypostases). The three are not three separate gods — tritheism — nor are they three modes or masks of a single person who appears differently at different times — modalism. The doctrine affirms genuine, irreducible personal distinctions within an absolute divine unity.

II. Hints of Plurality in the Old Testament

The Plural Name and the Spirit

Though the full revelation of the Trinity awaited the New Testament, the Old Testament contains significant hints of plurality within the Godhead. The very name for God most commonly used in Genesis — Elohim (אֱלֹהִים)

— is grammatically plural, yet it consistently takes singular verbs when referring to the God of Israel. This anomaly has long been noted by careful readers of the Hebrew text.

At the creation, God speaks of himself in the first person plural: 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness' (Genesis 1:26, ESV). While some have proposed this refers to a divine council or is simply a 'royal we,' neither explanation is satisfying. The subsequent verse reverts to the singular ('So God created man in his own image,' Genesis 1:27), suggesting a complex unity rather than a mere figure of speech. The same plural deliberation appears in Genesis 3:22 and 11:7. The most natural reading, in the light of the full canon, is an intra-Trinitarian communication.

"Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" — Genesis 1:26, ESV

The Angel of the LORD

A figure of striking theological interest in the Old Testament is the Angel of the LORD (malak YHWH, מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה). This figure both is distinguished from the LORD and is identified as the LORD himself. He appears to Hagar (Genesis 16:7-13), to Abraham at the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22:11-18), to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3:2-6), and to Gideon (Judges 6:11-24). In each case, the text moves seamlessly between describing the Angel and describing God himself. Many theologians, from Justin Martyr to John Calvin, have understood the Angel of the LORD as a pre-incarnate appearance of the Son of God — a theophany that anticipates the Incarnation.

The Spirit of God

The Holy Spirit is present from the very beginning of Scripture. In Genesis 1:2, the ruach Elohim (רוּחַ אֱלֹהִים) — the Spirit of God — hovers or broods over the face of the waters, active in the work of creation. Throughout the Old Testament, the Spirit of the LORD comes upon judges, prophets, and kings to empower, illuminate, and equip (Numbers 11:25; 1 Samuel 10:10; Isaiah 61:1). The Spirit is not an impersonal force

but acts with will, knowledge, and personality — grieving (Isaiah 63:10), teaching (Nehemiah 9:20), and giving wisdom (Isaiah 11:2).

"The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters." — Genesis 1:2, ESV

Isaiah 48:16 contains a remarkable Trinitarian formula within a prophetic oracle: 'And now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit.' Here a divine speaker — understood by many to be the pre-incarnate Son — is sent by the Father along with the Spirit, prefiguring the full Trinitarian disclosure in the New Testament.

III. The Revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament

The Baptism of Jesus

The New Testament does not merely hint at the Trinity — it reveals it. The baptism of Jesus is among the most explicit Trinitarian scenes in all of Scripture. As the Son emerges from the water, the Spirit descends upon him as a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven: 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased' (Matthew 3:16-17, ESV). All three persons are present and distinct, acting simultaneously. The Father speaks; the Son is baptised; the Spirit descends. This is not a vision or a metaphor — it is a historical event with three divine persons simultaneously and distinctly present.

"And when Jesus was baptised, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.'" — Matthew 3:16-17, ESV

The Deity of the Son

The New Testament testimony to the full deity of the Son is overwhelming. John's prologue identifies the Son as the eternal Logos: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God' (John 1:1, ESV). The prepositions here are theologically precise:

the Word was *pros ton theon* (πρὸς τὸν θεόν) — face to face with God, indicating personal distinction — and was *theos* (θεός) — fully God in nature, indicating full deity. Both distinctions are affirmed in the same breath.

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

The Son applies to himself the divine 'I AM' (*ego eimi, ἐγώ εἰμι*) with absolute force in John 8:58: 'Before Abraham was, I am.' His Jewish hearers understood the claim immediately and took up stones to kill him for blasphemy. He receives worship without rebuke (Matthew 28:17; John 20:28). He forgives sins — a divine prerogative (Mark 2:5-7). Paul calls him 'God over all, blessed forever' (Romans 9:5, ESV) and applies the LORD's own title (*kyrios*, used for YHWH in the Septuagint) to Jesus as the exalted Lord (Philippians 2:9-11).

Colossians 2:9 states plainly: 'For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily' (ESV). This is not a partial divine quality or a divine appointment — it is the complete fullness (*pleroma, πλήρωμα*) of the divine nature dwelling permanently in the incarnate Son.

The Deity and Personhood of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is not an impersonal force or divine energy. He is the third person of the Triune God, possessing the full attributes of personality and divinity. He speaks (Acts 13:2), teaches (John 14:26), intercedes (Romans 8:26-27), grieves (Ephesians 4:30), and can be lied to (Acts 5:3-4) — all characteristics that apply only to a personal being, not to a power or influence.

The Spirit's deity is confirmed by his identification with God. When Ananias lies to the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3), Peter immediately interprets this as lying to God (Acts 5:4). The Spirit is said to search the deep things of God (1 Corinthians 2:10-11), possesses omniscience, omnipresence (Psalm 139:7-8), and is the author of Scripture (2 Peter 1:21). He is listed alongside the Father and the Son in the baptismal formula (Matthew 28:19) and the apostolic benediction (2 Corinthians 13:14).

"Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...
You have not lied to man but to God." — **Acts 5:3-4, ESV**

IV. Key Trinitarian Texts Across the New Testament

Key Trinitarian Passages at a Glance

Matthew 28:19 — The baptismal formula: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit named as one.

John 14-16 — The Farewell Discourse: the Father sends the Son; the Son sends the Spirit.

Romans 8 — The triune God in redemption: the Father's purpose, the Son's work, the Spirit's indwelling.

Ephesians 1:3-14 — Election by the Father, redemption by the Son, sealing by the Spirit.

2 Corinthians 13:14 — The apostolic benediction: grace, love, and fellowship from all three persons.

1 Peter 1:2 — Elect according to the Father's foreknowledge, through the Spirit's sanctification, for obedience to Jesus Christ.

The baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19 is theologically dense. Jesus commands baptism 'in the name' — singular (onoma, ὄνομα) — of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. The use of the single name rather than three separate names indicates a shared divine name, affirming their unity. Yet three persons are named with equal grammatical weight, affirming their distinct identity. In one compact formula, Jesus buries both modalism (the three are the same person at different times) and tritheism (they are three separate gods).

The Farewell Discourse in John 14-16 is the most extended Trinitarian passage in Scripture. Jesus speaks of the Father who sent him, the Spirit whom he will send from the Father, the mutual indwelling of Father and Son, and the Spirit's role of glorifying the Son by revealing him to the disciples. The relationships are clear: the Father sends, the Son reveals the Father, and the Spirit glorifies the Son. The three are distinct in their personal relationships, equal in their divine being.

"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, ESV

V. The Order Within the Trinity: Eternal Relations and Economic Roles

One Being, Three Persons

Careful theological terminology helps guard the doctrine against ancient and recurring errors. The term 'essence' or 'substance' (ousia in Greek, essentia in Latin) refers to what God is — the undivided divine nature that is fully and identically possessed by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The term 'person' (hypostasis in Greek, persona in Latin) refers to who each is — the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three masks or three modes but three real and distinct subsistences within the one divine being.

The classical summary from the Athanasian Creed remains unsurpassed in precision: the Father is God, the Son is God, the Holy Spirit is God — yet there are not three gods but one God. The Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, the Spirit is not the Father — yet they share one divine nature, one will, one power, one knowledge, one glory.

Eternal Relations of Origin

Scripture reveals that the three persons stand in eternal relations of origin that distinguish them without creating inequality. The Father is unbegotten — he has his being from no other. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father — not created, not made, but generated within the divine life before all ages (Psalm 2:7; John 1:14, 18; Hebrews 1:5). The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father (and, in Western theology, from the Son as well — the filioque) — not a creation but an eternal procession within the divine being (John 15:26).

These eternal relations — generation and procession — establish real distinctions between the persons without implying any inferiority of nature. The Son is not less divine for being eternally begotten; the Spirit

is not less divine for eternally proceeding. What is communicated in generation and procession is the full divine essence, not a portion of it.

Economic and Immanent Trinity

Theologians distinguish between the immanent Trinity — God as he is in himself eternally — and the economic Trinity — God as he acts in the history of redemption. In salvation, the Father initiates (John 3:16; Ephesians 1:4-5), the Son accomplishes (Galatians 4:4-5; Hebrews 9:12), and the Spirit applies (Romans 8:9-17; Titus 3:5). This functional ordering — in which the Son and Spirit act in submission to the Father's will in redemption — does not imply ontological inferiority. The Son's submission to the Father in his incarnate mission (John 5:19; 6:38) is a voluntary, temporal ordering that reflects his love for the Father and his purpose to glorify him, not a deficiency in his divine nature.

"Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world... In love he predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will." —
Ephesians 1:3-5, ESV

VI. The Trinity and Salvation

The doctrine of the Trinity is not an abstract philosophical puzzle. It is the shape of salvation itself. Every act of redemption bears a Trinitarian structure.

Election is the Father's sovereign act before the foundation of the world (Ephesians 1:4-5; 1 Peter 1:2). The Father chose a people for himself in Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will. This is not reluctant foreknowledge but active, loving determination.

Redemption is the Son's accomplished work. The eternal Son took on human flesh, lived the life of perfect obedience his people could not live, bore the wrath of God against sin at the cross, and rose bodily for our justification (Romans 4:25; 2 Corinthians 5:21; Galatians 3:13). At no

point did the Father or the Spirit become incarnate — the Incarnation is the act of the second person of the Trinity alone.

Application is the Spirit's ongoing work. The Holy Spirit regenerates the dead heart (John 3:5-8), unites the believer to Christ by faith (1 Corinthians 12:13), seals the redeemed as God's possession (Ephesians 1:13-14), produces fruit conforming them to Christ's image (Galatians 5:22-23), and intercedes within them with groaning that goes beyond words (Romans 8:26-27).

"For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the Spirit of adoption as sons, by whom we cry, 'Abba! Father!' The Spirit himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God." — Romans 8:14-16, ESV

The Trinitarian shape of salvation means that no person of the Trinity is optional or incidental. To reject the Son is to reject the Father who sent him (John 5:23). To resist the Spirit is to resist the God who applies what the Son has purchased. The whole triune God is engaged in the rescue of sinners — in love, at great cost, to the praise of his glory.

VII. Guarding the Doctrine: Classic Errors and Their Corrections

Throughout church history, the doctrine of the Trinity has been assailed by errors that distort one or more of its essential components. Understanding these errors strengthens our grasp of the truth.

Modalism (Sabellianism)

Modalism teaches that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three distinct persons but three modes, roles, or manifestations of a single person. On this view, the one God appears as Father in creation, as Son in redemption, and as Spirit in sanctification — but these are successive or simultaneous masks, not genuine distinctions. Modalism is refuted by passages where all three persons are simultaneously and distinctly present (Matthew 3:16-17), where the Son addresses the Father as 'You'

(John 17), and where the Son sends the Spirit from the Father (John 15:26) — none of which is coherent if they are the same person.

Arianism

Arianism, condemned at the Council of Nicaea (AD 325), teaches that the Son is the first and greatest creation of the Father — a divine being, but not co-equal, co-eternal, or of the same substance (*homoousios*) as the Father. The Arian slogan was 'there was a time when he was not.' This heresy is refuted by John 1:1 (the Word was God), John 8:58 (before Abraham was, I am), Colossians 2:9 (the fullness of deity), and Hebrews 1:3 (the exact imprint of God's nature). The Nicene Creed's insistence that the Son is 'of one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father' precisely targets and excludes Arianism.

Tritheism

Tritheism posits three separate divine beings rather than one God in three persons. This fails to preserve the biblical insistence on the absolute unity of the divine being (Deuteronomy 6:4; Isaiah 45:5) and the single divine name shared by the three (Matthew 28:19). The three persons share one divine essence, one will in the immanent Trinity, and one purpose in redemption.

The Danger of Analogies

Popular analogies for the Trinity — water as ice, liquid, and steam; a man as father, husband, and son; the three-leafed clover — invariably slide toward either modalism or tritheism. None is adequate to the mystery of the divine being. The Trinity is not an illustration from nature but a revealed reality that surpasses all created categories. Analogies may have limited utility in introducing the concept, but they must be used with great caution and clear qualification.

VIII. The Trinity and the Christian Life

Trinitarian doctrine is not merely academic — it shapes the entire Christian life of faith, prayer, community, and worship.

Prayer is inherently Trinitarian. The New Testament pattern is prayer to the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit (John 14:13–14; Romans 8:26–27; Ephesians 2:18). The Spirit prays within us; the Son intercedes for us at the Father's right hand (Hebrews 7:25; Romans 8:34); the Father hears in the name of the Son. Every act of prayer is an engagement with the triune God.

Christian identity is Trinitarian from its inception. Baptism is administered in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). The believer is bound to all three persons — adopted by the Father (1 John 3:1), united to the Son (Romans 6:3–4), indwelt by the Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). The triune God does not merely assist the Christian life from a distance; he takes up residence within it.

The love and fellowship within the Trinity is the ground of human community. Jesus prays that his people would be one as the Father and Son are one (John 17:21). The unity of the church — a community of distinct persons bound in love — is to mirror and display the Trinitarian unity of God. Christian love for one another is not merely ethical duty but a participation in the very life of God.

"that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." — John 17:21, ESV

The triune God is the pattern and ground of all human community, all love, all knowing, all being known. To know the Trinity is to know the God who is love — not in a lonely, self-contained isolation, but in the eternal, overflowing fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Cross-References

Old Testament Foundations

Deuteronomy 6:4 · Genesis 1:2, 26 · Genesis 3:22 · Isaiah 48:16 · Isaiah 63:9–10

The Deity of the Son

John 1:1–3, 14 · John 8:58 · Colossians 1:15–17 · Colossians 2:9 · Hebrews 1:3 · Romans 9:5 · Philippians 2:6

The Deity and Personhood of the Spirit

Acts 5:3–4 · 1 Corinthians 2:10–11 · John 14:26 · Romans 8:26–27 · Ephesians 4:30 · 2 Peter 1:21

Explicit Trinitarian Passages

Matthew 3:16–17 · Matthew 28:19 · John 14–16 · Romans 8:9–17 · Ephesians 1:3–14 · 2 Corinthians 13:14 · 1 Peter 1:2

Discussion Questions

1. The Shema declares 'the LORD is one' (Deuteronomy 6:4). How does the New Testament's revelation of the Trinity fulfil and deepen this declaration rather than contradict it? What is the difference between a doctrine that develops and a doctrine that contradicts?
2. Compare Matthew 3:16–17, Matthew 28:19, and 2 Corinthians 13:14. What does each passage reveal about the relationship between the three persons? What would be lost theologically if any one of the three were absent from these texts?
3. John 1:1 states that the Word was both 'with God' and 'was God.' How do these two claims together rule out both modalism and Arianism? Why is this level of precision in Christology important for the gospel?
4. The doctrine distinguishes between the immanent Trinity (God as he is in himself) and the economic Trinity (God as he acts in redemption). In the economic Trinity, the Son submits to the Father. Does this imply the Son is ontologically inferior to the Father? What scriptures bear on this question?

5. Trace the Trinitarian structure of salvation in Ephesians 1:3–14: What is the specific work attributed to the Father in verses 3–6? To the Son in verses 7–12? To the Spirit in verses 13–14? What does this reveal about how each person contributes to the one work of redemption?
6. Jesus prays in John 17:21 that his disciples would be one 'just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you.' What does Trinitarian unity look like as a model for the unity of the church? In what ways does your church community reflect or fail to reflect this pattern?
7. Many Christians claim to believe in the Trinity but effectively pray only to Jesus, or relate almost exclusively to the Holy Spirit, or speak of God the Father with little personal warmth. How does a richer, more explicitly Trinitarian faith change the way we pray, worship, and understand our own salvation? What practical adjustments might this call for in your own devotional life?

Closing Application: Worshipping the Triune God

The doctrine of the Trinity is not a theological luxury for those with leisure for speculation. It is the bedrock of the gospel, the structure of salvation, and the ground of all Christian worship. When we are baptised into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we are baptised into the life of the triune God. When we pray, we enter the Trinitarian dynamic — the Spirit praying within us, the Son interceding above us, the Father hearing us in love. When we receive the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13:14), we are receiving the fullness of what it means to belong to this God.

To know God as he truly is — not as a bare Absolute, not as an impersonal force, not as a cosmic ruler who stands at a cold distance — but as the Father who is eternally love, the Son who is eternally given, the Spirit who is eternally the bond of that love — is to know something

that staggers the intellect and ravishes the heart. The mystery is real. We will not exhaust it in this life. But we are invited to enter it, to dwell in it, to be transformed by it.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all." — 2 Corinthians 13:14, ESV

Let the study of the Trinity not produce pride of knowledge but depth of worship. Let it not remain in the mind but descend into prayer, gratitude, and love. The God who is one in three persons is not an idea to be mastered but a Person — three Persons — to be known, trusted, and adored forever. To him be all glory, honour, and praise: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, world without end. Amen.