

The Trinity: One God or Three?

JUDAISM, Islam and a number of pseudo Christian cults often accuse orthodox Christians of worshipping three Gods: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This accusation reflects a serious misunderstanding of orthodox Christianity. Christianity insists that one God exists in Trinity: God has three "persons," but only one "essence."

Tertullian (c. A.D. 160-220) was the first to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity in the language of "persons" and "essence." He wrote that God exists in "three *Persons*—*the* Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost" (*Against Praxeas*, ch. 2). The doctrine of the Trinity was affirmed in principle at the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325) and reflected in the later Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381). These councils testified that this doctrine had been handed down through the church from the apostles themselves.

The creed most churches today recognize as the Nicene Creed (which was actually formalized by the Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381) is perhaps the most familiar early formulation of Trinitarian doctrine. It distinctly treats the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as individual persons within the Godhead. In its Synodical Letter of A.D. 382, the Council of Constantinople also formulated the earliest ecumenical version of this doctrine that uses the explicit terms "person" and "essence:" "There is one Godhead, Power and Substance of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost; the dignity being equal, and the majesty being equal in three perfect hypostases, i.e. three perfect persons" (NPNF 2, vol. 14.1, pp. 188-190). This is still the standard definition today.

The basic idea is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are coequal and coeternal centers of self-awareness, each being "I" in relation to the other two, who are "you," and each partaking of the full divine essence along with the other two. They are not three roles played by one person (*modalism*), nor are they three gods in a cluster (*tritheism*). The three persons are eternally together and cooperating. Each person is involved in everything the others do, for the Father is in the Son and the Son in him (in 10:38), and the Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (Ro 8:9). But Scripture also emphasizes general distinctions among the works of the three persons, the Father initiating, the Son complying and the Spirit

executing the joint will of all three. We must pay equal attention to, and give equal honor to, all three persons, while always remembering that we worship only one God in these three persons.

Although the doctrine of the Trinity is not explicitly stated in the Bible, it rightly summarizes the teaching of Scripture. The Old Testament constantly insists that there is only one God, the self-revealed Creator, who must be worshiped and loved exclusively (Dt 6:4-5; Isa 44:6-45:25). The New Testament agrees (Mk 12:29-30; 1Co 8:4; Eph 4:6; 1Ti 2:5), yet it speaks of three personal agents as fully divine: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The New Testament affirms Jesus' divinity and the rightness of worshiping him and praying to him (Jn 1:1-5; 20:28-31; cf. Jn 1:6-18; Ac 7:59; Ro 9:5; 10:9-13; 2Co 12:7-9; Php 2:5-6; Col 1:15-17; 2:9; Heb 1:1-12; 1 Pe 3:15; see also theological article "[Jesus Christ, God and Man](#)"). It also indicates that the Holy Spirit is a "Counselor" like Christ (Jn 14:16) and that he is at least as wonderful and valuable to the church as the incarnate Lord (Jn 14:16-17,26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15). To be as valuable to the church as Jesus is, the Holy Spirit must also be God, a fact the church has recognized from the beginning (Ac 5:3-4).

Christ himself assumed the doctrine of the Trinity when he prescribed baptism "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Mt 28:19)—the three persons share one name because they are one God. We also see the doctrine of the Trinity in places that demonstrate the equal contributions of each person. For example, at Jesus' baptism the Father acknowledged the Son and the Spirit showed his presence in the Son's life and ministry (Mk 1:9-11). In Ephesians 1:3-14 we read that salvation is a work of the Trinity: the Father electing, the Son accomplishing and the Spirit applying. We also find many other passages in the New Testament that mention the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit as equal persons (e.g., Ro 15:16; 2Co 13:14; Heb 9:14; 1Pe 1:2). Although the technical, theological language used to describe the Trinity (i.e., "three persons, one essence") does not appear in the New Testament, Trinitarian faith and thinking are present throughout its pages. Therefore, the Trinity must be acknowledged as a Biblical doctrine.

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