

How Can God Exist in Three Persons?

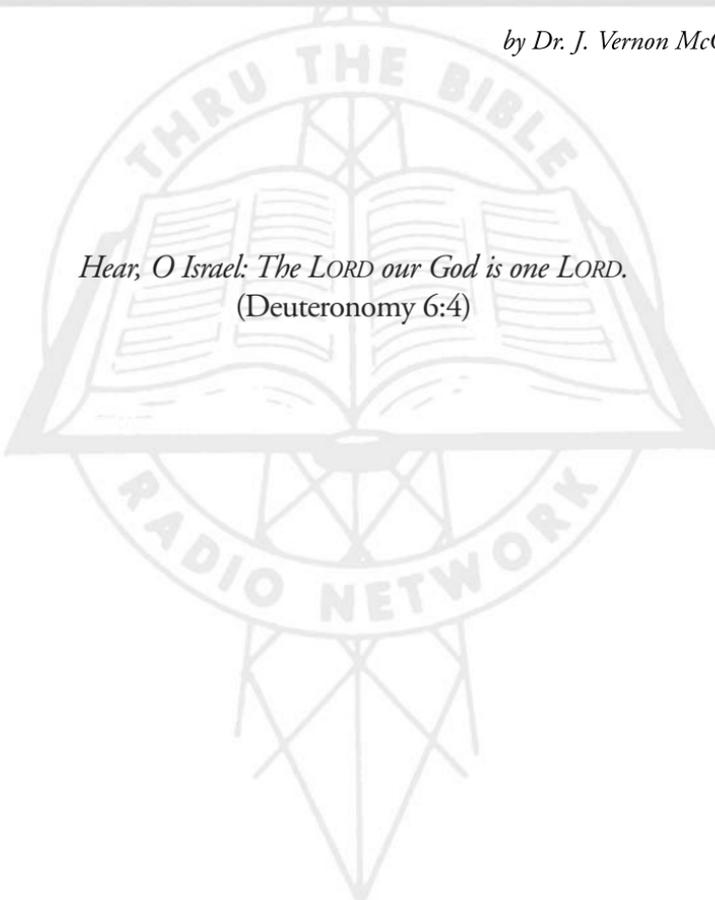
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*Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.
(Deuteronomy 6:4)*

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How Can God Exist in Three Persons?

Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the great English poet, in a conversation with Robert Browning remarked, “I read all your poetry, but nine-tenths of it I do not understand.” Robert Browning answered him by saying, “Sir, a person of your caliber ought to be satisfied if he understands one-tenth.”

Well, I have spent over a quarter of a century in a serious study of the Word of God, and I confess to my appalling ignorance in certain areas, especially in the subject of the Trinity. If you could have met me the year I graduated from seminary, you would have heard me give absolute answers to all of your questions. But I am unable to do that today. In fact, I would be content if I understood one-tenth of the great truth concerning our triune God.

I assure you that with all of my heart I believe in the Trinity. I revel and rejoice in it, believing that it is not only a great truth but also one of the unique truths of the Christian faith. But I confess that I find it to be an enigmatic mystery, an inscrutable riddle. I find that it is complicated, complex, bewildering, and impossible to explain.

One reason for this is that the Trinity is not geared to this mechanical age. Tensions and pressures hurry us through life. A cartoonist has pictured a man sitting in a one-counter restaurant, giving his order to the waitress. He is saying, “I have to be at work in twenty-three minutes. I want one-minute oatmeal, three-minute eggs, two-minute bacon, forty-five second toast, and instant coffee.” An age that goes at a pace like that is not an age that will know very much about the Trinity. The Trinity cannot be explained in just a few moments. It is doubtful if it can ever be satisfactorily explained, yet we need to study it carefully.

For several hundred years after the apostles lived, the Trinity was a most important subject to intelligent men. Men like Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Origen, and Augustine gave themselves to the study of this great doctrine. It was the all-engrossing topic that men of keen intellect spent their time pondering. As a result, the doctrine of the Trinity broadly affected European life for centuries. From the day of the apostles until about the seventh century it was very important to multitudes of people. The economic, political, and social spheres were all essentially influenced by this truth. Rulers reigned, armies marched, and diplomats convened as this truth helped shape the destiny of Europe.

All so-called theological liberalism is basically off at this point. Back of the denial of the deity of Christ is the denial of the Trinity. This denial came into America by way of New England through the Congregational churches, which eventually became largely Unitarian churches. There is an ancient adage which warns that those who try to understand the Trinity lose their minds and those who deny the Trinity lose their souls. We are caught in that kind of dilemma. Although we shall not be able to understand it fully, or perhaps not even satisfactorily, we shall at least stand on the fringe of this great truth and worship.

We shall look at the *definition* of the Trinity, then the *declaration* in Scripture of the Trinity, and finally *illustrations* of the Trinity from nature.

The Trinity Defined

First is the definition of the Trinity. What do we mean by “the Trinity”? We mean three Persons in the Godhead. There are two extremes that we need to avoid. They are like Scylla on one hand and Charybdis on the other (two equally dangerous monsters), and we need to sail our little bark between them.

The initial danger, when speaking of the Trinity, is to have in mind three gods. That is a false concept. Then there is the other extreme of holding that the one God has expressed Himself in three different ways, which is also false. This error, known as modal-Trinitarianism, was thoroughly answered by some of the giants of the faith whom we have already named.

I turn now to what I believe is the best statement made on this subject. It is in the “Westminster Confession of Faith.” The question is asked: “How many persons are there in the Godhead?” The answer is: “There are three persons in the Godhead: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.” That definition is the finest to be found.

Now notice that three Persons constitute one Being, one God. Peter, James, and John are not a trinity. They are three persons, but they are not the same, they are not equal. There are three chairs before me. They look alike and probably are constructed of the same material – possibly of the same tree – yet they are not a trinity.

God is one Being, and yet He is three Persons. However, these three have one nature. For instance, a great many like to make a distinction by saying that God is holy, Christ is love, and the Holy Spirit is infinite. Such is a false distinction, for God is holy, Christ is holy, and the Holy Spirit is holy; God is love (that is one of

His definitions), Christ is love, and the Holy Spirit is love; God is infinite, Christ is infinite, and the Holy Spirit is infinite.

The three Persons are also the same in their attributes, in their will, and in their purpose. What one wills, all will. When the Lord Jesus came to earth He made this very clear. He said, “I have come to do My Father’s will.” What He had come to do was in harmony with the Father, for all three were in agreement. He came to do the Father’s will; He came to do His will, which was evident; and He came to do the will of the Holy Spirit – He was led and guided by the Spirit of God.

Each one is God. Christ did not become a Son over time. He was always the only begotten Son of God. You see, God is called the everlasting Father, and you cannot have an everlasting Father unless you have an everlasting Son. There never was a time when Christ *became* the Son – He eternally occupies that position in the Trinity.

Another false way of stating it is to say that God is the Father, Christ is the Son, and the Holy Spirit is sort of like the Grandson. There was never a time when God was not the Father; there was never a time when Christ was not the Son; and there was never a time when the Holy Spirit was not the Holy Spirit. There are some who will say that because the Lord Jesus Christ came to this earth as a man, He is not equal with the Father. This is also wrong, for He said, “The Father and I are one.”

They have the same nature. There are not three gods and they are never opposed to each other. What one does all of them do. The clarity of this fact can do nothing but make us stand on the fringe and know that we are in the presence of the Infinite.

The Trinity Declared by Scripture

We come now to the declaration in Scripture of the Trinity. I hasten to say that the word “trinity” is not used in Scripture. But neither is the word “atonement” in the New Testament (the word incorrectly translated as “atonement” in Romans 5:11 [KJV] is actually “reconciliation”). But although the word does not appear in the New Testament, it certainly teaches what the Old Testament presents as the Atonement. It is not necessary to have the word, because that which the word signifies is taught in the New Testament Scripture. Since the word “trinity” does not appear in Scripture, does the Bible actually teach the doctrine of the Trinity? If it does not, we can dismiss the subject and forget about it. But if the Word of God does teach the Trinity, then we should believe it.

Someone may say, “Before I believe it I want to understand it.” If truth is only that which we understand, may I say that there is not much that is true today, for we are quite limited in our understanding. On such a basis, trigonometry and organic chemistry are not true because I don’t understand them. In college I had no desire to understand them, and today I still have no desire to understand these two subjects. Yet I do not take the awkward and ignorant position that they are not true subjects – they are. Thankfully, truth is not limited to my little mind or to your little mind. There are those today who, because they cannot understand the Trinity, want to dismiss it. However, the real question is: *Does the Word of God teach the Trinity?*

The Trinity in the Old Testament

I turn back now to the Old Testament because it clearly teaches the Trinity. The verse of Scripture that is probably the greatest doctrinal statement in the Old Testament is found in the Book of Deuteronomy:

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD.
(Deuteronomy 6:4)

If you want a literal translation, it is, “Hear, O Israel: the LORD our plural God is one God.” The word “one” is *echad*, the same word used back in Genesis 2:24 when God said, concerning Adam and Eve, “and they shall be one flesh.” Two persons become one. In that mysterious relationship of marriage, two people are made one, which is evident always in the child. They shall be one flesh, though two – two in one. This is the word used in Deuteronomy 6:4, “Hear, O Israel: Elohim – our plural God, our Trinity, tri-personality – is one God.” The mysterious One, like Adam and Eve made one flesh, is three Persons in one. That is a wonderful truth and unfathomable by human reason.

Scripture, you see, teaches the Trinity. The Old Testament repeatedly declares the plurality of God. If you go back to the first chapter of Genesis, you will see this again:

And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:26, 27)

Notice that God said, “Let *us* make man in *our* image.” It is plural. Then in the eleventh chapter of Genesis, at the tower of Babel, God said:

Come, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another's speech. So the LORD scattered them abroad from there upon the face of all the earth: and they ceased building the city. (Genesis 11:7, 8)

We see here that the LORD scattered them, but He said, “Let *us* go down.” The Trinity came down, but He is still one God.

Moving on in the Old Testament we find that Isaiah said:

Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me. (Isaiah 6:8)

Before this, Isaiah had gone into the temple and heard the seraphim saying, “Holy, holy, holy” – not twice, not four times, but three times. It was a praise to the triune God. Holy is the Father, holy is the Son, and holy is the Spirit.

In Ecclesiastes we read the familiar words, “Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth...” (Ecclesiastes 12:1). The word “Creator” is *Boreacho* which means the plural “Creators.” “Remember now thy Creators, thy Trinity” – for the Trinity was involved in creation, as you well know. We are told that God the Father was the Creator, “In the beginning God created....” Both the Gospel of John (1:3) and the Epistle to the Colossians (1:16) tell us that the Lord Jesus Christ was the Creator. Also we are told that the Holy Spirit of God was the Creator, “...The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2). Thus it is evident that the Trinity was involved in creation just as the Trinity is involved in redemption.

In the Old Testament, Israel witnessed to a polytheistic world – a civilization with many gods – concerning the unity of the Godhead. That was the mission of Israel in the ancient world. The mission of the church in this day is to a world not given to polytheism (the worship of many gods), but to atheism (the worship of no god). To our godless civilization we are to witness to the Trinity. For that reason the Unitarian doctrine that God exists only in one person is a damnable heresy which has injured America more than any other thing. It is what has softened and weakened this great country of ours.

The Trinity in the New Testament

The Trinity is an explicit and peculiar doctrine of the New Testament.

The record in the Gospels of the baptism of the Lord Jesus Christ graphically presents the Trinity. At the time the Lord Jesus was baptized, He saw the Holy Spirit as a dove coming upon Him, and the voice of the Father from heaven spoke, saying, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). The Trinity – the Father, Son and Holy Spirit – is clearly brought before us on this occasion.

Again, in the baptismal formula which Jesus gave to His apostles when He sent them out, He said, “...Baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28:19).

Paul, in his apostolic benediction, includes the three Persons of the Godhead:

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all.
Amen.* (2 Corinthians 13:14, emphasis mine)

The Lord Jesus even taught His disciples the doctrine of the Trinity:

And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter [like I am, on the same par with me], that he may abide with you forever. (John 14:16, emphasis mine)

The New Testament abounds with the teaching of the Trinity, for it repeatedly names the three Persons of the Godhead. We have a *Father* who is God.

To all that be in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 1:7, emphasis mine)

We have presented to us in the New Testament a *Son* who is God.

But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever; a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom. (Hebrews 1:8, emphasis mine)

Also the *Holy Spirit* is presented as God. At the incident involving Ananias and Sapphira, Peter said:

...Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back part of the price of the land? While it remained, was it not thine own? And after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? Why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? Thou hast not lied unto men, but unto God. (Acts 5:3, 4, emphasis mine)

Peter is saying here, “You have lied to the Holy Spirit, and when you have lied to the Holy Spirit you have lied to God.” The Holy Spirit is God.

The Trinity Illustrated by Nature

We come now to our third point, illustrations from nature of the Trinity.

I repeat the question: Is it possible to understand the Trinity? If the answer must be either “yes” or “no,” it has to be an emphatic *no*. The centuries have revealed that the intellect of the genius, the perspicuity of the philosopher, the comprehension of the scientist, and the lucidity of the orator have not been enough to make clear the Trinity. The reason is this: There are no perfect examples that can be used, because it is impossible to demonstrate the infinite God by finite creation. We cannot employ the creation to illustrate adequately the Creator in His person. Now it is true that the *love* of God can be illustrated by human love. You can take that feeling of love and translate it into human terminology. You see a mother bending over the crib of her little baby and somehow it illustrates something of God’s great pulsating love for us. But in nature you find no such illustration for the Trinity. Yet I shall dare to pull in several illustrations from nature that may be somewhat helpful.

Man Is a Trinity

First of all, I want to look at man himself.

And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly [your total personality]; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 5:23)

Man was created in the image of God, and so man is a trinity – body, soul, and spirit. Believe me, if we could understand human nature, we would have a better understanding of God. But we do not understand even ourselves.

Psychology has wrestled with this. When psychology began, it dealt only with the spirit or the soul. Then it found it was on the wrong track, and it swung over to the opposite extreme, as in my day when the psychology studied in college was behaviorism. It taught that we are only physical, that we are like a series of push-buttons. You push *this* button and you get *that* reaction. The difficulty was that you push a certain button on one fellow and get a certain reaction, but you push the same button on another fellow and you get a different reaction.

Since that theory did not work, psychology changed its mind again and said that we are more than body and more than just spirit. Psychology now admits that man is a three-fold being: man is sarcoic, man is psychic, and man is pneumatic. In other words, there is the psychological part, there is the spiritual part, and there is the body. We are more than body; we are more than just mind; we are more than spirit.

By the way, I am thankful we are more than spirit. What a relief it was to me when I found out that I was not going to be an angel. When I was a little fellow in Sunday school they taught us to sing, "I want to be an angel, and with the angels sing." Well, *I* never wanted to be an angel because I thought angels flitted around without bodies, which never suited me at all. I am thankful that throughout eternity we are to have bodies. We have been created a trinity – body, soul, and spirit.

When we say that we do not understand the Trinity, we must confess that neither do we understand ourselves. When we better understand man, we shall understand something of the Trinity which is God.

Music Is a Trinity

Let me move now into another realm of nature – the field of music. I am told that in music there are seven tones on the major scale but that there are only three structural tones. These are the principal chords: the tonic, the subdominant, and the dominant. These are the three major tones, and out of them comes all of our music. You cannot have harmony without these three.

There is the harmony of heaven. The Word of God speaks of it back before man was created “when the morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy” (Job 38:7). This heavenly music was based on a trinity – you cannot have harmony without it.

Thus in the realm of music you have the three that make one, and the one is harmony.

Water Is a Trinity

Let us move further into nature and consider water. Water is used in the Scriptures as a picture of God. Listen to the psalm that is David’s heart cry:

As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God. My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God.... (Psalm 42:1, 2)

David is saying here, “What the water brook is to a little animal, that is what God is to me.”

Then notice another psalm in which water repeatedly pictures God:

Thou visitest the earth, and waterest it; thou greatly enrichest it with the river of God, which is full of water; thou preparest them grain, when thou hast so provided for it. (Psalm 65:9)

Throughout the Old Testament water is a picture of God, so that when we come to the New Testament it is not surprising to hear the Lord Jesus cry on that last day of the feast, “If any man thirst, let him come unto me, and drink” (John 7:37), for water is a picture of God.

Water is also a picture of the Trinity, for water exists in three states. It exists in flowing water, it exists in ice, and it exists in steam. They are the same substance, but they are absolutely three different things.

Ice, I would suggest, reminds us of God the Father – stability, immutability. Steam reminds us of the Holy Spirit – the power of God. Water reminds us of the Lord Jesus Christ – the water of life today.

Light Is a Trinity

For our final illustration, let us consider light. We are told that God *dwells* in light, and that He *is* light. “In him is no darkness at all” (1 John 1:5). One of the glorious prospects of our future eternal home is that there will be no night there.

Light is probably the most expressive and adequate illustration that we have of the Trinity. God is light; God is holy. It is the attribute of the Father, but Christ also is the light of the world. He declared this attribute when a great sinner was brought to Him, “I am the light of the world...” (John 8:12). He was manifest. He is the “light” in John 1:5: “And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not” (KJV).

The Holy Spirit is called light. That lampstand back in the tabernacle and then the temple bore lights that spoke of the Holy Spirit of God. Zechariah was given a vision of the lampstand, which was supplied with oil directly from the olive trees instead of through

a middleman. In case there was any question, God provided the explanation: “Not by might, nor by power, but by my *Spirit*, saith the LORD of hosts” (Zechariah 4:6, italics mine).

In the Book of Revelation, John was given the vision of God’s throne which is characterized by light:

And out of the throne proceeded lightnings and thunder-claps, and voices; and there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven spirits of God [the complete Spirit of God – the Holy Spirit].
(Revelation 4:5)

Light is probably the best picture we have of God. Paul brings all three Persons together under this figure:

For God, who commanded the light to shine out of darkness, hath shone in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. (2 Corinthians 4:6)

Now notice that we have been called out of darkness into His marvelous light. We today are to walk in light. We have made the error of talking about *how* we walk rather than *where* we walk. When a man walks according to the how, he always pleases himself, because he can make up his own little rules and say he is spiritual. It is not *how* we walk but *where* we walk that is all-important. Are we walking in the light of the Word of God?

Every ray of light is pure white, and we always associate that white with God. You can pass a ray of light through a prism, which will divide it into three primary colors. These three elementary colors are yellow, red, and blue. Yellow speaks of the holiness of the Father; red, speaks of God the Son who shed His blood for you and me; blue speaks of the Holy Spirit, for blue is the color of truth, and He is the Spirit of truth. You can push the yellow, red,

and blue lights back through the prism and get one white light – three in one.

I am told that the flowers we see do not have any color whatsoever, that actually they and everything else are colorless. I look at these multicolored flowers and am told that although they are colorless, they have the power to absorb or reject the light rays falling upon them. For example, the yellow daffodil absorbs all the color rays except yellow, and since it rejects yellow, I see it as a yellow daffodil! I don't understand that at all. And if I cannot understand light, do you expect me to understand the Trinity? Yet this illustration from nature helps me.

Selah

When you look at yourself you see a trinity; when you hear music you hear a trinity; when you drink water you are drinking a trinity; when you are walking in light you are walking in a trinity.

We have been treading on the high places – I recognize that. I do not know if you have gone along with me, but I trust that you have. I hope that somehow or other the Spirit of God has let you stand on the fringe and see something of the blessed Trinity. There is nothing more awe-inspiring and wonderful in the universe. Learning how to get to the moon was a triviality compared to the privilege of learning, even in our limited capacity, something of the magnificence of the Trinity.

The Trinity's Plan for Man

Back in the beginning (when I say beginning, I mean before God had created anything) there was no vast universe as we have it today, there were no angels, there was no creation at all. God was alone. Now consider this: God was love, yet you cannot have love unless

you have an object of love. But there has always been the Trinity and the love they have for themselves. God the Father loves the Son, He is careful to tell us that. The Son loves the Father, He tells us so. The Holy Spirit loves both of them, and because of His love for them He is in the world today – this sin-stained world – carrying out their work and His work.

Back in eternity when God was alone, this great plan by which He is working today opened up for Him as the best plan. We know now that it meant He was to have a creature called man and that this little man would lift his fist in rebellion against his holy God. And his holy God must strike him down. A holy God would be just and righteous to breathe this little world out of existence. And, friends, He would not miss it, for He has other universes bigger and, I think, better than this. Why does He hang on to it? Because in His plan He wants the fellowship of that man down there in sin.

Perhaps at that time the Father said, “I will have to judge that man.” The Son said, “Because we love him, I’ll go down and die for him.” The Father said, “I’ll send you.” And the Holy Spirit said, “I’ll go down afterwards, and though I am blasphemed against and insulted, I shall stay in the world with that little miserable man and try to bring him back into a relationship with Us.”

This is the reason the Scripture says that Christ was the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world. Friends, the cross was not an ambulance that God sent to the scene of an accident. The cross is not God’s emergency air-raid shelter that He put up hurriedly to meet a surprise attack. Redemption was in God’s great plan at the beginning. According to Galatians 4:4 the Father sent down the Son in the fullness of time, and He came

forth – born of a woman, made under the law – that He might redeem those who were under the law and that He might redeem you today.

The triune God is involved not only in creation but in your redemption and in my redemption. God the Father loves you; He sent His Son. God the Son loves you; He died for you. And God the Holy Spirit loves you, for He is now at your heart's door knocking, wanting to come into your life.

Our triune God! No, you will not understand Him. He would not be God if you could. But you can bow in adoration and praise and yield that little, stubborn, rebellious heart to your Redeemer, Jesus Christ.

Heavenly Father, we do come to You, thanking You that You have revealed Yourself. And yet, O God, when we consider that which You have revealed concerning Yourself, we find that we are standing on the shore of an infinite sea. We feel like a little child playing with a bucket and a shovel, a little child who knows nothing of those vast shores and that vast sea. Somehow, by the power of the Holy Spirit, push back the clouds, open our minds and our hearts to receive You, even the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

We thank You today that You are infinitely concerned about us and that You are engaged in a plan and program to redeem us and bring us to Yourself.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen.