

Do You Believe in the Trinity?

by Lynnford Beachy

“Do you believe in the Trinity?” is one of the most common questions asked to determine orthodoxy. Yet, when this question is really understood, you may be surprised at your answer. Many people think that if a person believes in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then they believe in the Trinity, but there are many people who believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who do not believe in the Trinity, even though some of them think they do. There is much more to it than just believing in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The majority of Christians in the world today claim to believe in the Trinity, even though most will admit that they cannot understand it. With this widespread confusion regarding this doctrine, it is no wonder that among Trinitarians there are many different views about God. Much of this confusion results from the relative ignorance of what the Trinity doctrine really is. Many pastors and church leaders refuse to preach on this subject because they say that they cannot understand it themselves and therefore they feel incapable of expounding upon it to others. The confusion regarding this subject is heightened by the often-repeated saying that the Trinity is a mystery beyond our understanding, and should not be investigated. This has caused many people to ignore the subject of knowing God, and settle for some unknowable mystery in His place.

From my own experience I have witnessed some of the confusion on this subject. I have met several people who quickly claim that they believe in the Trinity but, upon investigation, I have found that they really do not believe in the Trinity. Even more surprising, there are some, even ministers, who openly denounce the doctrine of the Trinity, but the doctrine they promote is in reality the Trinity itself, or some very close variation of it, even though they wish to call it by another name, such as “Godhead.” You can call a chicken a dog all you want, but it will never change the fact that the chicken is still a chicken.

Because of the confusion that people have about God, and the implications this can have upon the gospel, we would like to examine some of the most popular views about God and compare them with Scripture. With this information you will be readily able to identify the Trinity doctrine as well as some other views about God that are sometimes called by that name, regardless of what the propagators of those doctrines wish to call them, and what words they use to describe them. I pray that after reading this study you will be prepared to accept the truth of Scripture and reject all man-made theories about God. I also pray that you will “be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason” for what you believe. (1Peter 3:15)

The four primary teachings about God that exist among Christians are Trinitarianism, Modalism (also called “Jesus only”), Unitarianism, and Tritheism. As we look at the details of these false teachings about God, keep in mind that each one is calculated to deny the literal sonship of Christ and His complete, divine death on the cross, leaving us with nothing more than a human sacrifice for sins, and no real conception of God’s love.

The Official Catholic View

The main points of the official Catholic view of God, also known as the “orthodox Trinity,” are accepted by most Protestant denominations with little variation. This is the only view that can truly be called “the Trinity” since they are the first ones to have defined this doctrine. On page 11 of the book, *Handbook for Today’s Catholic*, we read,

“The mystery of the Trinity is the central doctrine of the Catholic Faith. Upon it are based all the other teachings of the Church...

“The Church studied this mystery with great care and, after four centuries of clarification, decided to state the doctrine in this way: in the unity of the Godhead there are three Persons,—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit...”

The fundamental teaching of the orthodox Trinity is the idea that there are three distinct persons in one Being (one substance), called God. You will notice that with this usage of the words “person” and “being” they cannot mean the same thing, because it takes three “persons” to make up this one being. It is very important to understand this distinction in order to comprehend the different views of God. A being is all that comprises an individual—the spirit, soul, mind, consciousness, will and body. Person, on the other hand, can have several different meanings in theological circles, which we will discuss in more detail later in this study.

To help define the orthodox Trinity, I will quote from the Athanasian Creed, which is accepted as truth by the Catholic Church and most Protestant Churches. (See Philip Schaff’s *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Section 132, page 696.) The author of the Athanasian Creed is unknown, but portions of it seem to have been taken from the writings of Augustine. The Athanasian Creed says, in part:

The Athanasian Creed

1. Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith;
2. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly.
3. But this is the catholic faith: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity;
4. Neither confounding the persons; nor dividing the substance.
5. For there is one person of the Father: another of the Son: another of the Holy Ghost.
6. But the Godhead of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coëternal...
15. So the Father is God: the Son is God: and the Holy Ghost is God;
16. And yet there are not three Gods; but one God...

19. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord

20. So are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there are three Gods, or three Lords...

25. And in this Trinity none is before or after another: none is greater or less than another.

26. But the whole three Persons are co-eternal together, and co-equal.

27. So that in all things, as aforesaid, the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.

28. He therefore that will be saved, must thus think of the Trinity.

(The Athanasian Creed as quoted in Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Section 132, page 690-693)

The Orthodox Trinity

The orthodox Trinity teaches that there is one Being called God who is composed of three persons. Each of these persons are said to be distinct, self-conscious persons who are the same age (“none is before or after another”), and they are said to be exactly equal in rank and power (“none is greater or less than another”). However, the definition goes much deeper than this because, according to the orthodox Trinity, the three persons are not really persons as we would think of a person. Normally we would think of a person as an individual being, but this is not what is meant by the use of the word “person” in the orthodox Trinity. The propagators of this doctrine say the word “person,” when applied to God, is really inadequate because there is no other idea that can be expressed by the word “person” that is similar to the idea that is meant when it is applied to God. That is why most theologians prefer the term *hypostasis* rather than person because it is a word that refers to the theological concept of person that is half-way between mere personality and an individual being. This concept is explained in the following way:

“The doctrine of a subsistence in the substance of the Godhead brings to view a species of existence that is so anomalous and unique, that the human mind derives little or no aid from those analogies which assist it in all other cases. The hypostasis is a real subsistence, — a solid essential form of existence, and not a mere emanation, or energy, or manifestation, — but it is intermediate between substance and attributes. It is not identical with the substance, for there are not three substances [or beings]. It is not identical with attributes, for the three Persons each and equally possess all the divine attributes... Hence the human mind is called upon to grasp the notion of a species of existence that is totally *sui generis*, and not capable of illustration by any of the ordinary comparisons and analogies.” (Dr. Shedd, *History of Christian Doctrine*, vol. i. p. 365 as quoted in Philip Schaff's *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Section 130, pages 676, 677)

This strange conception of God is so difficult to understand that Augustine did not even understand it. Augustine was the most influential church writer to define the Trinity, and

he is very much respected as an authority among Trinitarians. Of him, Philip Schaff wrote, “Of all the fathers, next to Athanasius, Augustine performed the greatest service for this dogma [the Trinity].” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Section 131, page 684)

Augustine said, “If we be asked to define the Trinity, we can only say, it is not this or that.” (Augustine, as quoted in Philip Schaff’s *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Section 130, page 672)

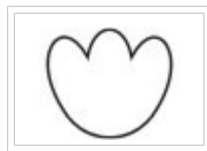
Athanasius, one of the earliest and very influential propagators of the Trinity, “has candidly confessed that whenever he forced his understanding to meditate upon the divinity of the Logos, his toilsome and unavailing efforts recoiled on themselves; that the more he thought, the less he comprehended; and the more he wrote, the less capable was he of expressing his thoughts.” (Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, chapter 5, paragraph 1, as quoted in Alonzo T. Jones’ *The Two Republics*, page 334)

Athanasius and Augustine, the two men who did more to formulate the doctrine of the Trinity than anyone else, both admitted that they did not understand it and could not define it.

The Orthodox Trinity Illustrated

The best way I can illustrate the orthodox Trinitarian conception of God would be to draw one circle with three protrusions:

The Orthodox Trinity



Three Persons (hypostasis) United in
One Being

The orthodox Trinity is the official Catholic teaching that the one God of the Bible is one being composed of three self-conscious hypostases. Hypostasis is the Greek word used by Orthodox Trinitarians to describe a supposed species of existence unique to the Trinity that is halfway between attributes and a being and cannot be defined further than to say it is not attributes, and it is not a being.

This concept of God, as confusing as it is, is the most commonly accepted view among Christians.

The orthodox Trinity denies the literal sonship and the complete death of Christ. It denies the death of Christ, because it is claimed that the divine Son of God is part of God and

therefore cannot be separated from Him in death because God cannot die. Let us allow a Trinitarian writer to demonstrate this himself.

Augustine wrote, “No dead man can raise himself. He [Christ] only was able to raise Himself, who though His Body was dead, was not dead. For He raised up that which was dead. He raised up Himself, who in Himself was alive, but in His Body that was to be raised was dead. For not the Father only, of whom it was said by the Apostle, ‘Wherefore God also hath exalted Him,’ raised the Son, but the Lord also raised Himself, that is, His Body.” (*Nicene & Post-Nicene Fathers*, series 1, volume 6, page 656, St. Augustine, “Sermons on Selected Lessons of the New Testament”)

It is true that a dead man cannot raise himself from the dead. It is also true that Christ died. The divine, glorified Jesus Christ said, “I... was dead.” (Revelation 1:18) Since Christ was truly dead, then He could not have raised Himself. The Bible does not teach that Christ raised Himself from the dead. Instead, it says at least thirty times that the Father raised Him from the dead. For example, Galatians 1:1 says, “Paul, an apostle, (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, who raised him from the dead.)”

I find Augustine’s conclusion that Christ “was not dead” to be repulsive to reason, contrary to Scripture, and injurious to the power of the gospel. Yet, this is the logical conclusion that must be reached if we believe that Christ is a part of the Being of God the Father. The believers in this doctrine are left with the conclusion that the death of Christ was nothing more than the death of a human that had been temporarily filled with the “second person” of the Trinity. No matter how exalted the pre-existent Son was; no matter how glorious, how powerful, or even eternal; if the manhood only died, the sacrifice was only human. Without believing that Christ died, how can anyone appreciate the love of God in giving His Son to die for our sins?

The orthodox Trinity doctrine denies the sonship of Christ, for if Christ, the Son of God, was some type of projection from the one God and part of the being of God, then He could not properly be called a Son of the Father, as was demonstrated by the Catholic acceptance of the doctrine of “eternal generation.”

Modalism (“Jesus only”)

Modalism, also called “Jesus only,” is the idea that God is one person who operates in three different modes. Please notice number 4 of the Athanasian creed. This has specific reference to Modalism and Tritheism. It says, “Neither confounding the persons [Modalism]; nor dividing the substance [Tritheism].” According to orthodox Trinitarians Modalism confounded the three persons into one person, claiming that God is one person who manifested Himself in three different modes at three different times. This idea is sometimes called Sabellianism because a man by the name of Sabellius is credited as the one who invented this theory. Here is what Dr. Philip Schaff had to say about this theory:

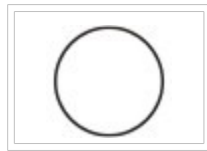
“His [Sabellius’] fundamental thought is, that the unity of God, without distinction in itself, unfolds or extends itself in the course of the world’s development in three different forms and periods of revelation and, after the completion of redemption, returns into unity. The Father reveals himself in the giving of the law or the Old Testament economy (not in the creation also, which in his view precedes the trinitarian revelation); the Son, in the incarnation; the Holy Ghost, in inspiration. The revelation of the Son ends with the ascension; the revelation of the Spirit goes on in regeneration and sanctification.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 2, Section 152, page 582)

This idea, according to orthodox Trinitarians, confounds the three persons of the Trinity into one person who acts in different modes at different times—sometimes He acts like a Father, sometimes a Son, and sometimes the Holy Spirit. This idea is called by several names, including, Modalism, Jesus only, and Sabellianism.

Modalism Illustrated

A way to illustrate Modalism would be to draw one circle:

Modalism



One Being who is
One Person with
Three consecutive modes or personalities

Modalism is the idea that there is one God who is one being who manifests Himself in three different modes at different times so that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not really three persons, but are merely three manifestations of the same individual person. There are some who believe in Modalism who claim that there are three *persons* in God, but to them the word *person* means “personality, characteristic, emanation, or manifestation” rather than a being or an hypostasis.

With this concept, there is no real Son of God. The only concept of a Son of God would have to be limited to the incarnation of Christ or to God revealing a manifestation of Himself, pretending to be His own Son. Either of these comes far short of portraying the love of God in giving His Son to die for sinners. In addition to denying the sonship of Christ, this theory also reduces the death of Christ to that of a mere human, for if Christ was only a manifestation of the one God, then He could not die, for the Bible says that God cannot die. (1 Timothy 6:16) So with this concept, the believer is left with the idea that God so loved the world that He came to earth pretending to be His own Son, and He pretended to die to reveal His great love for us. It is no wonder that there is a lack of

genuine love for God in this world, when the regenerating power of God's love, the heart of the gospel, is removed from God's people.

Unitarianism

Unitarianism is similar to Modalism in that it teaches that God is one individual person, but it differs in that Unitarians do not believe God has different modes in which He manifests Himself. Unitarians believe that Jesus was just a man, a prophet endowed with the Spirit of God rather than a divine being. They also deny that Christ died as a substitute for sinners. For evidence of this visit the Unitarian website www.americanunitarian.org. Also see William Channing's work entitled "Unitarian Christianity" at: www.channingmc.org/unitarianchristianity.htm.

Those who call themselves Unitarians are generally Christians but, perhaps ironically, it is the teaching that is believed in the Muslim religion, which is so openly opposed to Christianity.

The Muslim holy book, the Koran, says, "*Christ Jesus the son of Mary was (no more than) an apostle of Allah, and His Word, which He bestowed on Mary, and a Spirit proceeding from Him: So believe in Allah and His apostles. Say not 'Trinity': desist: It will be better for you: For Allah is One God: Glory be to Him: (Far Exalted is He) above having a son.*" (Koran 4:171)

With this concept Jesus could fully die, but since they reduce Christ to a mere man and deny that Christ's death truly atoned for our sins, they have less than a human sacrifice for sins; they have no sacrifice at all, either on the part of God or Christ. This concept, like the other false concepts we have examined, eliminates from its adherents any concept of God's love in giving His Son to die for their sins. It is no wonder that the Muslim world demonstrates such a cold and hate-filled religion, when their *god* has never revealed love to them. It is sad that some Christians adhere to this same concept of God and Jesus.

Tritheism

Tritheism is the concept that the one God of the Bible is really composed of three separate beings who are only one because they are perfectly united in their goals, plans and purposes and they work together. In this concept God is not an individual, but rather a group of three individuals, or a committee.

Again I would like to refer you to point number 4 in the Athanasian Creed. It says, "Neither confounding the persons; nor dividing the substance." The term, "nor dividing the substance" has direct reference to what is termed "Tritheism." According to orthodox Trinitarians, Tritheism divides the substance of God into three separate Beings, which would be three gods, hence it is labeled Tritheism. Notice the following definition of the "orthodox Trinity" in which the definition of Tritheism is brought out.

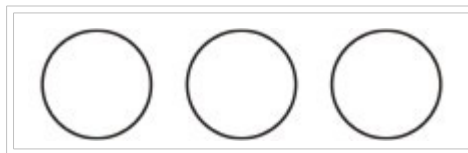
“...the term person [hypostasis] must not be taken here in the sense current among men, as if the three persons were three different individuals, or three self-conscious and separately acting beings. The trinitarian idea of personality lies midway between that of a mere form of manifestation, or a personation, which would lead to tritheism, and the idea of an independent, limited human personality, which would result in tritheism. In other words, it avoids the... unitarian Trinity of a threefold conception and aspect of one and the same being, and the... tritheistic trinity of three distinct and separate beings.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Section 130, pages 676, 677)

Notice here that Tritheism is defined as the idea that God exists in three persons who are “three different individuals, or three self-conscious and separately acting beings.”

Tritheism Illustrated

Tritheism could be illustrated by drawing three circles in the following way:

Tritheism



Three Persons who are
Three separate Beings
Who are *called* “one” because they are one in purpose and character

Tritheism is the idea that the one God of the Bible is not an individual Being, but rather a committee of three separate Beings who work together in perfect unity, while Modalism, on the other hand, is the idea that the one God of the Bible is one person who manifests Himself in three different ways. The Orthodox Trinity seeks to find a middle road between these two extremes, by inventing a species of existence called hypostasis, which is neither a manifestation, nor an individual being.

With the concept of Tritheism, there can be no real Son of God, for all there could be is one divine Being playing the role, or pretending to be the Son of another one of the divine Beings.

As an example of this theory of role playing I will quote from an author who promotes it.

In 1996 Gordon Jenson, who was the president of Spicer Memorial College in Pune, India wrote, “In order to eradicate sin and rebellion from the universe and to restore harmony and peace, one of the divine Beings accepted, and entered into, the role of the Father, another the role of the Son. The remaining divine Being, the Holy Spirit,... By accepting the roles that the plan entailed, the divine Beings lost none of the powers of Deity... The divine Beings entered into the roles they had agreed upon before the

foundations of the world were laid.” (That’s taken from The Week of Prayer issue of the *Adventist Review*, October 31, 1996)

Tritheism, like Modalism, denies the death of Christ, for it is claimed that all three of these divine Beings are exactly alike, and none of them could die or be separated from the other two. Again, the believer is left with a cold perception of God’s love, thinking that God (the committee of three) so loved the world that they sent one of them down here to pretend to be the Son of one of the others who had stayed behind, and to pretend to die, to reveal the love of all three, including the two who had stayed behind. This concept falls far short of revealing the wonderful love of God in giving His Son to die for our sins and has nothing more than a human sacrifice for sin.

Applying the Knowledge

As we look at these four views of God, we see that Modalists, Unitarians and Tritheists all understand the word *person* to mean “a being,” while the orthodox Trinitarians are adamantly opposed to this definition, and claim that the three persons of the Trinity are some mysterious, undefinable species of existence called hypostasis. Philip Schaff puts it this way,

“The word person is in reality only a make-shift, in the absence of a more adequate term.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, Volume 3, Section 130, pages 677)

Orthodox Trinitarians are adamantly opposed to the idea that God is made up of three beings. They say that anyone who says this is a Tritheist. Unitarians say there is only one divine person, God the Father.

The Modalist will say that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the same *person*, the Trinitarian will say that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are the same *being*, while the Tritheist will say the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are *three separate beings*.

With the information contained in this study, it should be easy for you to identify Trinitarians, Modalists, Unitarians and Tritheists. Yet, Satan is always busy inventing new angles on these concepts, and using different words to describe them, in an effort to confuse God’s people, even the very elect. I believe we will see this confusion increase as the time of Christ’s return comes closer.

One way Satan has confused people is by having different people use the same word with different meanings. Some ministers and theologians, when expounding upon God and His nature, use the word “person” to mean one of the modes, emanations, or manifestations of an individual, so that one being can have several of these “persons” or modes in which they manifest themselves. Others use the word “person” to mean a complete being, so that three persons would be three separate beings. Still others use the word “person” to mean, a mysterious form of existence that is half-way between a characteristic and a

being, so that one being can have three separate self-conscious “persons,” which are often called “hypostasis.”

To add to this confusion, the word “being,” at times, is used with any of the above three definitions in mind, most rarely with the first definition in mind, and most often with the second definition in mind, but it has also been used with the third definition in mind. So, as you can see, if you want to understand what is being taught by an individual, not only must you understand what they are saying, but you must know what they mean when they use the words, “person,” or “being.”

A Few Questions to Ask Trinitarians

Here are a few questions I like to ask people to help clarify where a person is coming from when they say they believe in the Trinity:

- When did Jesus Christ become the Son of God?
- Is the Son of God’s life derived from the Father?
- Was the Son of God begotten of the Father other than when He was born in Bethlehem?
- Does the Son of God have a separate mind, will, and consciousness from God the Father?
- Can God be tempted with sin?
- Could Jesus have sinned during his incarnation?
- Can God die?
- Was the Son of God conscious during the three days and three nights He lay in the tomb?
- Can God have something revealed to Him, that was hidden?
- Do you pray to the Holy Spirit? If *not*, why neglect him? If *so*, where is your biblical example?
- Does the Holy Spirit have a spirit of his own like the Father and the Son?

These questions will go a long way to help clarify what a person believes or teaches about God.

Summary

The idea of one God in three persons is contrary to Scripture regardless of which theory is promoted to try to harmonize these contradictory ideas. Modalism, Orthodox Trinitarianism, and Tritheism are all equally dangerous in that they all deny the Bible truths that Christ is truly the Son of God and that He truly died for our sins. The Catholic invention of the eternal generation of the Son is merely an attempt to harmonize the Bible truth that Christ is the only *begotten* Son of God with the false theory that He is the same age as His Father. It is neither biblical, nor consistent with reason. It does away with the sonship of Christ as thoroughly as Modalism or Tritheism. There are many other aspects that are affected when one accepts these false theories, yet the most important remain the

sonship of Christ and the death of Christ. The nature of Christ at His incarnation is also severely affected, along with the atonement made for our sins.

These false theories about God leave their adherents with, at best, a shallow picture of God's love that is unable to allow them to have the deep, genuine love for God that can endure every hardship, especially the conflict over the Mark of the Beast, which we shall all face very soon.

Remember that no lie is safe, no matter how innocently it is believed. Paul wrote that those who "believe a lie" will be "damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness." (2 Thessalonians 2:11, 12) Also, keep in mind that the majority are seldom right in religious matters. Jesus said, "broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: Because strait is the gate, and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it." (Matthew 7:13, 14) The councils of men, and the man-made creeds that are so often esteemed by Christians, are not the standards by which we can determine truth. There is only one standard, and one alone, that we can trust as an infallible guide to truth, and that is the Word of God. We must not trust man to lead us into truth, for God said, "For the leaders of this people cause them to err; and they that are led of them are destroyed." (Isaiah 9:16)

I pray that you will hold firmly to the truth of the Bible, that "there is but one God, the Father" and "one Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 8:6), who is "the only begotten Son of God" (John 3:18), who "proceeded forth" and "came out from God" "before the hills" (John 8:42; 16:27; Proverbs 8:25), who "died for our sins according to the Scriptures" (1 Corinthians 15:3), and "The Father... raised Him from the dead." (Galatians 1:1) I pray that you will also believe the truth that the Holy Spirit is "the holy Spirit of God" (Ephesians 4:30), which "proceedeth from the Father" (John 15:26) and is sent to us "through Jesus Christ." (Titus 3:5, 6)

Keep the faith—the true faith! "Earnestly contend for the faith which was once delivered unto the saints." (Jude 1:3)

