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Is the Trinity Biblical?

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IS THE TRINITY BIBLICAL?

This window, designed by Roy Callagan, is in the Spencerville Seventh-day Adventist Church in Silver Spring, Maryland. In it are symbols of the Trinity with the hand of God the Father reaching down from heaven. Christ is identified with His cross, while the Holy Spirit, symbolized by a dove, descends to the faithful in swirling fire. The lines surrounding the central image symbolize rays of light radiating from the Godhead—light that no human can approach other than through the merits of Jesus.





*The Trinity
doctrine in
three points*

JOHN PECKHAM

No!" I nearly shouted at Grandma. I was about 7 years old and I trusted her, but for a moment I thought she was trying to cheat me. What happened? I had three one-dollar bills in my hand and was going shopping for a treat. Grandma wanted to give me a couple more dollars, so she held out a five-dollar bill and said, "I'll give you this, and you give me the three dollars in your hand."

I didn't know much about money, but I knew three is more than one! So I refused. I didn't recognize the value of what she offered me. I had a lot to learn.

When it comes to the things of God, we all have much to learn, and some things in Scripture are "hard to understand" (2 Peter 3:16). Yet, if we are committed to the Bible as our rule of faith and practice, we should believe what Scripture teaches even when that teaching is difficult to understand.

FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT

After being baptized, Jesus came up from the water, "and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased'" (Matt. 3:16, 17).

In this scene the Son is baptized, the Holy Spirit descends, and the Father speaks from heaven. Have you ever wondered how these three—the Father, Son, and Spirit—can be one God and yet three persons? If so, you've wondered about the Trinity doctrine.

Some claim we shouldn't use the word Trinity, because that word is not in Scripture. However, the words incarnation, millennium, and theodicy (to name a few) also do not appear in Scripture. Yet these are *biblical* concepts. When seeking to determine whether a doctrine is biblical, the issue is whether it is *taught by* Scripture.

The question is, then, does Scripture teach the Trinity doctrine?

THE BIBLICAL TRINITY DOCTRINE

The basic Trinity doctrine can be defined in one sentence: There is only one God, and God is three distinct fully divine persons.

Is this taught by Scripture? Indeed it is. Scripture *repeatedly* teaches the following three points:

1. There is only one God.
2. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each (fully) divine and, therefore, coequal and coeternal.
3. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons.

Together these three teachings amount to the basic Trinity doctrine. As we will see, Scripture repeatedly teaches each of these points and, therefore, teaches the basic Trinity doctrine.¹

THE ONENESS OF GOD

Scripture directly teaches that there is only one God. For example, "the Lord Himself is God; there is none other besides Him" (Deut. 4:35; cf. verse 39). Further, Deuteronomy 6:4 teaches, "the Lord our God, the Lord is one!"

Elsewhere God Himself proclaims, “I am the Lord, and there is no other; there is no God besides Me” (Isa. 45:5). James also teaches, “there is one God” (James 2:19), and Paul likewise writes, “there is no other God but one” (1 Cor. 8:4). Indeed, Jesus Himself refers to “the one and only God” (John 5:44, NASB).

Scripture also teaches that there is no one like God: “You are great, O Lord God. For there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You” (2 Sam. 7:22; see also 1 Chron. 17:20). This teaching that there is no one like God rules out the possibility that someone is *partially* God. Scripture sets forth an *absolute* distinction between God—the Creator—and everyone else. Even as one cannot be a little bit pregnant, one cannot be a little bit divine.² One is either God (divine) or not.

The Bible expressly teaches, then, that there is only one God.

THE DIVINITY OF THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

Alongside the Father, Scripture repeatedly teaches that the Son and the Holy Spirit are divine, referring to both as “God.” And, as seen earlier, the Bible excludes the view that anyone is *partially* God or partially divine.

In Acts 5, after Ananias falsely claimed he gave *all* the proceeds from selling his land, Peter replied: “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit. . . . You have not lied to men but to God” (verses 3, 4). To lie to the Holy Spirit, then, was to lie to God, thus referring to the Holy Spirit as God.

Later, Paul quotes a message God gave to Isaiah (Isa. 6:8-10) as given by *the Holy Spirit*, saying, “The Holy Spirit spoke rightly through Isaiah” (Acts 28:25). Likewise, Hebrews 3:7 quotes words spoken by God in Psalm 95:7-11, saying “as the Holy Spirit says.”

Further, while only God is eternal, all-knowing, and present everywhere, Scripture refers to the Holy Spirit as eternal (Heb. 9:14), all-knowing (1 Cor. 2:10, 11), and present everywhere (John 14:16). These and other texts identify the Holy Spirit as God.

Scripture also refers to the Son as God. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through

Him, and apart from Him not even one thing came into being that has come into being” (John 1:1-3, NASB). Notice, John writes, “The Word was God,” and John later identifies the Word as Christ (John 1:14). This passage further identifies Christ as eternal—He was “with God” “in the beginning” and did not Himself come into being, because “apart from Him [Christ] not even one thing came into being that has come into being” (see also Col. 1:16, 17; Rev. 22:13).

Later Jesus declares, “Before Abraham was, I AM” (John 8:58), identifying Himself as the great “I AM” who spoke to Moses from the burning bush (Ex. 3:14; cf. Rev. 22:13). Further, Jesus taught, “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30) and “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9; cf. John 5:18).

Likewise, Thomas calls Jesus, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28). And though Scripture strictly forbids worshipping anyone other than God (Ex. 34:14; see also Deut. 4:39; 5:7-9; Matt. 4:10; Luke 4:8; Rev. 19:10), humans worshipped Jesus, and Jesus did not rebuke them (John 9:38; cf. Matt. 2:11; 14:33; 28:9, 17; Luke 24:52; Heb. 1:6; Rev. 5:8-14). Indeed, the Father Himself even commands angels to worship Christ! (Heb. 1:6).

Scripture further teaches that “in [Christ] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9) and identifies Christ as “the radiance of His [God’s] glory and the exact representation of His [God’s] nature,” who “upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3, NASB). But only One who is God could be the “radiance” of God’s “glory and the exact representation of His nature” (cf. Isa. 42:8; John 5:23). Accordingly, later in Hebrews the Father Himself refers to Christ as God: “But to the Son He [the Father] says: ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever’” (Heb. 1:8). These texts and more teach the full divinity of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

It is no coincidence that Jesus commanded His followers to baptize “in the name [singular] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19; see also Matt. 3:16, 17; 1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; Isa. 63:7-14).³

THE DISTINCT PERSONHOOD OF THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT

The personhood of the Father and the Son are not typically questioned, but some question whether the Holy Spirit is a person.

First, we must recognize that “person” in this context does not mean *human* person or someone limited to a physical body, as humans are. Instead, “person” refers to one who possesses *personal* characteristics, such as self-consciousness, reason, and will.

Scripture repeatedly attributes to the Holy Spirit *personal* characteristics and actions. The Holy Spirit:

- can be grieved (Eph. 4:30),
- knows the things of God (1 Cor. 2:11),
- and distributes gifts to individuals as He wills (1 Cor. 12:11).

A mere force or power cannot be grieved (requiring self-consciousness), cannot know the things of God (requiring reason), and cannot will to give spiritual gifts (requiring will).

The Holy Spirit also teaches (Luke 12:12), intercedes (Rom. 8:26), testifies (John 15:26), is lied to (Acts 5:3, 4), speaks (Acts 8:29), admonishes (Neh. 9:30), leads and guides (Ps. 143:10; Acts 8:29), calls and sends to ministry (Acts 13:2-4), and forbids or allows (Acts 16:6, 7). These and other passages attribute distinctly *personal* characteristics and actions to the Holy Spirit.⁴

Further, Scripture repeatedly distinguishes the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son such that the Holy Spirit cannot be a part of or the same person as the Father or the Son. For example, Jesus said, “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things” (John 14:26). Later Jesus taught further, “When the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me” (John 15:26). Since the Holy Spirit is sent *by* the Father *in* Jesus’ name (John 14:26) and sent *by* Jesus *from* the Father (John 15:26), the Holy Spirit cannot be either the Father or the Son (or part of them), but must be distinct from the Father and Son (see also Matt. 12:32; Luke 3:21, 22; John 14:16).⁵

These and many other biblical texts identify the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as *distinct* persons.

THE BASIC TRINITY DOCTRINE IS BIBLICAL

Taking these three points together, we find that Scripture teaches that there is only one God, and that the Father, Son, and Spirit are fully divine (each referred to as God) and distinct persons. In other words, Scripture teaches the basic Trinity



There is only one God, and God is three distinct (fully) divine persons.

doctrine: There is only one God, and God is three distinct (fully) divine persons.

But, one may ask, how can God be one *and* three? My next discipleship of the mind article will address this question and the great importance of the Trinity for our faith and practice.

For now, notice that even as my grandma offered me more than I grasped in my hand, the truth about God is always more than we fully grasp. This should remind us to be humble and diligently study and cling to what God has revealed about Himself in Scripture, “bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5), which is the task of discipleship of the mind. 📌

¹ While there are competing understandings of some aspects of the Trinity, this article focuses only on this basic Trinity doctrine. See, further, John C. Peckham, *God With Us: An Introduction to Adventist Theology* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2023), chaps. 4-6.

² I reserve the word “divine” for Persons who have attributes that only God has.

³ The word “name” in singular here “points to the fact that they [Father, Son, and Spirit] are in some sense one” (Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992], p. 748).

⁴ Ellen G. White comments: “The Holy Spirit is a person. . . . The Holy Spirit has a personality, else He could not bear witness to our spirits and with our spirits that we are the children of God. He must also be a divine person, else He could not search out the secrets which lie hidden in the mind of God” (*Evangelism* [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Pub. Assn., 1946], pp. 616, 617).

⁵ Ellen G. White writes: The Holy Spirit “personifies Christ, yet is a distinct personality” (manuscript 93, 1893, in *Manuscript Releases* [Silver Spring, Md.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1993], vol. 20, p. 324).

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