

# **A Simple Explanation of the Trinity**

Andrew R. McGinn

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## **Introduction:**

Central to Christianity is the teaching that God exists in Trinity. It is so central to what Christianity is, that any who would reject this teaching are immediately recognized as non-Christian. Despite the centrality of this doctrine, it remains a mystery. It is in many ways inexplicable, and most simple explanations are inadequate since they reduce God to a simplistic notion that fails to capture his true majesty and glory.

## **Knowing God:**

We begin our explanation by pointing to the basis of our knowledge of God. Ours is not the knowledge of science, but the knowledge of faith. It is a rational trust in the evidence of the holy Scriptures. It is a belief that God wants us to know who he is and has gone out of his way to reveal himself to us. He is not a mystery shrouded in shadow, he is light bursting forth into the world in unmistakable clarity and glory.

Quite simply, God is not an object that science can investigate. He is Spirit, a metaphysical being and not material or flesh and blood. Because he is Spirit, he is invisible and intangible to our bodily senses and this disqualifies him as an object of the empirical sciences. Knowledge of God must come from some place other than the laboratory.

All this implies that God is not easily known. This leads some to despair of knowing him at all, these people are called agnostics—those who are “unknowing.” Others simply reject that knowledge can exist outside of sense experience, and so they deny God exists at all, these people bear the name atheist or “no god” Christians contend that there is yet another way of knowing, knowing that is as valid as knowledge gained through science, but which concerns matters that science cannot touch.

This other area of knowledge is based upon certain uncanny experiences that we have had. Experiences that are undoubted by us who have had them, but yet impossible to duplicate or control. Experiences of power and presence that is not rooted in material things. A power that is essential to all things, and yet is distinct and over them. A power that bears personality and force. When confronted by this reality that is not rooted in the material stuff of the world we generally find ourselves overwhelmed, filled with a dreadful fear, but at the same time drawn to this thing with a strange fascination. This thing that draws us is clearly something holy, a sacred personality whose presence cannot be masked or hidden, and when it draws near to us, we are unmistakably aware

of its presence. We know it, we experience it and we believe it, even if we cannot explain it.

### **The Prophet and Knowledge:**

From this experience we are aware that we can know things that science cannot touch. Our belief in this presence is by faith, which is not irrational nor based on nothing, but rooted in a real and unmistakable experience of the *numinous* or spiritual that we have had and have shared with others. We also realize that some people have a greater propensity to engage and meet with this holy personality, and they come to bear the name “prophet.” They have been chosen by this thing to communicate to us its will. And under the guidance of this holy presence they instruct us truly and unmistakably what he gives them to say.

What does the prophet say? He tells us that this power, this dreadful presence is God, a divine being of immense power and wisdom. The prophet also tells us that this God is our Creator, that he has brought us into existence and that he continues to give us life. The prophet also says that this God has no rival, that he is alone in his majesty and power, that there is no other personality that shares his place.— he alone is God.

What do we say of the prophet’s word? Our response may be varied, but for the Christian it is one of faith. Faith based upon experience and the recognition that what the prophet says rings true with our spirit and our experience. We know that what he says is true, that he interprets our experience accurately and gives words to our own unarticulated thoughts. His ability to do this marks him out as one who is authoritative, one who is to be believed and our belief in him is not irrational or nonsensical, it is faith.

### **Scripture as a Source of Knowledge:**

When the words of the prophet are recorded for us they become Scripture. It is a revelation from God giving us knowledge of God that we cannot divine for ourselves and instructions on how we might come to experience a fuller and more powerful relationship with God in all his holiness without the fear that drives us away from his terrible and threatening presence. These words become life for us, because our experience of God, our very constitution tells us that anything less than this intimate fellowship is death, a nonliving existence that is mundane and profane.

The Bible is this Scripture, or so we believe. Our experience of its power confirms our faith in it and our faith is confirmed by our experience of its power and authority, leading us to an unwavering commitment to it. It becomes for us the only true and certain way in which to experience God or to know him, what he is like and what he is doing.

## What does the Bible Say about God?

For our discussion we need only concern ourselves with three things. Things which are eternal truths about God. By eternal we mean only to say at this point that they pre-exist human existence and the world which is his creation and that they will undoubtedly continue to be true of God after human existence and the creation as we know it comes to an end.

First we learn that God is infinite. This is true in a number of spheres, and so we extrapolate this to encompass all of his being, as it is not logical for us to limit some aspects when others are not so limited. We see that he is unbounded by time. He has always existed (Gen 1:1; Ps 90:2; John 17:5, 24) and always will exist (Gen 21:33; Deut 32:40; 33:27; Neh 9:5; Ps 41:13; Is 9:6). He is the creator, indicating to us that he has immeasurable strength and power (Gen 1:1; 14:19, 22; 17:1; Is 40:28). This power is also illustrated in his victories over his enemies and his unfailing nature (Num 11:23; 1 Ch 28:20; Is 50:2). He has wisdom and knowledge of everything, even thoughts before they are spoken and actions before they are taken (Ps 139; 147:5). This infinite in knowledge, strength and existence extends to his whole person. It is his immensity, his greatness which enables him to be present in every point of the universe at the same moment. He is not defined by space as we are, "where can I go from your Spirit?" (Ps 139:7). This every-where presence of God no doubt contributes to his knowledge of all things, his knowledge of the secrets of the heart (Ps 44:21) which are presumably the most unknowable things.

Second, God is One. There can only be one infinite Spirit. Only one can be all-powerful, if there are two, then one does not have all power. But more to the point, God himself, through the prophet indicates that he brooks no rival, that there are no others like him (Deut 4:35; 6:4; Is 45:5-6, 14, 21; 46:9; 1 Cor 8:4; Eph 4:6; cf. Deut 3:24; Ps 77:13). The oneness of God implies his uniqueness, that is that there is only one God, not two or more. It is this denial of other gods that leads the prophet to declare idols to be nothing in 1 Corinthians 8:4. God is supreme, and there cannot be two supreme beings.

Third, notwithstanding God's oneness, he exists in plurality. This is indicated by several things, the first being his name "God", which is a plural form which could be said "gods", except that it is not used as a plural, but appellatively as name for a singular actor. All the verbs relating to his action demand a singular subject, but that subject is in the plural. Genesis 1:1 could be translated literally something like this: "In the beginning God (pl.) he created (sing.) the heavens and the earth." The "he" is entailed in the verb. Verbs in Hebrew contain a reference to their subjects. The "he" entailed in the verb is singular and must refer grammatically to "God" even though the word "God" is plural. This indicates for us that God exists in some essential way as a plurality which is why his name is written in a plural form.

The plurality of God is further indicated by the conversation God has with himself in the Genesis creation account. God speaks and things happen, yet no recipient of his words is revealed. This culminates in Genesis 1:26 with his declaration of his intention to create humanity. The Scripture reads: "And God (pl.) he said (sing.), 'Let us (pl.) make *adam*<sup>1</sup> in our (pl.) image.'" Genesis chapter one indicates for us that God is engaged in a conversation. This conversation is with himself and he treats himself in this conversation as a plurality. This plurality is not further defined, but it speaks of the one God as a complex of persons who are able to deliberate together. This element of God's plurality is what forms the backbone to the doctrine of the Trinity.

## **The Trinity**

The doctrine of the Trinity is not taught in the Scripture. Rather it is derived from the Scripture as necessary to make sense of God's self revelation contained in the Scripture. Because it is not taught in the Scripture we cannot find a verse or passage which explicitly says: "The one God exists as three persons;" but this does not make this statement a false one, it simply means that our understanding of God is based upon a reflection of how it is that he has revealed himself. The doctrine of God as Trinity, we believe, is the only way to adequately account for the testimony about him in the Scripture that does not lead to contradiction.

### **Trinity Defined:**

The doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized as follows: God who is One exists as three persons: The Father, The Son, and The Spirit. Each of these persons, Father, Son and Spirit are each fully God and share fully and equally in the nature of God. To speak of God in material language and to draw an analogy, each of these three are constructed from the same stuff, they each exist, simultaneously, as the same being, but yet they are distinct eternally from each other. Their relationship is a fellowship, it is a social relationship of love. Thus these three who can be individually recognized and distinguished from each other are in their relationship to each other, in their unity, in their Oneness, these three are God.

To continue to speak from another direction, God is Father, Son and Spirit. The Father is God, the Son is God and the Spirit is God. The Father is not the Son and the Father is not the Spirit and the Son is not the Spirit. But together, and only together can we

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<sup>1</sup> The word *adam* in the Hebrew is related the word *adamah*, which refers to the ground or earth. What is implied is that Adam the *adam* is from the earth. A good translation of this word is "earthling." I have not translated the word to allow this nuance to be felt. The word is seldom used of an individual male, Adam excepted, since it is his name and he bears it as the corporate figure for all human beings. It is a masculine noun, but normally refers to humanity with no gender distinction implied. The translation as man in Genesis clouds this reality by singling out Adam's gender and then making it an intrinsic part of the term, which is unnecessary and confusing, especially since the *adam* was created male and female, rendering the English term "man" in our post-modern and politically sensitive society inaccurate.

speak of God, though each as an individual possess all that it means to be God. They can be distinguished one from the other, but they cannot be separated.

### **Two Analogies and Their Limitations:**

There are ways of speaking that help us to understand what we mean by Trinity. These ways are called analogies. Analogies are logical correlations between one thing and another that uses similarities between the two objects as a means of comparison or explanation. For our teaching on the Trinity, by which we mean God's Three-in-oneness or his tri-unity, many analogies could be drawn, but each analogy will only be able to carry part of our meaning, it only connects with God at some points, other points conflict. Because of this, we normally avoid drawing too many analogies or relying too heavy on them. Permit me to illustrate:

God can be and has been compared to H<sub>2</sub>O or water. Under various conditions H<sub>2</sub>O can exist as a solid (ice), a liquid (water) and a vapour (steam), but in its atomic elements or molecular structure no change has taken place, only its state has changed. However as good as this analogy is for helping us to discern that each person of the Godhead can be distinguished while at the same time remaining the same substance, it fails as an analogy because it does not remain each of these things at the same time and in all places. The doctrine of the Trinity teaches that God exists eternally as Father, Son and Spirit. He does not change between them, taking on the mode or role of Father and then the Son and finally the Spirit, but that he exists as each of these at all times and in all places. Furthermore, water is not personal, so there is no society, no fellowship, no love expressed in the relationship between the forms, it is purely mechanical and so the analogy breaks down.

In like manner the comparison of God to a council is also helpful. A council of three who together form the council and who individually represent the council but apart from whom no council exists expresses some elements of what God is like. The social dynamic between the Father, Son and Spirit are preserved in this analogy, as is their distinctions. But the unity or oneness of God is compromised in that each is separate from the other and can exist in places and times apart from the council itself. The Father, Son and Spirit cannot do this, they exist in eternal society, and their distinctiveness does not result in or permit them to be separated. Such is the nature of the doctrine, that only parts of it seem to fit with any particular analogy that we might construct or observe between our world and the existence of God.

### **Rationale for the Doctrine:**

So then, how do we justify positing a doctrine that is unparalleled in our normal daily experience? The answer is really quite simple. Certain things are stated about God and about the three persons of the Godhead — the Father, the Son and the Spirit — that indicate that each of them shares characteristics that can only be posited of one,

eternal and supreme God. Each is associated with Creation (Father, Gen. 1:1; Son, John 1:1; Spirit, Isa 32:15), each is associated with divine wisdom (Father, Rom 16:26; 1 Cor 1:21; Eph 3:10; Son, Isa 11:2; 1 Cor 1:24, 30; Spirit, Deut. 34:9; Isa 11:2; Eph 1:17), and each is eternal (Father, Gen 21:33; Deut 33:27; Jer 10:10; Rom 16:26; 1 Tim 1:17; Son, Matt 28:20; John 17:5; 1 John 5:20; Rev 1:7; 22:13; Spirit, Heb 9:14). Jesus indicates by certain statements that he and the Father are one (John 10:30) and that those who listen to him are listening to God (John 14:24), that those who see him see God and that those who believe in him believe in God (John 12:44-45). Jesus also claims that as God has life in himself, life not derived from another source, so has God granted that the Son should have life in himself (John 5:26). Paul also provides glimpses into the nature of Jesus as divine. He possessed the fullness of the godhead (Colossians 2:9) and is the image of God (Colossians 1:15). He is called God and Saviour, titles reserved normally for the Father (Titus 2:13; 2 Peter 1:1).

Likewise the Spirit is attributed aspects of divinity. Hebrews 9:14 speaks of “the eternal Spirit,” a characteristic that is uniquely God’s. Paul likewise affirms that there is only one Spirit (1 Cor 12:4, 9; Eph 4:4) while speaking in various contexts of this one Spirit as the Spirit of both the Father and the Son. Above all, the way in which Paul speaks of the Spirit indicates that the Spirit is God in action. Romans 8:26-27 indicate that God (the Father) knows the mind of the Spirit demonstrating a reciprocal knowing of God and the Spirit. The Spirit who knows the mind of God (1 Cor 2:11) is likewise known by God. Such language implies some kind of distinction and the talk of “mind” indicates that the distinction is at a personal level. Romans 8:9 and 1 Peter 1:11 speak of the Spirit as the Spirit of Christ, indicating the close affinity of the Spirit not only with the Father but with Christ.

These Three then are presented as independent, and yet their connection is also undeniable. The Spirit is spoken of as belonging to both the Father and the Son. The monotheistic proclamations of the Scripture preclude viewing them as three distinct gods, but to deprive any of them of divine status would seem to rob the Scriptures of their full intent. What we then have is three persons, clearly distinguishable, who are each individually prescribed divinity enjoined with clear pronouncements on the unity and oneness of God.

### **God in Unity:**

The ultimate explanation then comes in the recognition of union between these Three. The Spirit’s unity piggybacks on that of Christ, which is to say, if such a union can be demonstrated of Christ, then it is a small step to include the Spirit. And to be sure there is much said of Jesus’ unity with the Father, though little of the Spirit’s, except that the Spirit is often identified in relation to the Father and the Son. The greater task with respect to the Spirit is to show that the Spirit is a person, and not simply an extension of the Father or the Son. The Spirit is not something that belongs to God, but someone who is God.

Jesus and the Father are one (John 10:30). They shared glory before creation (John 17:5). Philip asks to see the Father, to which Jesus replies in John 14:9-10:

"Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work."

The unity is expressed in terms of a dynamic relationship of mutual indwelling. The Father is in the Son and the Son is in the Father. The result is that those who gaze upon the Son see, in fact, the Father. Those who believe in Jesus believe the Father.

This unity between the Father and the Son, God and Jesus, is unmistakable. Given that we are unable to deny their unity, we must then propose that these two who can be distinguished are One. Both of them are God. Their relationship to the Spirit is of the same kind, and so poses no problem for us in positing it as a solution to how we must understand these three, Father, Son and Spirit. They are One in a unity that does not preclude their individuality and distinctiveness. Jesus states in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one."

### **Practical Importance:**

The individuality and unity is important. From the stand point of the incarnation, God unites himself with humanity and so becomes manifestly present in the world of the human. We can know and relate to God precisely because he has become one with us in our nature. One of the early Fathers of the church has remarked: God became a human, that humans may become like God.

Jesus' Sonship extends to us. All who are in union with him share in the privileges of his Sonship. And our union with him is made possible by his uniting with us by taking on our nature. Being the son of God involves a promise of eternal enjoyment of God in heavenly glory, a possession of full and abundant life by the Spirit, and power to live in joy, love and peace.

Jesus then reveals God to us. He makes him known and brings him into immediate contact with us in our humanity. The Spirit carries on this work upon the ascension of Jesus into heaven. Jesus having departed, the Spirit is sent to continue to make known the presence of God and apply the benefits of Christ's intercessory work on our behalf.

Our knowledge then, of both Father and Son is mediated by the Spirit. It is the Spirit who reveals God to us through Jesus Christ. It is the Spirit who takes what Jesus has done on the cross and makes it a reality in our lives. It is the Spirit who speaks to our heart the truth of Jesus and allows us to receive the word spoken by Spirit. It is this Spirit, who filled the prophets who have written what becomes for us the Word of God,

the Bible. It is the Spirit whom we encounter in faith, who sets Christ before us that we might see him, resurrected and ascended, now ruling over all the earth. The Spirit makes God tangible for us, sensible for us.

Further to this, God is able to sympathize with us in our weakness. He experienced human suffering in Jesus. And having done so provides in Jesus an advocate for suffering humanity. Having faced every temptation that is common to the nature of humanity, Jesus knows us, he understands us, not simply as mechanic understands a machine he has designed and manufactured, but by experience and identification. He knows intimately what weaknesses are inherent in the human soul and is able to provide for those weaknesses.

Jesus, identified with us in our human plight, is able to author salvation for us. He is able to go before us and make ready a way that we might follow him into the presence of God. He atones for us and reconciles us to God, because he is God. We experience that reconciliation through the indwelling of the Spirit who unites us to Christ and God.

### **Revealing God:**

The doctrine of the Trinity is about revealing God. Different epochs and different times have called for different manifestations of God. In the beginning God related almost exclusively through the Father. The Spirit and Son while active and present were largely understood merely as extensions of the Father and were not distinguished from him.

At an appointed time, God revealed himself more dramatically and more tangibly through the act of incarnation. That is to say, at a specific point in time, God who was previously revealed only as Father came to be known also as Son. With the coming of Jesus God began a new phase of his self revelation. It is no longer acceptable to know him only as "God" or only as "Father." But to know God truly means one must know him also as "Son" and more to the point, in the Son.

The Son, however, does not remain physically present in our world. He has descended, clothed himself with our nature, but after accomplishing a decisive act of redemption for us, he departs this world and returns to the heavenly realm. Knowledge of him is, however, preserved in the descending of the Spirit. Christ who ascended bodily descends spiritually in the Spirit and becomes incarnated in a people, the Church. God is known in the community of his people, joined together in faith, love, joy and peace, indwelt by the Spirit.

As it is not sufficient to know God as Father only, so it is insufficient to know him only in the two persons of Father and Son. To know God in his fullness as he has revealed himself is to know him as Father, Son and Spirit. The decisive factor in this is not

whether God is Father, Son or Spirit, but that the times have changed demanding that he be recognized in the manner in which he has revealed himself. Because the Spirit has come, has entered onto the stage of the human drama as the means to reveal and make God known, it is not appropriate to deny him. Likewise the Son, having burst into our world, it is wrong to deny him. Thus the Three must be acknowledged, as they have revealed God in human history. We cannot return to the past, times previous to God's full revelation, and so we believe — We believe in God who is Father, Son and Spirit, three persons, distinct and yet One and we worship him in the beauty of his holiness.

**Benediction:**

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor 13:14)