

# How do we explain the Trinity?

By Dr. Jim Denison

Every parent dreads the question: "What is the Trinity?" How do we explain the fact that our God is three and yet one? The concept violates logic. This issue is especially relevant in these days of interaction with the Muslim world. Islamic faith is insistent on the unity and singularity of God. The central affirmation of Islam is this statement: there is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is his prophet. To this way of thinking, Christians are tri-theists and thus idolaters.

How can we explain our trinitarian theology to Muslims, or even to ourselves? And why does it all matter to our lives today?

## What is the "Trinity"?

It has been said that if the mind were simple enough for us to understand it, we would be too simple to understand it. Likewise, if God were simple enough for my finite, fallen mind to understand him, he would not be God. How does a mother explain marriage to her five year old daughter? How does a mathematician explain calculus to his third grade son?

Yet we try. We sing as though we understood the words, "Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty...God in three Persons, blessed Trinity." I speak the same words over new believers which were recited over me in the baptismal waters, and over other Christians for twenty centuries: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit." Why? What is the Trinity? And why is understanding it so essential?

### *A brief history of God*

The first biblical reference to God starts the mystery: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). The Hebrew term here translated "God" is *Elohim*. The "im" is how the Hebrew language makes a word plural, like putting "s" on the end of a word in English. Thus one could translate the word "Gods" (though some Hebrew scholars believe that the plurality points more to God's majesty than his number).

However, the following Hebrew verb "created" requires a singular noun, indicating that its subject is one rather than many. In English we would say "they create" but "he creates"; the latter is the idea of Genesis 1:1. So, in "God created" we have our start into the mystery that is the nature of God.

From earliest times, the Jewish tradition has affirmed that "the Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deuteronomy 6:4, the "Shema" which is recited in daily Jewish spirituality). Such monotheism was a radical departure from the polytheism of ancient cultures. But the experience of the first Christians made simple monotheism problematic, for they knew Jesus Christ to be Lord and God (cf. John 1:1; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13). They also experienced the Holy Spirit as divine (Gen. 1:2; cf. Acts 5:2-4; 2 Corinthians 3:17-18).

But these three were independent (at Jesus' baptism the Father spoke and the Spirit descended; Matthew 3:16-17).

There is no indication that apostolic Christians struggled with the logic of their experience of God. Paul could pray for the Corinthians, "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 Corinthians 13:14). They knew God to be one, but they experienced him as three persons. This logical contradiction did not trouble them, for they were more pragmatic than speculative. They needed no words such as "Trinity" or theological formulations to explain their faith. But matters would quickly change.

### ***The problem of God***

As Christianity spread beyond its Jewish roots, it encountered a world view steeped in logic and rationalism. Aristotle had taught the Western world that non-contradiction is the test for all truth. Something cannot be one and three at the same time. So how can the Christian doctrine of God be reasonable?

The earliest answers to the question resolved the logical tension, but created problems greater than the one they "solved." Some made the Son and the Spirit less divine than the Father, an approach known as subordinationism." By this formulation, Jesus is not Lord and the Holy Spirit who makes us Christians (cf. Romans 8:9) is not fully God. Others taught that God shifts from being Father (Old Testament) to Son (Gospels) to Spirit (Acts to Revelation), an approach known as "modalism." This strategy cannot explain the baptism of Jesus, the work of the Son (John 1:3-4) and the Spirit (Genesis 1:2) in creation, or the presence of the Spirit throughout the Old Testament (cf. Psalm 51:11). "Dynamic monarchians" taught that divine power descended upon Jesus, so that he was not himself divine.

At the Councils of Nicaea (AD 325) and Constantinople (AD 381), the orthodox Church declared all such formulations to be heretical, and affirmed that the Son and Spirit are of the same "essence" as the Father. "God in three Persons" catches the sense of their approach.

From then to now, believers have sought to understand better this paradox. Some suggest that God is like water, capable of being solid ice, liquid, or steam (but not at the same time). Perhaps he is like a three-sided pyramid seen from above (but the three sides do not work independently as did the Trinity at Jesus' baptism). Maybe he is like an egg: yoke, sac, shell (but the three do not retain the same essence). Perhaps he is like a woman who is mother to her children, wife to her husband, and daughter to her parents (but she cannot act in three independent ways at the same time). All analogies eventually break down, as they should. As we noted earlier, if we can understand fully the essence of God, he would not be God.

Commitment to a God whose essence transcends our logical comprehension is a problem for some in our rationalistic culture. We like our faith to make sense. We may not understand why a ship floats or an airplane stays in the air, but we know that someone

does. We'd have a hard time taking medicine no one understands, expecting effects no one can explain.

But we'd best get used to it. The more we learn about the universe, the more incomprehensible it becomes. Physicians do not understand how the mind works, or even if there is such a thing as the "mind." We assume the category of time, but none of us can define it without contradiction.

So it is with the major doctrines of Christian faith. Is God three or one? Is Jesus fully God or fully human? Does God know the future or do we have freedom? Is the Bible divinely inspired or humanly written? The answer to each question is the same: yes.

### **The divinity of Jesus**

Muslims, Jews, and Christians hold in common our belief that there is a God of the universe. When we speak of the "Father," we are on familiar footing with other monotheistic faiths. But when we elevate the Son and the Spirit to divine status, we create the kind of tension which leads to confusion and rejection. So let's take a moment to examine the divinity of the Second and Third members of the Godhead.

"Jesus is Lord" is the central affirmation of the Christian faith. Its Greek original is found scrawled on walls in the Roman catacombs and at the heart of the most ancient formulations of faith. When the Empire forced Christians to say "Caesar is Lord" or die, believers by the multiplied thousands chose to die. If presented the same option, we should make the same choice. Why?

#### ***Did Jesus claim to be God?***

In recent years it has become popular to claim that Jesus of Nazareth saw himself only as a religious teacher, and that the Church deified him over the centuries. Not according to the eyewitnesses. When Jesus stood on trial for his life, the high priest challenged him: "I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God" (Matthew 26:63). His answer sealed his fate: "Yes, it is as you say" (v. 64). Earlier he told his opponents, "Before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58). He clearly claimed to be God.

And his first followers accepted his claim to be true. Peter and the other apostles refused to stop preaching that Jesus is Lord, even when threatened with their lives (cf. Acts 5:29-32). Each but John was martyred for his faith in Christ, and John was exiled to the prison island of Patmos for preaching the Lordship of Jesus. Billions of people across twenty centuries have accepted their truth claims and followed their Lord as God.

#### ***How do we know he was right?***

Here is the rope from which Christianity swings: "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith. More than that, we are then found to be false witnesses about God, for we have testified about God that he raised Christ from the dead" (1 Corinthians

15:13-15). Before Easter, the disciples assumed their leader was dead and gone. After that day, they were transfused with divine courage and set about winning the world to Jesus. The resurrection was the basis for their commitment to Christ as Lord. It is ours as well.

We know Jesus existed, and was crucified at the hands of Pontius Pilate. We know that the first Christians believed him to be raised from the dead (cf. the letter of Pliny the Younger, the descriptions of Josephus). But believing doesn't make it so. Is there objective evidence for their faith in a risen Savior?

David Hume was an 18<sup>th</sup>-century Scottish philosopher, known today as the "Father of Skepticism." He made it his life's work to debunk assumptions which he considered to be unprovable, among them the veracity of miracles. He argued for six criteria by which we should judge those who claim to have witnessed a miracle: they should be numerous, intelligent, educated, of unquestioned integrity, willing to undergo severe loss if proven wrong, and their claims should be capable of easy validation (David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2d ed. [LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1966] 128-9). Each is appropriate for determining the truthfulness of a witness. How do the eyewitnesses of the risen Christ fare by such standards?

They were *numerous*: over 500 saw the resurrected Lord (1 Cor. 15:6). They were *intelligent* and *well-educated*, as the literature they produced makes clear (the Acts 4:13 claim that they were "unschooled, ordinary men" meant only that they had not attended rabbinic schools). Paul was in fact trained by Gamaliel, the finest scholar in Judaism (Acts 22:3). They were men and women of *unquestioned integrity*, clearly *willing to undergo severe loss*, as proven by their martyrdoms. And their claims were *easily validated*, as witnessed by the empty tomb (cf. Acts 26:26, "this thing was not done in a corner").

So the witnesses were credible. What of the objective evidence for their claims? It is a fact of history that Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and buried, and that on the third day his tomb was found empty. Skeptics have struggled to explain the empty tomb ever since.

Three strategies center on theft. The first was to claim that while the guards slept, the disciples stole the body (Matthew 28:11-15). How would sleeping guards know the identity of such thieves? How could the disciples convince 500 people that the corpse was alive? And why would these disciples then die for what they knew to be a lie?

A second approach claims that the women stole the body. How would they overpower the guards? How would they make a corpse look alive? Why would they suffer and die for such fabrication? A third explanation is that the authorities stole the body. When the misguided disciples found an empty tomb, they announced a risen Lord. But why would the authorities steal the body they had positioned guards to watch? And when the Christians began preaching the resurrection, wouldn't they quickly produce the corpse?

A fourth approach is the wrong tomb theory—the grief-stricken women and apostles went to the wrong tomb, found it empty, and began announcing Easter. But the women saw where he was buried (Mt. 27:61); Joseph of Arimathea would have corrected the error (Mt. 27:57-61); and the authorities would have gone to the correct tomb and produced the corpse.

A fifth strategy is the "swoon theory"—Jesus did not actually die on the cross. He or his followers bribed the medical examiner to pronounce him dead, then he revived in the tomb and appeared to be resurrected. But how could he survive burial clothes which cut off all air? How could he shove aside the stone and overpower the guards? How could he appear through walls (John 20:19, 26) and ascend to heaven (Acts 1:9)?

There is only one reasonable explanation for the empty tomb, the changed lives of the disciples, and the overnight explosion of the Christian movement upon the world stage: Jesus Christ rose from the dead. He is therefore the person he claimed to be: our Lord and God. Trusting him is not a leap into the dark, but into the light. When you jump, crucified hands will catch you and never let you go (Jn. 10:28).

### **The divinity of the Holy Spirit**

One of my pet peeves in Dallas is the fact that turn signals are apparently signs of weakness. I sometimes think I'm the only person in Dallas County who signals when shifting lanes; people stare at me as though I'm from another planet, while wondering what that blinking light at the back of my car is about.

One of my theological pet peeves is the fact that so many Christians refer to the Holy Spirit as "it." He is the third member of the Trinity, as fully divine as the Father and the Son. He is a person, deserving of our respect and gratitude. He is no more an "it" than you are.

The Holy Spirit has all the distinctive characteristics of personality: knowledge (1 Corinthians 2:10-11), will (1 Cor. 12:11), and feeling or emotion (Romans 15:30). He performs acts which only a person can perform: he searches (1 Cor. 2:10), speaks (Revelation 2:7), cries (Galatians 4:6), prays (Ro. 8:26), testifies (John 15:26), teaches (John 14:26), leads (Ro. 8:14), and commands (Acts 16:6, 7). He is treated as only a person can be treated: he is grieved and rebelled against (Isaiah 63:10; Ephesians 4:30), insulted (Hebrews 10:29), and blasphemed (Matthew 12:31, 32).

The Holy Spirit is given each of the four distinctly divine attributes: eternity (Heb. 9:14), omnipresence (Psalm 139:7-10), omniscience (1 Cor. 2:10, 11), and omnipotence (Luke 1:35). He performs each of the three distinctly divine works: creation (Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30; Genesis 1:1-3), impartation of life (John 6:63; Gen. 2:7), and authorship of prophecy (2 Peter 1:21).

Exodus 16:7 says that the people "grumbled" against God; Hebrews 3:7-11 quotes the Holy Spirit's statement that such complaints were made against him. The name of the

Holy Spirit is coupled with that of God (1 Corinthians 12:4-6; Matthew 28:19-20; 2 Cor. 13:14). The Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3, 4).

And yet the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son (Luke 3:21-22; Mt. 28:19; John 16:7). He is sent by the Father in the name of the Son (Jn 14:26; 15:26), speaks only what he hears from the Father (Jn 16:13), and seeks only to glorify God (Jn 16:14).

In every sense, the Holy Spirit is God. We can "solve" the problem of the Trinity by devaluing the Son and the Spirit, but we lose far more than we gain. We forfeit the divine Savior whose death paid for our sins, and the divine Person who brings salvation to our souls. I would rather live with the mystery of God's nature than give up the relationship with him which that nature makes possible.

### **The ministry of the Holy Spirit**

Now let's move more specifically to the question of sanctification, the work of spiritual growth which the Holy Spirit authors in our lives. The Spirit shows us our guilt as sinners, convicting us of righteousness and judgment (Acts 2:36-37, John 16:8). He imparts spiritual life to those who are spiritually dead (Ephesians 2:1-2; Titus 3:5; John 3:3-5). Now he indwells the believer (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20) and sets us free for God (Romans 8:2). He forms Christ within us (Eph. 3:14-19), bringing forth the Christ-like graces of character (Galatians 5:22-23). He guides us into the life of God's children (Ro. 8:14) and bears witness to our status with our Father (Ro. 8:15, 16).

The Spirit teaches us (Jn. 14:26), reveals the deep things of God to us (1 Cor. 2:9-13), interprets his own revelation (1 Cor. 2:14), and enables us to communicate truth to others (1 Cor. 2:1-5).

The Spirit guides us in prayer (Jude 20; Ephesians 6:18), inspires and guides our thanksgiving (Eph. 5:18-20), and inspires our worship (Philippians 3:3). He infills the believer (Eph. 5:18), sends us into definite vocations (Acts 13:2-4), and guides us in daily life (Acts 8:27-29; 16:6, 7).

From this brief survey, is it clear that we cannot progress in the spiritual life without the Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the member of the Trinity who dwells in all believers, and empowers our growth and maturity in the faith. We must be yielded to his leading and empowering every day, or we cannot grow closer to our Lord. Time spent each morning in prayer and Bible study is crucial; time through the day to connect with God in prayer is vital.

We each need a spiritual inventory every week, whereby we ask the Spirit to show us anything wrong between us and our Father—we write down what comes to mind, confess it, and throw the paper away. In the words of evangelist Gypsy Smith, we draw a circle around ourselves and pray until everything inside that circle is right with God.

We need periodic times of solitude, where we listen to the Spirit's voice. Find a place where you can be alone and undistracted. Meditate on a single verse or passage of Scripture, placing yourself in the text. Feel, smell, hear and taste the story. Ask the Spirit to show you the truth from that passage which you most need to hear, and he will.

Meditate on God's creation. The hour I spent with a leaf was memorable to my soul. I had just begun my ministry in Midland, and had no idea how to move forward in God's plan. Examining a leaf in my hand, I became impressed with its intricate design. The more I studied, the more amazed I became. Then the Spirit spoke to my spirit: "If I can design a leaf, I can design your life and work." And he did.

Meditate on a current or global event. Pray about it, asking God to reveal his truth through this matter to you. Trust him to use his world and his word in your life. Listen until you have heard him speak. And you will.

Doc Severinson was the trumpet player and band leader for Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show*. As a trumpet player myself, I followed Severinson's career with interest. Once I was privileged to attend a workshop and concert he staged. During the conversation following the performance, someone asked him about his practice habits. Severinson replied, "If I don't practice one day, I know it. Two days, my band knows it. Three days, the world knows it." The same is true of my soul, and perhaps yours as well.

## **Conclusion**

We've discussed briefly the trinitarian nature of God, the divinity of the Son and the Spirit, and the work of the Spirit in our lives. The practical outcome of such a hurried survey is simply this: we are each to give ourselves every day to the Spirit. We are to yield the morning as it begins and the day before it starts. We are to seek his wisdom and direction for every step and every decision. We are to be led by his grace in every moment. And as we practice his presence in our lives, we experience the abundant life which Jesus came to give us all (John 10:10).

One of my favorite stories concerns a father who arrived home after work and was greeted by his two small daughters. The older girl got to him just as he stepped onto the sidewalk leading from the driveway, with a hedge on either side. She threw her arms around her father's legs. The younger sister then arrived. Her older sister was in front of her, hedges on both sides, and she couldn't get to her father. Her big sister taunted her, "Ha, ha, ha, I've got all of Daddy there is."

The wise father then reached over his older daughter, picked up the younger sister, and held her in his arms. The younger girl then said to the older, "Ha, ha, ha, Daddy's got all of me there is."

You have all of the Father there is. Does he have all of you today?