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AsiAfrica Ministries, Inc.
Edited for readers whose first language is not English

INTRODUCTION

Recently, as I flipped through the "Christian" channels on my television, I stopped at an Australian broadcast when I heard the word "Trinity." The host was asking her guest, an "expert" on the doctrine, "How can God be one *and* three?" "How can one 'equal' three?" she asked. "The 'math' just doesn't add up," she said. Her questions show the common misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity.

A few years ago, a survey was taken among a group of church members in London, who were asked, "How can God be three persons in one?"[1] Showing their misunderstanding of the "oneness" of God, about one-third of the respondents replied that God was "one" in the sense of being "one person." As one respondent said, "The three are one person; they're all one person."[2]

To be sure, much *confusion* exists regarding the doctrine of the Trinity! The confusion is made worse by preachers who describe the doctrine of the Trinity as a mind-boggling "puzzle" that is beyond the reach of human understanding. While it is true that finite humans cannot fully comprehend the infinite God, it is *not* true that the doctrine of the Trinity is beyond our understanding. A "doctrine" is simply an attempt to put into words what we *do know* about God based upon the way *God has revealed himself* to us. The "doctrine of the Trinity" is an attempt to make sense of the fact that the "one God" of the Christian faith has revealed himself in the Holy Bible in "three persons"—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The biblical story of the Father's reconciliation of the world in Jesus Christ, as well as his bringing that work to completion by the Spirit, implies a Trinitarian understanding of God (*see* 2Cor 5:18-20; Rom 5:1-5; Eph 1:3-14).

DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

In its earliest days, the Church was composed mainly of Jews. Unlike the nations around them who worshipped many gods, the Jews worshipped "one God" (*see* Deut 6:4). At the same time, the early Jewish Christians believed that God had come in the flesh—*as man*— and dwelt among them in the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1, 14). They believed that Jesus is *Immanuel*: "God with us" (Matt 1:23). Moreover, the early Christians believed that the crucified Christ remained present among them through the person of the Holy Spirit indwelling their hearts (2Cor 3:17, 18).

The believers of the early Church, many of whom were slaves who could not read nor write, did not concern themselves with abstract speculation about the nature of God; yet, their worship and

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[1] Even the way the question is asked shows a lack of understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity!
[2] *In* Fiddes, P.S. *Participating in God: A Pastoral Doctrine of the Trinity*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), pp. 4-5.

practice was distinctly Trinitarian in character. Following the commandment of Jesus Christ (Matt 28:19), the early Church baptized in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit, even as they declared the love of God, the grace of Jesus Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2Cor 13:14). Early 2nd Century writings portray Christians baptizing and celebrating Holy Communion (or the Lord's Supper) in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.[3]

GOD AND JESUS

From the early Christians' experience of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Christian theologians began to develop the "doctrine" of the Trinity. The starting point for the doctrine of the Trinity is the *relationship* between God and Jesus Christ. The problem faced by early Christian theologians, as they studied the New Testament teachings about Jesus Christ,[4] was not whether Jesus was God, but how could they explain their belief in "one God," while, at the same time, claiming that both Jesus and the Father are God?

FALSE TEACHINGS ABOUT THE TRINITY

As the early Church began to proclaim the deity of Christ, they encountered opposition from those who distorted the New Testament witness to the Triune nature of God. In the second century, some incorrectly argued that the terms "Father," Son" and "Holy Spirit" are merely different "names" for God, each designating a different "role" played by a "one-person" God, like a single individual who plays the roles of spouse, employee and soccer coach on a given day. Others wrongly argued that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct "individuals," like the coach, quarterback and wide receiver on a football team. The first error, known historically as *modalism*, preserves the one "being" of God but loses the specific identity of the three persons of the Godhead by reducing the Father, Son and Spirit to "one" person. The second error, *tritheism* (or "three gods"), preserves the "distinction" of the three persons of the Godhead at the expense of the "unity" of God and results in "three gods," rather than "one God in three persons." Quite importantly, both errors fail to express the essential element of *relationship* among the three persons of the Godhead. Modalism precludes relationship by reducing the Father, Son and Holy Spirit to "one person." Less obviously, the second error, "tritheism," precludes relationship, for the three persons are separated, divided and independent of one another.

> *Modalism* is the false doctrine that God is "one person" who plays three different roles, like an actor in a play who plays three different characters.
>
> *Tri-theism* is the false doctrine that Christians worship "three gods."
>
> The Bible reveals that God is "three persons"—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who are so intimately united in a fellowship of love that we can rightly say, "God is one."

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[3] These early Christian writings include the 1) *Didache*, an early writing on Church order and practice; 2) Hippolytus' Holy Communion prayer and baptismal formula, and 3) Justin Martyr's early description of a Christian worship service and baptism.

[4] See, for example, John 1:1, 14; 10:30; 14:9; Col 1:16, 17; 2:9; Heb 1:3

EARLY CHRISTIAN THINKERS

In the face of these distortions of the New Testament teaching about the Triune (*i.e.,* "three-in-one") nature of God, early Christian thinkers struggled to accurately express God's self-revelation in salvation history as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, while maintaining the unity of the "one God" of the Judeo-Christian heritage.

Justin Martyr, the great "apologist" who defended the early second-century Church against false charges brought against Christians, invoked the image of "light" to capture the eternal relation between the Father and the Son. Justin explained both the *equality* and the *distinction* of the Father-Son relation by arguing that the Son is indivisible (*i.e.,* "cannot be separated") from the Father in the same way that light given off by the sun is indivisible from its source. His description became a favorite among the Church fathers and was later included in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 A.D.), where one of several phrases used to describe Jesus Christ is "Light from Light."

Irenaeus, an important theologian of the second-century, developed his Trinitarian thought against the Gnostics, who falsely claimed that God refused to be involved with this "evil" world. To the contrary, Irenaeus argued that God the Father is deeply involved in creation. According to Irenaeus, the Father is like a master sculptor who molds his clay into a beautiful creation, using his "two hands," the Son and Spirit. The Son and the Spirit are the personal "agents" through which God the Father interacts with creation.


Tertullian gave us the word "Trinity"

In the third century, the North African lawyer, Tertullian, invented the word "Trinity" (Latin: *trinitas*) in order to explain that Christians worship "*one* God in *three* persons." For Tertullian, the "unity" (i.e., "one-ness") of God is found in their common "being" or "nature"; that is, all three persons share the *same* "being" or "God-ness." (Thus, we say that God is "one" in "being" or "nature.") "Person" is the principle of "distinction" or "other-ness"; that is, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Father, and the Father and Son are not the Holy Spirit. Rather, each person of the Triune God is "distinct" from the other. (Thus, we say that God is "three persons.")

THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

The fourth century was a time of great conflict among the theologians of the early Church. Since the time of Tertullian, confusion had existed between the Greek-speaking theologians of the eastern Mediterranean and the Latin-speaking theologians of the west regarding the proper translation of important Trinitarian terms such as "being" and "person." To add to the confusion, these terms were often used interchangeably, much as today when a single individual may be described both as a "person" and as a human "being." Prior to the fourth century, the universal Church simply lacked the appropriate language to explain how God is *both* one *and* three.

This confusion in language climaxed in one of the greatest theological battles in the history of the Church. Arius, a deacon from Alexandria, argued that the "one being" of God cannot be "divided," for such would result in "more than" one God and compromise the principle of monotheism.[5] For Arius, Jesus Christ cannot "share" the "being" of God; therefore, he is not fully divine. Rather, Jesus is "subordinate" to the Father; that is, he is of "lesser rank" than the Father. Much like modern-day Jehovah's Witnesses, Arius argued that Jesus is a *created* being, that is, an exalted "creature," like an archangel, who is *less than* fully God. The great Athanasius, one of the most important theologians in the history of the Church, mightily defended the deity of Jesus Christ against the *subordinationism* of Arius. As Athanasius understood, if Jesus is a "created" being, he cannot be the "eternal" Word of God "incarnate,"

Athanasius

that is, God in human flesh (John 1:1, 14).[6] For Athanasius, this was no mere academic theological squabble; to be sure, nothing less than human salvation was at stake, for if Jesus Christ is not fully God, then we are still in our sins, for only God can save.
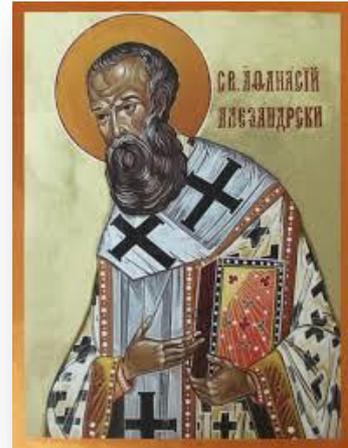
In what has been called the most important theological statement since the New Testament, Athanasius argued that the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, is "of one being with the Father." That is, Jesus Christ is *fully God*, just as the Father is God. Athanasius' defense of the full deity of Jesus Christ was included in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 A.D.), where, in accordance with the apostolic witness recorded in the New Testament, the Church fathers declared that Jesus Christ is "God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made, *Of one being with the Father*." At the same time, the fathers asserted the full deity of the Holy Spirit.[7]

THE CAPPADOCIAN FATHERS

With the assertion of the full deity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit against distortions of the New Testament witness to the Triune nature of God, the way was cleared in the late fourth century for the classic, orthodox statement of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, formulated by a trio of theologians—Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa and Gregory Nazianzus—known collectively in Church history as the "Cappadocian Fathers." By precisely defining important Trinitarian terms such

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[5] Monotheism is the Christian belief in "one God," in contrast to a religion like Hinduism that teaches the existence of millions of gods.

[6] If Jesus is a "created" being, as Arius (falsely) claimed, then there was a time when he did not exist. As Arius wrongly said, there was a time when he "was not." If this were so, then Jesus could not be the eternal Son of God.

[7] Regarding the divinity of the third person of the Godhead, Scripture describes the Holy Spirit as one who is a "personal, encountering, interacting Thou" clearly distinguishable from the Father and Son. The Spirit speaks in the first person (Acts 10:20; 13:12), teaches (Jn 14:26), stands as witness (Rom 8:16; 1Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13, 14), sends (Acts 13:2), grieves (Eph 4:3), struggles with other persons (Gen 6:3; Isa 63:10) and gives gifts (1Cor 12:4-11; Eph 6). Moreover, the names (Acts 1:8; Jn 4:24; 14:21; 15:26; Rom 8:14), attributes (Heb 9:14; 1Cor 2:10-12; Lk 11:20; Rom 15:18-19) and works (1Cor 2:10; Acts 5:30-32; 28:25; Titus 3:5; 1Cor 6:19) of God are ascribed to the Spirit. *See* Oden, T.C. *Systematic Theology, Volume One: The Living God*. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), p. 199.

as "being" and "person," these Greek-speaking theologians were able to conceptually express the *unity* ("one-ness") and *diversity* ("three-ness") of the Triune Godhead in a way similar to that of the Latin theologian Tertullian a century earlier. In view of the three-fold pattern of God's self-revelation in salvation history as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Cappadocians argued that God exists as "one being" (*i.e.,* "nature," "essence") in "three persons," where "being" is the principle of *unity* and "person" is the principle of distinction or *diversity*. As the Cappadocians argued, the divine persons of the Trinity share a common "being"; at the same time, they are three distinct "persons." In other words, "what" Father, Son and Spirit are is the same. "Who" each is is distinct and unique.[8]

It is important to note that the terms "being" and "person," as used by the Cappadocian fathers, are *not* interchangeable. If we say God is "three beings," we commit the error of "tri-theism." If we say God is "one person," we commit the error of "modalism." The Cappadocian formula—"one being, three persons"—preserves both the "unity" (one-ness) and the "diversity" (three-ness) of the Godhead, while articulating the Trinitarian grammar that would allow the Church to speak of God as "one being in three persons"—One in Three, Three in One.

In addition, it is essential to note that the Father, Son and Spirit cannot be thought of as independent, autonomous "selves," as the modern use of the term "person" suggests. For Athanasius and the Cappadocian fathers, the term "person" inherently includes *relationship,* for the terms "Father" and "Son" are necessarily relational. There can be no "Father" apart from the "Son"; there can be no "Son" apart from the "Father." Thus, *the divine persons in relationship* constitute the "being" of God. At the same time, each divine person is unique in terms of "origin*."* In Trinitarian language, the Father is "un-begotten," the Son is "begotten" and the Spirit "proceeds." The language of relationship captures the "unity" of the persons of the Holy Trinity, while the language of origin captures the distinctiveness or "diversity" of the divine persons.

> "God" is three divine Persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—who are so closely united in a *relationship* of love, that they are said to "indwell" one another in a divine "dance" of mutual giving and receiving. This mutual "indwelling" is called *perichoresis*.

PERICHORESIS

Finally, at the heart of the Holy Trinity, the Cappadocians saw an interpersonal "communion" (*koinonia*) or "fellowship," where each divine person is intimately *related* to the other two in reciprocal joy and delight. The internal related-ness of the divine persons is expressed in the Trinitarian concept, *perichoresis* (Latin: "coinherence"), where the divine persons are said to mutually "indwell" and permeate one another in a divine "dance" of mutual giving and receiving.

Perichoresis: The divine dance of love

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[8] As an aid to memory, we might say that, in the Holy Trinity, there is one "what" ("being") and three "who's" ("persons").

Putting all this together, we can say that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, mutually indwelling one another in an intimate communion of love, *is* the "one God" of the Christian faith. As the Cappadocian father Gregory Nazianzus put it, "When I say 'God', I mean the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." The Cappadocian formula—"one being, three persons—with its regard for the importance of "relationship" as an integral aspect of the "being" of the "one God," is enjoying renewed appreciation today among leading contemporary Trinitarian theologians.

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

In light of what may appear to be theological hair-splitting about the nature of God, does the doctrine of the Trinity really matter? Does it make any difference whether God is "one being in three persons," as the doctrine of the Trinity claims (and the Bible reveals), or simply "one person" who plays three roles (*i.e.,* "modalism") or even three different gods pursuing their own plans (*i.e.,* "tritheism")? In regard to the last point, if Christians are really polytheists[9] who worship three "gods," rather than "three persons in *one* God," *then we can never be certain that God is like Jesus!* The Church fathers' teaching that Jesus is "of one being with the Father" concisely expresses the biblical truth that the loving heart of Jesus is a window into the inner heart of the Holy Trinity. The unity of "being," as well as the unity of will and purpose between the Father and the incarnate Son (John 5:30) assure us that there is no dark, unknowable god hidden behind the back of Jesus Christ, but only the God who has loved us to the uttermost in sending his Son to be our Savior. Therefore, it matters whether the Holy Trinity is three "gods," each independently seeking to fulfil his own plans, or "one God in three persons," who enjoy unity of being, harmony of will and singleness of purpose in creating humanity to share in the life and love of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Moreover, if God is only "one person," who plays three different "roles," then the New Testament teaching on the nature of God is called into question. According to the apostle John, "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). For John, "love" is not one characteristic among many that we "attribute" to God; rather, God *is* love. Yet, what is godly love like? In his memorable treatise on love (*see* 1Cor 13), the apostle Paul writes that love is patient and kind. It does not envy or dishonor others. Love is not self-seeking. It keeps no record of wrongs. Note that Paul describes love in *interpersonal* terms; that is, he describes love in terms of *relationship*. To be sure, godly love is *relational*, for by its very nature, love requires *another*.

In regard to the doctrine of the Trinity, "Father" and "Son" are terms of *relationship.* God is "the epitome of love in relation."[10] God is not alone, in isolation from relationships, but is eternally *related* within the Holy Trinity as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The "one God" of the Christian faith

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[9] Polytheism is belief in many gods. Hindus in India are polytheists. Christians, on the other hand, are monotheists. We believe in one God.

[10] Sanders, J. *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*. (Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), p. 148.

eternally exists in a Triune communion of *relationship,* whose nature is "love": the Father loves the Son in the Holy Spirit; the Son loves the Father in the Holy Spirit.

On the other hand, if God is "one" divine person who plays three different "roles," then God cannot be *eternally* love; rather, God *becomes* love when he creates another. In that case, we cannot be certain of God's purpose in creation, for a one-person god, who was "alone" before the creation of the world, may create from a need for fellowship. If so, then creation is not God's free and gracious act *for us* but is, rather, a *self*-fulfilling act designed to fill the one-person-god's need for community. (In other words, the creation of the world would be a selfish act rather than an act of pure grace and love.)

Happily, because scripture reveals that God is a divine communion of love, eternally existing as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, we can be certain that there is nothing lacking in God. God did not create us to fill a void or need in his heart; rather, God created us in an act of overflowing love, for by its nature godly love cannot be contained; it reaches out in self-giving *for us.* God created the world in order to *share* his divine life and love with all humanity. *That is why we were born*: to be included in the divine life and love of the Holy Trinity, to share and enjoy the eternal communion and fellowship of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

ETERNALLY FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT

The doctrine of the Trinity is the Church's attempt to express, within the limitations of human thought and speech, the biblical witness to the eternal nature of God, whom the New Testament describes as "love." God's self-revelation in the history of salvation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit is finally God's self-witness to his eternal, loving purpose for the whole world. Most importantly, the doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian assertion that God is always and eternally the same God who has revealed himself in the history of human salvation as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In short, *we know who God is from what he does*. There is no other God than the loving Father who has loved us to the uttermost in the gift of his Son and the sending of the Spirit—all *for us* and for our salvation. "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).

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