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# GOD IN 3 PERSONS — IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The word "trinity" is not found in the Bible. But neither are words or expressions like "incarnation" or "investigative judgment." What is important is that the concept is there. The word itself was coined in the late second century by the Latin church father Tertullian. The doctrine of the Trinity developed as the early church encountered the Greco-Roman world and began to reflect on how best to explain the biblical message to a pagan world.

The core elements of the doctrine of the Trinity are *oneness* and *distinctiveness*. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one, yet three. To express this conviction, words and expressions came into use that are not explicitly used in the Bible. The oneness of God we confess by claiming that God is one in *being*; the distinctiveness we confess by teaching that there are three *persons*.<sup>1</sup> The Bible nowhere uses these terms exactly that way because they belong to our language,<sup>2</sup> but in this study of the Trinity in the New Testament we will come to see that these concepts not only are present, but that they are also highly significant and decisive for the way the inspired authors speak about God.

Three major perspectives and practices led to the teaching of the Trinity: the biblical texts, the worship of Jesus Christ, and the story of redemption—that is, the drama of salvation we often describe as the great controversy between good and evil.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Being* is our translation of the Greek *ousia*, or the Latin *substantia*, our word *person* comes from Greek *prosōpon*, Latin *persona*, all words with a history of their own. When the term *persona* was used and applied to God, the meaning may not have been exactly identical to the way we use "person" today.

<sup>2</sup> The word "person" may serve to illustrate this point. Few, if any, will contest that Jesus was a person. The New Testament, however, never explicitly states that fact. We infer it nevertheless from the way Jesus is described because the characteristics by which we generally define what we mean by "person" clearly are present in the texts.

<sup>3</sup> Good, general, evangelical introductions to the Trinity are written by Brian Edgar, *The Message of the Trinity*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), and Roger W. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity*, Guides to Theology (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2002). Edgar leads the reader systematically through the biblical texts. Olson and Hall provide a concise biblical and historical overview of the doctrine. Contributions by SDA scholars include Woodrow Whidden, Jerry Moon, and John W. Reeve, *The Trinity* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2002); Fernando L. Canale, "Doctrine of God" in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul

The early Christians' doctrine of the Trinity centered on the identity of Jesus, and the development of this teaching follows naturally from an acceptance of His divinity. As the first Christians worshiped Jesus and spread the good news about Him to the world, (1) they maintained with the Hebrew Bible that God is one, (2) they worshiped and confessed Jesus as God, (3) they realized that the Father and the Son are two distinct persons, (4) they came to understand that the Holy Spirit is also God and a distinct person, and (5) they saw that the three persons of the Godhead are one in being and exist in an eternal relationship of love.

We share with the first Christians the belief that God is known by his self-revelation. This truth is based on the biblical concept of creation. God created out of nothing, and He is by nature independent of all things created. Humans, therefore, cannot by themselves find or comprehend God. Unaided by God, human philosophy is insufficient for that task, but in His love God has not remained silent. He has revealed Himself to us as a person in Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit has inspired the biblical authors to tell about Him in the Scriptures. In this article, we will, in particular, discuss and reflect on the texts in the New Testament that form the basis for the understanding of our merciful and loving triune God. Our premise is the trustworthiness of the Holy Scriptures. Modern, critical attempts to see a developmental history of Christian beliefs behind the proposed layers of the New Testament are rejected,<sup>4</sup> and our theological positions are based on Scripture alone. We also recognize that the various authors of the Bible were inspired by the Spirit of God to present different aspects of God's nature and His activities for human salvation, and that they wrote for different purposes and audiences, and in different contexts. Our position, therefore, is also based on Scripture as a whole. Focusing in particular on the New Testament, we note that for the authors of the New Testament, the Old Testament or Hebrew

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Dederen (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 2000), 105–159; the magisterial volume 2 of the *Systematic Theology* by Norman W. Gulley, *God as Trinity* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2011); and the papers from the South Pacific Division's Trinity Congress, eds. Paul Petersen and Rob McIver, *Biblical and Theological Studies on the Trinity* (Melbourne: ATF Press & Cooranbong: Avondale Academic Press, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> It is common in popular culture to claim that the belief in the divinity of Jesus and, as a consequence, in the doctrine of the Trinity is a late and in part a pagan-inspired invention by the Christian Church. See, for example, the popular and much discussed book *The Da Vinci Code* by Dan Brown (New York: Random House, 2003), or on a more scholarly level Bart Ehrman's *How Jesus Became God: The Exaltation of a Jewish Preacher from Galilee* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014). The anthology edited by Michael F. Bird, *How God Became Jesus: The Real Origins of Belief in Jesus' Divine Nature* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014) is a significant evangelical response to Ehrman's thesis and similar views.

Bible formed the accepted, inspired background to their depiction of God.

### Who is Jesus?

When reading the description of Jesus in the New Testament, it is worth remembering that Jesus is both divine and human. Several key terms used to refer to Jesus in the New Testament help us to identify Jesus as a divine person, one with God. But at the same time a number of texts view Him from the perspective of the incarnation and emphasize His humanity. Sometimes people use these texts to argue against His divinity, and we will discuss the most important of these when we have laid the foundation by observing the various ways Jesus is presented as God on earth.

### *Theos/God*

The English word "God" is originally a Germanic word for the highest god. When we use it today, we have come to indicate the Christian, or at least the monotheistic, meaning by capitalizing the word, using a lower case "g" for pagan gods. Such a distinction was not necessarily evident in biblical times, and though the word for "G/god" in general is used about God in Scripture in our modern Christian sense, it is also used for Satan (2 Cor 4:4). A certain caution needs to be exercised when we read words common in our language back into the biblical languages. While we at first emphasize the use of specific terms, we do well in realizing that the concept of the divinity of Jesus rests on far more than singular expressions.

In the New Testament the word "God" is translated from the Greek *theos*, which at times is used almost as a name for God the Father (as in 1 Cor 8:6, which we will discuss below). Nevertheless, *theos* is also unquestionably used about Jesus in the following seven texts: John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1, underlining that Jesus is "God-by-Nature".<sup>5</sup> These texts are not written by just one author; they are the testimonies of disciples like John and Peter as well as the apostle Paul. They are not the words spoken by Jesus Himself. Had He explicitly stated that He was God, it would in His Jewish context have been understood as "I am God the Father." Jesus, therefore, spoke about His identity in other ways, using biblical metaphors or the phrase translated with "I AM," to which we will turn shortly.

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<sup>5</sup> This is the conclusion by M. J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of Theos in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1992), 291; see also the discussion by Norman H. Young, "Jesus—Divinity Revealed in Humility" in *The Essential Jesus*, eds. Bryan W. Ball and William G. Johnsson (Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2002), 104–105.

## ***Theos in the Gospel of John***<sup>6</sup>

The first chapter of the fourth gospel is clear: "the Word was God" (John 1:1).<sup>7</sup> While the Greek of John 1:18 is not as clear, hence the differences in modern translations, the uncertainty of the text does not relate to the divinity of Jesus. As put by the Common English Bible, "No one has ever seen God. God the only Son, who is at the Father's side, has made God known" (John 1:18).

John presents Jesus as God in a way that highlights three important questions in relation to His divinity. First, it connects the divinity of Jesus to the story of redemption. Jesus is the Word that "became flesh," that is a human being, and it is through this Word that we know God as a person (see 1:18). In other words, how could Jesus bring atonement and save us from sin if He were not God, and how would we know God as a person if God had not become truly human in Christ?

Second, the text raises the issue of the nature of Jesus' divinity. What does it mean to be God? By using the phrase "in the beginning," the text alludes to Genesis 1 and thus clearly presupposes the Old Testament understanding of God, the Word, as eternal Creator, independent of all creation (see John 1:1–3). The translation suggested by Jehovah's Witnesses that "the Word became a god" is not only grammatically impossible, but creates a fundamental theological problem. If Jesus was just "a god", it would mean that there are two types of gods. God would not be one, and the monotheistic faith of the Bible would be in jeopardy.

Third, the use in John 1:18 of the term *monogenes* and the notion of the "sonship" of Jesus raises significant questions which demand more detailed comments. To the Gospel of John these questions are central, and we will discuss them below.

## ***Theos in the Epistles***

Paul's declaration of the eternal divinity of Jesus is straightforward: "To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen" (Rom 9:5). Or as expressed in the New King James Version, "... Christ came, who is over all, *the* eternally blessed God. Amen" (Rom 9:5). While the grammar of this text is difficult, what is clear and signifi-

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<sup>6</sup> A good discussion of the divinity of Jesus in the Gospel of John is Rob McIver, "Some Aspects of the Christology of the Fourth Gospel Relevant to Contemporary Christological Controversy" in Petersen & McIver, 3–27. On the topic of the Trinity in the fourth gospel, Andreas J. Köstenberger and Scott R. Swain have written an excellent monograph, *Father, Son and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*, New Studies in Biblical Theology (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> All biblical quotations are from the ESV, unless otherwise indicated.

cant is that Jesus here is seen as the object of worship, eternally to be blessed in the sense of being praised. Only God is to be worshiped (Exod 20:3).

Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1 combine the two words “God” and “Savior” when they identify Jesus. As Christians we are Adventists, waiting for “our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). And the grammatical construction in 2 Peter 1:1 excludes the interpretation that makes “our God and Savior Jesus Christ” refer to two different personalities. Jesus is clearly named “God” by Paul and Peter.

### Objections

Against the belief that Jesus was God (*theos*), two texts are often mentioned, which at surface level seem to imply the opposite—namely John 17:3 and 1 Corinthians 8:6, which both point to the Father as the “one God.” The immediate challenge to such a claim is that if John and Paul in these texts rejected the idea of the divinity of Jesus, they would clearly contradict themselves. Both have, as indicated by the texts referred to in the previous paragraph, explicitly called Jesus “God” (*theos*). A closer look at these texts in their context will help us to avoid posing such an internal biblical conflict.

The prayer of Jesus in John 17 is often called His “high priestly” prayer because He prays as the ultimate intercessor and mediator between God and human beings. He acts as the human representative before God’s throne. Early in this prayer He states, “And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). Did Jesus by these words contradict the opening claim of the gospel to His divinity (cf. John 1:1,18)?

Two observations clarify this question and resolve the perceived discrepancy. First, Jesus speaks clearly in His role as our human representative. The words are uttered from the perspective of His humanity. In order to become the full representative of and the ideal example for humanity, Jesus had to submit to His heavenly Father in all things and acknowledge that the authority He has as a human being stems from God alone. Therefore, He opens His prayer by saying that God has given the Son “authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him” (John 17:2). Coming to earth, this was the role of Jesus, but the text does not reject the fact already presented in the Gospel that Jesus was God by nature. Second, we also need to observe that Jesus in this text is actually stating that eternal life depends on knowing Him. In a sense Jesus makes Himself equal to God; eternal life is to know God and Jesus, because it is in Jesus alone we see God as a person (see texts like John 1:18 and 14:6–9; cf. Luke 10:22).



Salvation is not simply a matter of accepting the message of Jesus, as if He were a prophet only; salvation depends on knowing Him as a person, knowing Him in the sense of a personal experience.

In 1 Corinthians 8 Paul speaks against pagan polytheism in the context of sacrificial meals. He affirms the Christian belief in monotheism by referring to the *Shema*,<sup>8</sup> the central opening creed of the law in Deuteronomy 6:4, when he says, "there is no God but one" (1 Cor 8:4). Next, he expands the meaning of the *Shema* by a formal statement, sounding like an early Christian creed, "there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Cor 8:6).

Does Paul here contradict what he so strongly confesses in Romans 9:5, "to them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen"? The answer to this seeming discrepancy is found in two related observations. First, the formulaic nature of the sentence needs to be taken into account, as well as the fact that Paul combines his belief in Jesus with the confession of the *Shema*. Second, when that context is acknowledged, the description of Jesus as the only Lord is remarkable: if the text means that Jesus should never be called "God" (in contrast to other clear New Testament texts), it would also mean that God the Father should never be called "Lord." That can hardly be correct when we consider the use of the word "Lord" in the rest of the New Testament.<sup>9</sup> Rather, 1 Corinthians 8:6 reflects an early Christian confessional statement that incorporates Jesus into the *Shema* and upholds the Old Testament monotheism: there is one God and we know Him as a person through Jesus Christ. Thirdly, the text also clearly indicates that Jesus is uncreated—all things came through Him, and if all creation thus exists because of Him, he cannot Himself belong to creation. And if Jesus is not cre-

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<sup>8</sup> The *Shema* is "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4). The use of it in such confessional formulas has been observed by a number of scholars, among them Gordon Fee, *Pauline Christology: An Exegetical-Theological Study* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 17, 89–92; Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the God of Israel: God Crucified and Other Studies on the New Testament's Christology of Divine Identity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 27–28, 97–104, 210–218; and Andrew Chester, "High Christology—Whence, When and Why?" in *Early Christianity* 2 (2011), 36–37.

<sup>9</sup> Outside of a strict liturgical context, the Father is, for instance, called "Lord" in Mark 12:36; Acts 2:34 (quoting from Psalm 110); James identifies "Lord" with the Father in 1:5, 7. Looking at the OT background it would be very difficult to defend the claim that when YHWH is mentioned ("the LORD" in modern translations), it is never a reference to God the Father, e.g. Exodus 7:16; 20:2; 1 Kings 22:53 and the parallels between "LORD" and "God" in Psalms 3:7; 10:12; 18:6; 24:5 etc.

ated, He is truly God in the sense in which we use the word “God.” Only God is uncreated.

By using the term “Lord” for Jesus, the text leads us a step further into our study of the identity of Jesus. The Greek word *kyrios*, which is translated into English as “Lord,” was commonly used in the Greek translations of the Hebrew Scriptures to indicate Yahweh, the so-called *tetragrammaton*, denoting the four letters of the divine name for God.

### Kyrios/Lord

When the angels announced the birth of Jesus to the shepherds above the fields of Bethlehem, they told them that the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes was “Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11). The word “Christ” is Greek for Messiah, but the word “Lord” is from the Greek *kyrios*. In his song in Luke 1, the priest Zechariah foretold the role of his son, John the Baptist, by quoting the Old Testament prophet Isaiah:

A voice cries: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God” (Isa 40:3).

“And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways” (Luke 1:76)

The “Lord” whose way John the Baptist was to prepare is obviously Jesus; but in the text from Isaiah, the Lord mentioned by the prophet is in the original Hebrew *Yahweh*. This name for God is in the Greek Old Testament (Septuagint) translated as *kyrios*, and in the same verse is in parallel with “God” (*theos*). In a number of texts, the early Christians exclaimed that they had seen the Lord (1 Cor 9:1, cf. Acts 9:17, 27; 26:16) and beheld His glory (2 Cor 3:18, Luke 9:32; John 1:14; 12:41, cf. Exod 34:6–8; Isa 6:1 ff). The background to these experiences was the visions of the Shekinah, the divine presence, the glory of Yahweh.<sup>10</sup>

The Jews at the time of Jesus showed tremendous respect for the name of God. Yahweh was never to be pronounced except by the High Priest in the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement. Whenever the

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<sup>10</sup> This background has been thoroughly studied by Christopher Barina Kaiser, *Seeing the Lord's Glory: Kyriocentric Visions and the Dilemma of Early Christology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014).

four letters YHWH were found in the text of the Hebrew Scriptures, a reader would pronounce the name *Adonai* (Lord) in its place. When speaking about *Yahweh*, people would often use the term *Ha-Shem*, which simply means “the Name.” This fact lends significance to many of the New Testament references to the name of Jesus. The Book of Acts speaks about the preaching of the gospel to the Gentiles. Jesus is called “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36), and believers are baptized in the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48; 19:5)—they belong to Him. Christians like Paul, Titus, James, and Peter were “servants,” or literally “slaves,” of Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 1:1; Jas 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1). Such ownership of human beings rightfully belongs to God alone. On the Day of Pentecost Peter quoted the prophet Joel (Acts 2:21, cf. Joel 2:32), who stated that everyone calling upon the name of the Lord would be saved. In the Hebrew text this Lord is *Yahweh*. And this is the Lord upon whose name Christians now call, when they call upon the name of Jesus (e.g., Rom 10:13; 1 Cor 1:2). “There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (Act 4:12). Men and women were baptized when the apostles preached “the good news about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ” (Act 8:12). Jesus carries “the Name,” *Ha-Shem*.

We know from the Christian manuscripts that Christians used a unique scribal practice when referring to God. Most likely inspired by the Jewish awe for the name of God, Christians would only write one or two letters when God was mentioned, and they would put a horizontal stroke above those letters. The practice is called *nomina sacra* (“holy names”), and it is significant that the practice at first encompassed these four words: *theos*/God, *kyrios*/Lord, Jesus, and Christ. These were regarded as divine and sacred names.

The use of the term *kyrios* for Christ implies His identification with *Yahweh* of the Old Testament. This identification is supported by the so-called “I AM”-texts and is significant for answering the questions what is meant by believing that Jesus is one with God, or what is the nature of His divinity?

### I AM / Ego Eimi / 'Ani Hu'

Particularly in the Gospel of John, Jesus is quoted using a number of expressions introduced by “I am.” When we look at this phrase from the perspective of the English language, it seems not very significant, but rather a common way of indicating who you are. However, in the Greek language there is no need to include the personal pronoun in such a sentence, as it is already indicated by the form of the verb—so the “I” in “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12) is used for special emphasis. But not only that. In a number of situa-

tions, the context in which the Gospels report Jesus using the phrase "I am" clearly points to His divine nature as the great "I AM" of the Old Testament, *Yahweh*.<sup>11</sup> The context of the quoted saying by Jesus in John 8, for example, is the celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles. The temple compound was lit up to illustrate how Yahweh had led His people through the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire during the night. That light was Christ. Similarly, by saying, "I am the Good Shepherd," Jesus not only spoke about Himself as a good shepherd, but as *the* shepherd of Psalm 23, who is *Yahweh*.

Several of the other claims Jesus made when He used the phrase "I am . . ." imply a very high degree of authority that normally belongs only to God. Jesus is "the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through" Him (John 14:6). He is "the resurrection and the life" (John 11:25) and "the bread of life" (John 6:48).<sup>12</sup>

The Hebrew equivalent of the phrase "I am he/the one" is *'ani hu'* which is used repeatedly in the second part of the book of Isaiah as an expression spoken by *Yahweh* Himself (e.g., Isa 41:4; 43:10, 13; 48:12). A couple of times when Jesus says "I am," His identification with *Yahweh* is obvious. In John 13:19 Jesus speaks as the one who knows the end from the beginning—"I am telling you this now, before it takes place, that when it does take place you may believe that I am he" (John 13:19).<sup>13</sup> When His prophecies have been fulfilled, the disciples will recognize that Jesus is the One. In the dialogue with the Jewish leaders in John 8, the enemies of Jesus clearly understand what He is saying, and they want to execute Him for blasphemy because He claims to be one with God (John 8:59, cf. 10:30–33). Jesus' statement was unambiguous: "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am [*ego eimi*]" (John 8:58).

In Revelation, the identification between *Yahweh* and Jesus is likewise difficult to overlook. The almighty God presents Himself in the opening greetings as the "alpha and omega," the first and the last letter of the Greek alphabet (Rev 1:8). When Jesus shows Himself to John on Patmos, He identifies Himself in a similar manner as "the first and the last" (Rev 1:17). In so doing, Jesus quotes Isaiah, through whom *Yahweh* spoke as "the first and . . . the last; besides me there is no god" (Isa 44:6). The identification is even stronger in the closing

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<sup>11</sup> As pointed out by, among many others, Richard Bauckham, "Monotheism and Christology in the Gospel of John" in *Contours of Christology in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005), 153–163.

<sup>12</sup> Köstenberger and Swain (37) list seven absolute "I am" sayings in which "Jesus' deity is clearly implied," namely John 4:26; 6:20; 8:24, 28; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8.

<sup>13</sup> Compare John 19:13 with the meaning of the divine name given to Moses at the burning bush in Exodus 3:14.

words of Revelation when Jesus greets John as both “the alpha and omega” and “the first and the last” (Rev 22:13).

### **The Son—Son of God/Son of Man**

But isn't Jesus also commonly portrayed as the Son? And if He is the Son, how can He be God—isn't God the Father ?

In response to such questions, it must be emphasized that speaking about Jesus as God does not mean that He is identical with God the Father as a person. The Bible makes it clear that the Father and the Son are two distinct persons, and the doctrine of the Trinity does not teach anything different. Actually, the notion that the Father and the Son are one and the same person was rejected by the early church as a heresy commonly labelled *modalism*. Furthermore, when the authors of the Bible speak about God, they do not thereby automatically think of God the Father, but rather of the Godhead, and the term “God” could refer to any of the persons of that Godhead.

Next, we need to understand the nature of the human language we employ when we speak about God. As created beings, we are limited because God is not exactly like us, and we are only able to use human language. God is not a father exactly as we are fathers. God the Father was, for instance, never a son who Himself had a father. There are people who claim that Jesus was God's eternal son in a literal sense, and that God the Father literally begat the Son. But from a modern Western perspective, “literal” in that case would mean that God the Father sometime before everything else generated the Son through a mother!

Moreover, when reading the Bible, it is important to understand words in light of the biblical usage, and not impose a modern, Western usage upon the biblical texts. In Semitic languages the terms “Son” and “Father” are used in a wider sense than is common in most Western languages. A son can be what we call a son of flesh and blood, identified by DNA, but it can also refer to a descendant.<sup>14</sup> Son can indicate a student, as in “sons of the prophets” (2 King 2:3), or the son in Proverbs 1:8 and other wisdom literature. Furthermore, “son” can be used in reference to a successor in an office, for example, Belshazzar as the king of Babylon referred to his predecessor, Nebuchadnezzar, as his “father” (Dan 5:18). Basically, a “son” is a representative, most clearly exemplified by the term “sons of God” (Job 1:6; 2:1)

Jesus is called “the Son of God” (Matt 4:3, 6; 8:29; etc.) because of His role of representing the Godhead. In that sense Jesus was the

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<sup>14</sup> Biblical genealogies, therefore, can effortlessly skip generations. A good example is the genealogy of Christ in Matthew 1:1–17. In verse 8 three generations are left out (cf. 1 Chron 3:11, 12), in verse 11 King Jehoiakim is left out (cf. 1 Chron 3:15, 16).

eternal Son. He has always represented God to the created beings. He did that from eternity. Then, in the incarnation He became "Son" in a special sense by taking upon Himself human nature in order to save what was lost. Let us look closer at the expressions used about the sonship of Jesus Christ in order to understand in what sense Jesus was eternally the "Son," and in what way He is described as "Son" in the context of the plan of salvation.

The Bible speaks about Jesus as "Son" in three different ways. He is "the Son of Man," "the Son of God," or simply "the Son."

### **"Son of Man"**

"Son of Man" is a favorite expression used by Jesus about Himself. It has its origin in Daniel 7:13, 14 where someone like "a Son of Man" receives the eternal kingdom. Its meaning is in one sense simple: it denotes a human being. In the context of Daniel's vision of the beasts of prey who by violence and force dominate earth, the "Son of Man" is the weak human being who nevertheless is regarded worthy to rule and be worshiped by all. This is a fitting description of Jesus Christ, similar to the portrayal of Jesus in the last book of the Bible, as a slain Lamb encountering brutal and fierce monsters (Rev 5:6, 12). As a perfect human being who died for the sins of the world, He is able to represent the believers before the throne of God, and everyone who belongs to Him is safe during the pre-advent judgment (Dan 7:9, 10).

### **"Son of God"**

When the "sons of God" gather before the throne of God as in the Book of Job (1:6; 2:1), they come as representatives for various parts of the universe. God's main representative on earth during the time of the monarchy of Israel was the Davidic king on Mt. Zion. When the king was enthroned, he became the "Son of God", adopted as God's representative (cf. Ps 2:7). In the New Testament this description of the royal king is rightly applied to Jesus, who as the true Messiah prophetically fulfilled the type provided by the description of the Davidic king. After His sacrifice Jesus was elevated and enthroned as the priestly king forever, a main theme in the book of Hebrews (cf. Heb 1:1-3). It is important that we do not see this adoption or exaltation outside of the context of the incarnation of Jesus. Christ was not just a very good man who because of that became a god; He was the Creator God who became a human being, the Good Shepherd who became a slain lamb (cf. Rev 5:12).

When the New Testament speaks about Jesus as the "Son of God," it clearly refers to His role as the Redeemer King of the line of David.

By becoming a human being Jesus was able to represent God on earth to the fallen human race. It is in this context we must understand the term *prototokos* in Colossians 1:15.<sup>15</sup> The word is traditionally translated "firstborn," but "the one who is first over all creation" (CEB) also expresses the intent well. "Firstborn" is used as a title for the Messiah, the Davidic king, the "king of kings," or "the highest of the kings of the earth" (Ps 89:27). In his hymn to Christ in Colossians 1:15–17, Paul makes it clear that Jesus Himself was not created, but rather "by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col 1:16). And if Jesus is uncreated and independent of all creation, He is by his very nature one with God! Paul next connects Jesus' reign to His victory over death—Jesus is "the firstborn from the dead" (Col 1:18). That means He is the preeminent one, not chronologically the first (Moses and others had preceded Him; see Matt 17:3; Luke 7:13–15; John 11:43, 44). The resurrection of Jesus was seen as the proof of His divinity (Rom 1:4) and of His right to be exalted and return to His place on the throne of God.

### "The Son"

The third way Jesus is portrayed as "Son" is just as the Son! Numerous times Jesus speaks about Himself simply as "the Son". That is especially the case in the Gospel of John. The statistics are enlightening. While God is mentioned as "father" only eighteen times in the whole of the Old Testament, Jesus in the Gospel of John alone calls Himself "the Son" more than one hundred times. The message is clear: we know the Father through the Son. God has revealed Himself to us as a person through Jesus Christ, both fully God and fully human.

### Monogenes

One of the most contested words used about Jesus in the New Testament is the Greek word *monogenes* in John 3:16.<sup>16</sup> Traditionally it has been translated as "only begotten" (KJV; NKJV). Most recent translations, however, follow established research of the Greek language and translate the word as "one and only" (CBS; NIV), "only" (ESV; NAB; RSV), or "unique" (MIT). What is the reason for this translation, and what is the significance of the word for our understanding of the identity of Jesus in relation to the Godhead?

The Greek term "monogenes" is a compound word formed by

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<sup>15</sup> Ekkehardt Mueller has written a clear, detailed, and insightful article on the question of "prototokos" in Petersen and McIver, "The Firstborn in Colossians 1:15," 65–86.

<sup>16</sup> For further details see the article by Petersen, "Jesus—the 'One and Only' or 'Only Begotten': The Meaning of *Monogenes*" in Petersen and McIver, 29–34.

”mono” meaning ”one,” as in the English words ”monogamous” or ”monotheism,” and the word *genes* which means ”kind, type.” Previous translations mistakenly derived the latter part of the word from *gennao*, which means ”beget, sire, give birth to.” It is, however, convincingly shown that this was a misunderstanding, and that ”monogenes” means ”one of a kind, unique,” not ”the only one born to.” It is used, for instance, in the Greek language about a mythical bird.<sup>17</sup>

That the meaning of *monogenes* is not ”the only one born to” is particularly evident from two examples of New Testament usage. In Hebrews 11:17 *monogenes* refers to Isaac as Abraham’s only son, and as all Bible readers know, Isaac was not literally the only son of Abraham, who had also fathered Ishmael and later with Ketura would become the father of a number of sons (see Gen 25:1–4). However, Isaac was the ”unique” son of Abraham, born according to the promises of God. The other example comes from John 1:12–14, where John employs the term *monogenes* in a context where he also speaks about those who are ”born” by God, using the Greek word ”*gennaō*”. The believers are said to be ”born/begotten” (*gennaō*) by God and receiving the right to be called the sons of God. Immediately following, John in verse 14 calls Jesus the *monogenes*. It would not make sense if John, having just stated that we all as believers are born/begotten by God, went on to say that only Jesus is born/begotten by God! However, the meaning ”unique” fits the contexts very well; we have become God’s children because of Jesus, who in a unique sense is the Son of God!<sup>18</sup>

### **The Divine Authority of Jesus**

The identity of Jesus is not only evident from the terms used to describe Him. In the Gospel narratives, Jesus in several situations exercises an authority that typically belongs to God alone. Exposed to His divine creative power, the people in the boats ”were filled with great fear and said to one another, ‘Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?’” (Mark 4:41). But even stronger evidence is the acknowledged authority of Jesus to forgive sins. When facing a crippled man lowered through a hole in the roof, the first words of Jesus to the man are an offer of forgiveness (see Mark 2:1–12). The scribes murmured among themselves, whispering correctly that ”only the one God can forgive sins” (Mark 2:7, CEB). To prove the truth of

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<sup>17</sup> One Christian author in late Antiquity even used *monogenes* for the Holy Spirit—obviously to him it did not mean ”only one born to/begotten.” For this and other examples of the usage of monogenes as ”unique,” see Petersen and McIver, 31, note 6.

<sup>18</sup> A similar example, with *monogenes* and *gennao* in the same context, is found in 1 John 4:7–9. Jesus is the ”only” Son and the believers are ”born” by God.



this assumption, Jesus healed the man. If God had not acknowledged the right of Jesus to forgive the sins of the crippled man, why would Jesus have been allowed to perform the healing?

Other examples could be added. Jesus is the “Lord of the Sabbath” (Mark 2:28). Who but the Creator Himself would be able to claim such a title and the authority over the law? Simon J. Gathercole has pointed out that Jesus exercises an authority over the people of God equal to God in the Old Testament, referring among other texts to Matthew 11:27, “No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.” Jesus chooses who can know the Father! In Mark the people of God are called “his [Jesus’] elect” (Mark 13:27).<sup>19</sup> Even the angels belong to Jesus, as is clear from Matthew 24:31, “And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other.”

### Worshipping Jesus

The fact that Jesus is not one of the created angelic beings is highlighted by the worship devoted to Jesus. The book of Revelation strongly warns against any worship of angels. When John fell down in awe at the feet of the angel who accompanied Him, the response came quickly, “You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God” (Rev 19:10; 22:9). But in the scenes from the heavenly throne room (Rev 5:1–14), Jesus as the Lamb of God is the very object of worship along with the “Lord God Almighty”. Michael F. Bird correctly points out, “Jesus receives the worship that is given to God but forbidden for angels. In Revelation, the worship given to Jesus is not angel worship, but God worship!”<sup>20</sup>

This thought is in line with the statement by Jesus to the Devil in the wilderness, “It is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve’” (Luke 4:8). In tempting Jesus, Satan came to Him pretending to be the true Son of God (or the Son of Man in Daniel 7:13, 14) whom all people are going to worship or serve. Jesus made it clear to the Devil that only God is to be worshiped.

At the end of his Gospel, Luke describes how the disciples worshiped (*proskuneō*) Jesus (Luke 24:52). He is not simply talking about an informal show of reverence to a superior. The event is an example of formal worship. When Luke in the book of Acts relates how

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<sup>19</sup> Simon J. Gathercole, “What Did the First Christians Think About Jesus,” in Bird, *How God Became Jesus*, 100.

<sup>20</sup> Michael F. Bird, “Of God, Angels, and Men,” in Bird, *How God Became Jesus*, 33.

Cornelius bowed down to worship Peter, using the same Greek word *proskuneō* for "worship," he records how Peter quickly responded and "lifted Him up, saying, 'Stand up; I too am a man'" (Act 10:26).

The biblical message is clear: only God is to receive worship.<sup>21</sup> The biblical fact is equally clear: Jesus is worshiped. Hence, the conclusion is likewise clear: Jesus is one with God!

### Objections

That Jesus was not only God, but through His incarnation also became a human being, is reflected in all the texts that speak about His submission. From His human perspective He could say, "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). He had emptied Himself (Phil 2:7) and by His own choice (John 10:18) refrained from using or accessing His divine power or knowledge. Therefore He explained to His disciples when speaking about His return that "only the Father knows" the hour and day (Matt 24:36, CEB).

Out of love God became a human being in Jesus Christ. As a human being, Jesus the Son submitted completely to the will of His heavenly Father. By His victory over sin and death Jesus won the right to reign as eternal king. With reference to Psalms 8 and 110, Paul speaks in 1 Corinthians 15:22–28 about this role of Jesus as the victorious human being, the king under whose feet God will put all the enemies. In the context of victory over death Paul ends his statement with these words, "When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28).

A first reading could leave the impression that the reign of Jesus will end when He submits His kingdom and Himself to the Father. But other places in the Bible make it clear that the royal dominion of Jesus is unending: "And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed" (Dan 7:14, cf. 2:44).

Paul's statement in 1 Corinthians 15:28 must be understood in its context. He speaks about the plan of salvation, especially about Christ's victory over death—the whole focus of the chapter is the resurrection. By dying out of love, by His voluntary sacrifice, Jesus gained the victory over death, and in the judgment God is therefore able to bring every power and authority into submission under the feet of Christ as

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<sup>21</sup> In his description of humanity's historical development of depravity the apostle Paul in Romans 1:20–25 provides a striking example of the clear line of demarcation between Creator and created beings as objects of worship.

the ruler and king. When that process is finished, when the judgment is over, when believers have been sanctified, and when sin and death with all their consequences have been finally eradicated, Jesus brings every power back into submission under God. As the victorious human king, He returns to God what properly belongs to God, and there will be no death anymore because God is "all in all". The text does not talk about the nature of Jesus as God, but about His role as the perfect human being who has won back the kingdom for God.

So it is necessary to remember that the Bible speaks about Jesus both as eternal God and as a human being. In His incarnation Jesus submitted to the heavenly Father, and texts that deal with the plan of salvation will often underline this submission. But at the same time there are, as we have seen, a large number of biblical texts that clearly and without ambiguity underline His divinity. The texts about His submission in the plan of salvation for the sake of humanity should not be used to deny what Jesus as God is by nature.

### **The Divinity of Jesus: Summary**

The identity of Jesus as one with God from eternity is an essential component of the story of divine love. Paul summarizes the main elements of that story in Philippians 2:4–11, where he used what was probably one of the earliest Christian hymns. In this retelling of the grand drama of salvation Paul highlights that:

1. Christ was fully God (v. 6)
2. He emptied Himself and became fully human, dying on the cross (vs. 7, 8)
3. He has been exalted and received "the name which is above every name" (v. 9)
4. Every creature will acknowledge that the Lord is Jesus Christ<sup>22</sup> (vs. 10, 11)

There can be no more absolute love than the eternal, omnipotent Creator becoming a human being and dying as a sinner in my place. If Jesus were anything less than God in that biblical sense of Almighty Creator, the love of God would not be absolute. God would in that case have sent someone else, not given Himself.

As we have seen, the divinity of Jesus is evident from the New Testament. That is not true just because He is called God in a few

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<sup>22</sup> As pointed out by Gordon Fee (*Pauline Christology*, 123–134, 399–340), the vast majority of NT texts that link Jesus with Lord/*kyrios*, place the word *kyrios* before Jesus/Christ, thereby underlining the identification of Jesus with the Lord/*Yahweh* of the Old Testament.

texts, and Jesus is not just a second God like the pagan gods found in the pantheon of the Romans and the Greeks of the time. Jesus is *kyrios*, the Lord *Yahweh* Himself, and He is in a number of ways identified with the Creator God described in the Old Testament. Through Jesus we really know God Himself as a person, "for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19). In Jesus it is truly God who reconciles the world to Himself (2 Cor 5:19).

With that insight from Scripture, the early Christians also faced a challenge. Jesus was God, and God is one, but it was also evident that God the Father and God the Son were not one and the same. Jesus prayed to His heavenly Father while on earth. So Christians concluded from God's revelation through Scripture and through Jesus that in the one God there are at least two distinct persons. And looking at the way the New Testament describes the Godhead, it became clear to them that the distinctions do not point to only two, but to three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

### **The Holy Spirit**

The biblical foundation for the doctrine of the Trinity are the texts that emphasize oneness and distinctiveness. The New Testament describes the Holy Spirit both as a distinct person or personality and as one with the other two distinct persons of the Godhead, that is the Father and the Son.<sup>23</sup>

#### **Distinctiveness of the Spirit**

The original biblical words for "Spirit" are challenging because they may cover a broad range of meanings. Both the Hebrew *ruach* and the Greek *pneuma* may mean "wind", "breath" or even "storm". So, the word "spirit" does not refer to the Holy Spirit every time it is present. They are also used to describe aspects of human identity. When we speak about the "spirit" of a human being, we do not infer that we speak about another person. What are the features that lead us to a different conclusion when we speak about the "Spirit of God"?

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<sup>23</sup> Keith Warrington, *Discovering the Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005) and F. LeRon Shults and Andrea Hollingsworth, *The Holy Spirit, Guides to Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008) are good evangelical sources for the study of the Holy Spirit. Warrington walks the reader through NT texts, Shults and Hollingsworth give a solid summary of the historical development of the doctrine. Among Seventh-day Adventist studies, Jan Paulsen's *When the Spirit Descends* (Silver Springs, MD: Review & Herald, 2000) stands out as unique for its theological depth. See also Frank M. Hasel's thorough overview of the theological implications of the biblical texts in "The Holy Spirit: His Divinity and Personality," in Petersen and McIver, 127–144.

The answer is found in the biblical texts. A number of these talk about the Holy Spirit in ways different from when Scripture mentions the spirit of a human being. Texts like the following underline the personhood of the Holy Spirit.

All these are activated by one and the same Spirit, who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses (1 Cor 12:11, NRS).

And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption (Eph 4:30, NIV).

Therefore I tell you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven people, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. And whoever speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come (Matt 12:31, 32).

The Spirit has His own will and chooses accordingly. He can be grieved and blasphemed against. Such expressions are not fit for a mere power or influence, but are characteristics of a person. Is the Spirit then a person just like you and me? No, we use limited human terminology to describe the divine, and the Spirit is what human beings can never be.

The above quotations about the personhood of the Holy Spirit are important because they describe the Spirit as different from the Father and the Son. He is “another comforter” (John 14:16). Jesus says that sin against the Spirit is not identical with sin against Himself. Though united as one in a way that human beings can never be, they are nevertheless not the same person; they are distinct. This distinctiveness is expressed in many New Testament texts. Luke underlines the “three-ness” in his description of the baptism of Jesus, where Father, Son, and Spirit are clearly not identical, “Now when all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heavens were opened, and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form, like a dove; and a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased’” (Luke 3:21, 22).

This difference between Jesus and the Holy Spirit was significant for the early Christians’ understanding of the heavenly sanctuary. Jesus had entered it as our heavenly High Priest, but by keeping His humanity He limited Himself. When Peter, following the Day of Pentecost, further explained the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, he em-

phasized that Jesus “must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets” (Acts 3:21, NIV).

Jesus Himself, when sharing the promise of the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, also made the distinctive nature of the Spirit clear: “I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, to be with you forever . . . But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you (John 14:16, 26).

Not all arguments used to support the doctrine of the Trinity hold up when investigated more closely. The Greek text uses the masculine pronoun “he” though the word for Spirit (*pneuma*) is in the neuter gender. Some claim this grammatical fact to be a proof that Jesus speaks about the Spirit as a person. However, the particular gender of the pronoun is simply used because it refers back to the word for “comforter” or “helper,” Greek *parakletos*, which is masculine. In itself it says little about the personhood of the Spirit.<sup>24</sup>

The distinctiveness of the Spirit as a person is, however, evident from the clear differentiation in function between Father, Son, and Spirit.<sup>25</sup> It is also emphasized by the use of the pronoun “he” (*ekeinos*) throughout the speech by Jesus, not because of the masculine gender of the pronoun but simply because of its presence. Because a subject in Greek is normally indicated by the form of the verb, the constant repetition by Jesus of this pronoun is unnecessary and thus underlines that the Spirit is distinct from Jesus.

Some interpret the words of Jesus, “I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:18) as proof that Jesus and the Spirit are one and the same person. There is, however, no reason to assume that Jesus implies a complete common identity. Rather, He speaks about the unity and oneness not only between Himself and the Spirit, but also between Himself and the Father. To anyone who loves God’s commands “we will come,” Jesus says (John 14:23), referring to both His Father and Himself. If the Spirit is to be identified as the same person as Jesus, the Father must be as well. That is obviously not the case, and the texts instead reveal the very nature of the Trinity by underlining both oneness and distinctiveness.

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<sup>24</sup> Also, the argument often used that the use of the pronoun *allos* (“another”) in place of *heteros* proves -the distinct divinity of the Holy Spirit carries little weight grammatically.

<sup>25</sup> The three are clearly described as distinct from one another. Is “Spirit” another name for Jesus? That this is not the case becomes clear when we try to replace “Jesus” with “Spirit” in John 16:14. The Spirit “will glorify **himself**, for he will take what is **his** and declare it to you!” That would make little sense and is not what Jesus teaches.

## The Holy Spirit: One with God

The Holy Spirit is a distinct person. Yet, He is also one with God the Father and God the Son. That fact can be deduced from the many triune statements found in the New Testament. Some of these are clear trinitarian formulas:

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).

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all (Eph 4:4–6).

And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age” (Matt 28:18–20).

Such expressions place the Spirit on the same level as the Father and the Son. The Spirit is not just a created being like the heavenly angels. He is one with God. The gospel commission in Matthew highlights in a unique way both oneness and distinctiveness. In the baptismal formula “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”, there are three persons, yet the word for “name” is singular!<sup>26</sup>

In the formula quoted above from Ephesians 4 the Holy Spirit is mentioned first; in Matthew 28 the Father is first and in 2 Corinthians 13 the Son is first. This variety in sequence is typical for the NT texts or text groups in which Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all mentioned.<sup>27</sup> The sequence depends on the theme addressed in the context. There is no ranking of the three who are one God.

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<sup>26</sup> Various Internet articles claim that the gospel commission was absent from the early manuscripts of Matthew. This claim has no factual basis. Moreover, the Trinitarian baptismal formula from Matthew is attested as early as around the year 100 where it is quoted in the early Christian writing called *Didache*.

<sup>27</sup> According to Kevin Giles, in the epistles of Paul the Son is mentioned first sixteen times, the Spirit nine times, and God the Father six times (*Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006], 109–110).

Two questions are often raised in objection to the notion of the Spirit as a distinct person and one with God in being. First, is the Spirit really a person in the same way as I, a human being, am a person? And second, if the Holy Spirit truly is God, why is not more said about the Spirit in the Bible? These two questions may be answered by referring to one basic feature of the doctrine of the Trinity: we only know God as a person through the human being Jesus Christ! God as God is by nature never just like us. In order to indicate that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct, we use the term "person," but, as all words we use about God, it does not fully reflect what God is. "Persons" in our normal sense of the word are not omnipotent, omniscient, and forever present. We are only created beings; we are not eternal—God is.

For that reason our personal knowledge of who God is, and what He is like, comes through His self-revelation in the incarnate Christ, fully human and fully God, and thus the only mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim 2:5). The role of the Holy Spirit in the plan of salvation is not to talk about Himself, but to reveal Jesus Christ to us (John 16:13–15) and thereby lead us to conviction of sin, repentance, and into a trusting personal relationship with Jesus, forgiven and reconciled with God.

### **Theological Significance**

We have already touched on some of the important theological implications of the concept of the Trinity as we find it in the New Testament. This section therefore functions as a summary. Throughout the history of the Christian Church, believers have reflected on and discussed many ways of understanding the doctrine, but we will focus on what is directly stated or implied in the biblical texts.

The New Testament portrays Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as divine. The inspired authors describe the Godhead both from the perspective of oneness and distinctiveness. God is one, but that one name, *Ha-Shem*, is shared by three (see Matt 28:19). One being but three persons is the language we use.

Why is this teaching important? What difference does it make? The answer points to two areas: our knowledge of God and our redemption. It is because Jesus is fully God that we are able to know God as a person and enter into a trusting relationship with Him. This truth is clearly stated by Jesus in His conversation with the disciples Thomas and Philip:

Jesus said to him, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From



now on you do know him and have seen him.” Philip said to him, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us.” Jesus said to him, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:6–9).

If Jesus were not God in the “flesh” (John 1:14), we would be able to hear His teachings about God, but we would not know God in person, and our relationship would not be based on trust or faith, but on information only.

Next, because Jesus is fully God, our reconciliation with God through His sacrifice on Calvary can be complete. In Christ all “the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19), and therefore it was God Himself who in Christ reconciled the world and us to Himself (2 Cor 5:18, 19) by not counting our sins against us. He did this by dying on the cross. If Jesus had been less than God, if He had been a created being only, the one whom God sent to die for our sins on Calvary would have been someone else, and there would have been no full atonement.

The doctrine of the Trinity centers on the divinity of Jesus Christ. Being God, He must by His very nature be eternal and omnipotent. There are no small gods; there is no secondary God. *Yahweh* is “the first and the last”—and so is Jesus (Isa 44:6; Rev 1:17).

The role of the Holy Spirit in the plan of salvation corresponds to these two areas of knowledge of God and redemption. We know God as a person in Jesus Christ, but after His ascension we only know Jesus Christ because He has been revealed to us by the Holy Spirit. This is the very content of Jesus’ teaching about the Spirit in John 14–16 (cf. John 16:13–16), and throughout the Bible it is repeatedly stated that the authors of Scripture, the prophets, were inspired by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Pet 1:11 and 2 Pet 1:21). The Spirit who spoke through the Old Testament (Acts 1:16; 4:25) is the same Spirit whom Jesus sent to His disciples to proclaim the gospel to the world.

It is also the Holy Spirit who by sanctifying the saints in Christ (1 Cor 1:2; 1 Pet 1:2) applies the merits of the sacrifice and atonement of Jesus. As Jesus is our intercessor in the heavenly sanctuary (Heb 7:25), the Holy Spirit comes to us on earth as the intercessor (Rom 8:26) to help us pray with the attitude and mind of Jesus, connecting us while still on earth to God in heaven. He is able to do that because He is one with God and knows the depth of the very being of God (1 Cor 2:10). Sanctifying us in Christ, the Spirit reaps in our lives a harvest of love, peace, joy etc. (Gal 5:22, 23), thus reconciling us with God by applying the merits of the sacrifice of Calvary.

### Trinity: the Love Story

God is known through His self-revelation. As a person, God the Son reveals the Father. Through the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit reveals who Jesus is. Therefore, both the Son and the Spirit are full representatives of and one with God.

The Christian religion is a historical religion. The drama of salvation centers on major events in history. In the history of mankind these comprise Creation, Fall, incarnation, cross, resurrection, and the second coming of Jesus with the final restoration. These historical events are placed in the context of a cosmic drama that in the New Testament is underlined by the apocalyptic perspective permeating all books of the New Testament, not just the book of Revelation. The battle between good and evil is the explicit background for NT history, confirmed by a multitude of examples such as the temptation in the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11), the sermon on the Mount of Olives (Matt 24, 25, also called the little apocalypse), Paul's understanding of the powers behind the ethical battle (Acts 26:18), and Paul's reference to the prophecies of Daniel which he had once explained to the church in Thessalonica (2 Thess 2:1–12). The gospel is presented in the context of a great, cosmic controversy between good and evil.

It is significant for this biblical narrative that the Son existed before He was born in Bethlehem. As repeatedly mentioned in the Gospels, Jesus came to "call the sinners" (Mark 2:17); He came to "fulfill the law" (Matt 5:17); He came to "cast fire onto the earth (Luk 12:49); He came to "serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45; Matt 20:28); He came to "seek and save what was lost" (Luke 19:19). If Jesus came, He had to come from somewhere. He had a pre-existence, and He came to earth because of His love for fallen humanity.<sup>28</sup>

To express the nature of that love the NT authors and the early Christians employed a rarely used Greek word for love, *agape*, and invested it with new meaning. In the Christian context, *agape* love came to signify how the almighty God reached out to the most unworthy sinner. This love is absolute. It avoids all trading with or compromise with sin. The highest searches for the lowest. The Good Shepherd becomes a sacrificial lamb (John 10:14; Rev 5:12).

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<sup>28</sup> The synoptic Gospels are often thought not to teach the pre-existence of Jesus. Simon J. Gathercole has convincingly shown that they do in *The Preexistent Son: Recovering the Christologies of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2006). The examples are summarized in his chapter "What Did the First Christians Think about Jesus?" in Bird, *How God Became Jesus*, 96–97.

The doctrine of the Trinity is the very core of the Christian message. The Creator did not send a created being. God did not send an angel. He did not send a secondary god. In Christ, God Himself came. "For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1), "and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Anything less would have jeopardized this divine love. It would not have been absolute, and there would be no gospel. God would not have reconciled us to Himself, but to someone else, and we would not have known Him as a person in Jesus, revealed to us by the Holy Spirit.

In this love story all traditional human values are turned upside down. The servant is the master (Matt 20:24–28) because it is the very nature of God Himself to serve. When Jesus came to give Himself as a sacrifice, He exemplified what has always been the core of the heart of God. He came to win with love, not by force. God is the greatest in His kingdom, and in absolute love God Himself became a servant of love.

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