

Who Is God?*

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As introduction to this essay, I want to quote from the fifth edition of the *Evangelical Lutheran Adult Catechism*, p. 464, paragraph 4, *Trinity*:

Among the most difficult elements of the Christian faith is the belief that God is Triune. To many this seems incomprehensible or contradictory. Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust* is spokesman for this idea: "My friend, this art is old and new, it was a technique of all ages, to propagate error not truth through 'one and three,' and 'three and one.'" However, the teaching of the Trinity is not a mathematical puzzle about how three can be one. The Trinity does not teach that three times one is one. Rather it embodies a mystery which cannot be grasped alone in intellectual categories.

But it is no secret that in the Christian world the vast majority of believers subscribe to Trinitarianism. I have found, however, that very few can offer even a reasonably coherent explanation of this doctrine. I once spoke with a woman about a certain congregation we were both acquainted with and she countered with: "Oh, but they don't believe in the Trinity." I asked, "What is the Trinity?" "I have no idea," she replied.

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Many years ago, when I was a young evangelist in Mexico, things went very badly for me during a conversation with a Jehovah's Witness. He put questions to me about the Trinity to which I had no satisfactory answer. I then decided to investigate this subject in more depth, although I had already studied it as a theology student at university. Looking through the relevant literature I came again and again across the same statement: "It is impossible to understand this teaching [Trinitarianism] with the mind. It must be accepted as a revelation."

During my investigation I resolved never again to use the expression "Trinity" in discussion with Jehovah's Witnesses, since it is not a biblical word. I would just prove to them from the Bible that Jesus is God. From my studies I had collected about six to eight proof-texts with which to demonstrate the proposition that Jesus is the Almighty God. Because of my subsequent success in dialogue with Jehovah's Witnesses and others, I felt sure that I was teaching the Truth.

Nevertheless I began having difficulties with the Trinity in my own thinking. I knew that most of the passages which I was using as proof-texts were the subject of disagreement among theologians and linguists. Moreover it seemed to me quite unbiblical to speak of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as the first, second and third members of the Godhead. Are they not all equally God? Although I kept in mind what I had always heard — that one should not try to understand the Trinity — I still felt uneasy about this central doctrine.

For years I refused the baptism in the spirit. Then I discovered that it is a biblical doctrine. I prayed for it and received it. Probably this experience gave me the courage to explore in the light of the Bible my whole belief system. The question of water baptism kept me busy. I had to wonder why the early Christians were always baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Did they not know about Jesus' command in Matthew 28:19, or did they understand it differently than we do? At the age of 42 I was baptized, according to Acts 2:38, in the name of Jesus Christ.

Through this baptism I got to know other spirit-baptized believers, who also had difficulties with Trinitarianism. They were called "oneness" Christians. For them God is "One." He reveals Himself sometimes as Father, sometimes as Son and sometimes as the Holy Spirit. In church history this teaching is known as Modalism or Sabellianism (after Sabellius who brought this teaching to Rome in the third century [215 AD]). If anything, adherents of this belief emphasize the Godhead of Jesus more strongly than Trinitarians. They take Jesus' words quite

literally when he said: “I and the Father are one.” For most of the “oneness” Christians Jesus is Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

In this way the problem of the Three in One is eliminated. But another problem surfaces: how to distinguish the Father from the Son. During a preaching tour I visited for some months congregations in America who hold this “oneness” position. Whenever I brought up specific Bible verses which strongly emphasize a distinction between the Father and the Son (e.g. John 14:28, “for the Father is greater than I”), things became uncomfortable both for me and the congregation. Such verses are also problematic for Trinitarians. Theologians call it “the problem of subordination.”

In my personal search for the Truth about God I have noticed that, in contrast to the complicated formulations of the Trinity advocated by the Church, biblical sayings about God and the Christian belief are quite straightforward. For example:

“To you it was shown these things that you might know that the Lord, He is God. There is no other beside Him” (Deut. 4:35).

“So recognize today and take it to heart that the Lord is the only God in heaven above and on the earth below. There is no other” (Deut. 4:39).

“Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God. The Lord is one. And you are to love your God . . .” (Deut. 6:4, 5 — quoted by Jesus in Mark 12:29, 30).

“So that the people of the earth may know that the Lord is God and there is no other” (Isa. 45:6).

“I am Yahweh. That is My name” (Isa. 42:8a). (In the *Elberfelder* and other translations the word LORD in capitals renders the Hebrew word Yahweh.)

“Before Me no God was formed and none will be formed after Me. I am the Lord and beside Me there is no Savior” (Isa. 43:10b, 11).

“I the Lord am the one who works all things, who spread out the heavens; I alone formed the earth — who was with Me?” (Isa. 44:24).

“I am the Lord and there is no other. Besides Me there is no God” (Isa. 45:5).

These are only some of the many Bible passages in the Hebrew Bible to show that God is one (see also: Ps. 86:10; Isa. 43:10b, 11; 44:6, 8; Jer. 10:10a; 32:27; Hos. 13:4; Mal. 2:10, etc.). *No Old Testament verse says that God is three.*

I noticed also that in the New Testament the idea that God is One is stated frequently:

“Jesus answered him: ‘The first commandment is: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God alone is Lord, and you shall love the Lord your God . . . ’” (Mark 12:29, 30).

“How can you become believers, you who seek honor from each other and not the honor which comes from the one who alone is God” (John 5:44).

“There is no God but one . . . For us Christians there is One God, the Father, from whom are all things and one Lord Jesus through whom are all things and we through Him . . . ” (1 Cor. 8:4, 6).

“To the King of the ages, the imperishable, invisible only God, be honor and majesty throughout all eternity. Amen” (1 Tim. 1:17).

“For there is One God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Messiah Jesus” (1 Tim. 2:5). “A mediator is not a mediator of one. But God is only one party” (Gal. 3:20).

“You believe that there is only One God? You do well; the demons also believe this and tremble” (James 2:19).

These texts are all uncomplicated and clear. GOD IS ONE. Let us now contrast those biblical sayings with the following:

THE DOGMA OF THE HOLY TRINITY

253. The Trinity is One. We do not believe in three Gods but a single God in three Persons: the consubstantial Trinity (2nd Council of Constantinople, 553 AD, DS 421). The Persons of the Godhead do not share the Godhead. Each of them is fully and completely God. The Father is the same as the Son, the Son the same as the Father, the Father and Son the same as the Holy Spirit, namely one God in

nature (11 Synod of Toledo, 675 AD, DS 530). Each of the Persons is that reality which is known as divine substance, essence or nature (4th Lateran Council, 1215 AD, DS 804).

254. The Three Divine Persons are really distinct from each other. The One God is not, so to speak, “alone to Himself” (Fides Damasi, DS 71). “Father, Son and Holy Spirit” are not simply names to designate the manner of being of the Divine beings, for they are really distinct from each other: “The Father is not the same as the Son, neither is the Son the same as the Father, nor is the Holy Spirit the same as the Father or the Son” (11 Synod of Toledo, 675 AD, DS 530). They are distinguished from one another through their relationship of origin: It is the Father who begets, the Son who is begotten and the Holy Spirit who proceeds (4th Lateran Council, 1215 AD, DS 804). The Divine Unity is threefold.

255. The Three Divine Persons relate to one another. While the real distinction between the Persons does not divide the divine Unity, it lies in their mutual relations. With the names of the Persons, which express a relationship, the Father relates to the Son, the Son to the Father and the Holy Spirit to both. Although in regard to their relations they are called three Persons, they are according to our belief only one nature or substance (11 Synod of Toledo, 675 AD, DS 528). In them all is one in which no opposition of relationship intervenes (Council of Florence, 1442 AD, DS 1330). Because of their Unity the Father is wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Son is wholly in the Father, wholly in the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is wholly in the Father, wholly in the Son (Council of Florence, 1442 AD, DS 1331).¹

This teaching was taken over by the Reformation churches and the majority of the Free Churches with almost no alteration. Unfortunately most Protestants are not prepared, as are many Roman Catholic theologians, to admit honestly and openly in the words of Cardinal Hosier (early 16th century): “We believe in the doctrine of God as Trinity because we have received it from tradition, although there is no mention of it in the Holy Scriptures.”

I have also come to the conclusion that the Trinity is nowhere found in the Scriptures. I had to ask myself why I clung so tenaciously to this

¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the German edition, pub. R. Oldenbourg, Munich: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993.

doctrine. If it were really true, why does the Bible not state clearly: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is Triune”? I am now experiencing anger and opposition when I put this question to others. There have been some who shouted, “William, you cannot explain the Trinity with your reason. Of course you can’t find it in the Bible. Nonetheless, it is true and you have to believe it.” To which my reply is: “I am sorry, I am unable to believe it.”

My answer prompted this question: “If you don’t believe in the Trinity, what *do* you believe? Who is the Father, who is the Son, who is the Holy Spirit?”

My answer is very simple:

1. The Father is God. God is the Father (1 Cor. 8:6a).
2. The Son is the Son of God. His Father is God (1 John 4:15).
3. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father (1 Cor. 2:11).

Believing Christians will, if reluctantly, have to agree with this explanation. Most are not happy with it. They ask, “What do you mean by that?” I answer, “I mean the Father is God. Jesus is the Son of God and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God.” If one is a Christian one must approve of this statement. Yet many feel uncomfortable when they hear it in this context. Why?

Someone recently asked a well-known and devout leader in Germany if it is sufficient to confess from the heart that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This leader said: “I would say, ‘Jesus is the Son — God.’” I ask, “Why? Why is it necessary to improve on the foundational Christian confession, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ and thus alter its clear meaning? If I have to change the Word of God to support my teaching, then what I teach is suspect.”

In order to understand God and Jesus and their relationship, we must begin with this confession. Let’s read Matthew 16:13-20 carefully:

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he questioned his disciples: “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They said, “Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Jesus said, “But who do *you* say I am?” Peter replied: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus answered him: “You are most blessed, Simon, son of Jona. Flesh and blood did not reveal this to you but my Father who is in heaven. And I say this to you: You are Peter and upon this rock I will

build my Church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys to the Kingdom of Heaven; and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever is loosed on earth will be loosed in heaven.” Then Jesus warned the disciples strongly not to divulge to anyone that he was the Christ.

Notice what is reported here. Jesus asks, “Who am I?” Simon Peter answers, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” Jesus affirms that this is a revelation from the heavenly Father and that he will build his Church on this foundation. Paul’s testimony is as follows: “No other foundation can one lay, but the one that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 3:11). John also says in his first letter: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God” and “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God” (1 John 4:15; 5:1).

The biblical confession of a Christian is simple and clear: “Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of the living God.” With these words we recognize that:

1. God is living.
2. He is the God who promised to send the Messiah.
3. This God is the Father of Jesus.
4. Jesus is the Messiah.
5. Jesus is the Son of God.

This biblical confession of faith represents the central biblical Message. John puts it like this: “God so loved the world that He commissioned His uniquely begotten Son so that everyone who believes in him should not perish but gain the ‘Life of the Coming Age’ ” (John 3:16). Jesus expressed the same teaching in his prayer to the Father: “This is what Life in the Coming Age is: That they should come to know You, the *only true God*, and Jesus Christ whom You commissioned” (John 17:3).

In summary: The true God is the Father of Jesus. Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God. To recognize this means the “Life of the Coming Age.” Hallelujah!