



# What Is the Trinity?

*Do Christians believe in three gods? For embracing a concept of the Trinity, we are accused of this by many non-Christians. Christians are also not of one mind as to just what the Trinity means and how the three—Father, Son, Holy Spirit—relate.*

## Introduction

Holy, holy, holy,  
merciful and mighty!  
God in three Persons,  
blessed Trinity!

This is the way we sing praises to God, the sublime Trinity. To make a visible symbol of the Holy Trinity, we frequently use a triangle, where the Latin word *sanctus* means “holy.”

God is holy. As holy, God is mysterious, beyond the ability of our minds to fathom or comprehend. What we know of God is limited to what God has revealed. We can have confidence that we know God in the sense of enjoying a personal relationship to God, but God understands us much more fully than we understand God. The overwhelming and unsearchable majesty of God will be with us throughout eternity.

Having acknowledged this, Christians still exert effort to think about God, to construct ideas or concepts of God. These concepts fall woefully short of comprehending the reality of God, to be sure, yet we persist. This construction of concepts of God is called *theology*, which means literally “thinking about God.”

How do we go about building a concept of God? We begin with what the Bible says. Once we have laid a biblical foundation, then we build upward toward ideas that remain loyal to what the Bible says but also take into account Christian tradition, experience with living the godly life, and human reasoning. This makes our ideas somewhat fluid, easy to modify, and exciting to discuss. We need only be careful to remember that our concepts of God are subordinate to what has been revealed about God through the history of Jesus and what is recorded in Scripture.



## Just What Does the Bible Say?

Like so many distinctively Christian commitments, the idea of the Trinity emerges from the Easter resurrection of Jesus. “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you” (Rom. 8: 11). Jesus tells us to baptize with the Trinity on our lips. “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” (Matt. 28:19). Paul provides a benediction on behalf of the Trinity. “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you” (2 Cor. 13:13).

Key to constructing the idea of the Trinity is Jesus’ relationship to God as Father. Jesus prays to God. When in anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, Jesus calls God “*Abba*,” in Aramaic (Mark 14:36). When he teaches us the Lord’s Prayer, he begins with *abba*, which we translate into English as “Our Father.” This word, *abba*, was used by little children when snuggling in the arms

of their parents. It is best translated “daddy.” The Holy God of Israel, ineffable and sublime, is addressed by Jesus in this familiar and tender and intimate manner. And Jesus emboldens us to pray the same way. When we so pray, the Holy Spirit speaks with us from within us. “When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is that very Spirit bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom. 8:16).

For the sake of our discussion here, we need to highlight that Jesus was relating to God as Father. By *Father* we are not referring to Jesus’ biological father. Nor are we referring to Jesus’ parent in any generic sense. Nor is this the brutal impersonal father of patriarchy, which has come under critique in recent decades. All that is being said is that Jesus was interacting with the God previously revealed to Moses.

God is not literally the father of Jesus, to be sure. *Father* is a figurative or metaphorical term, just as the word *Son* is metaphorical when referring to Jesus. Jesus was literally Mary’s son, figuratively God’s son. The interaction between Jesus and the God of Israel is in some ways similar to that of a son-and-father interaction.

On the one hand, Jesus interacts with the Father as if they are two distinct persons. On the other hand, they enjoy a unity with each other. “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). The concept of the Trinity tries to combine these dimensions in a reasonable way.

## Alternative Trinity Ideas

Just how do we put together these biblical passages into a single reasonable concept? During the first five centuries of the Christian era, theologians experimented with a number of alternatives. Some were discarded along the way.

One of the discards was *modalism*. According to the modal model, the divine reality is timeless and unitary. Only one divine being exists, and this divine being is beyond attributes, beyond description. The divine is unchanging. Only the modes enter into the world of change. When this divine being appears to us as Father, the attributes of fatherliness constitute the mode of making this otherwise unknowable divinity known to us. Jesus Christ as God’s Son becomes the second mode. And the Holy Spirit becomes the third mode. According to modalism, there is one God in three modes of revelation. In principle, this God could

continue to develop more modes of revelation in the future. Modalism was rejected after considerable debate because it implied that none of the three—Father, Son, or Holy Spirit—would itself be God. Christians were strongly inclined to say more than simply that each of the three is a mode of a divine reality beyond them. Rather, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God again.

Another discarded model was *subordinationism*. According to the concept of subordinationism, full divinity was identified with only one of the three persons, the first. Because the Father generates the Son and because the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son, the subordinationists argued that the Father is the source of divinity for the other two. The Son and Spirit borrowed their divinity from the Father, so to speak. This was rejected because early Christians believed the second and third persons were fully divine. They rejected subordinating the second two to the first.

What is going on here in early Christian thinking is dramatically important. Note carefully what is being rejected. What is being rejected is the idea that God’s life consists of some sort of static substance or unchangeable quality that is strictly supernatural or immortal. Do we want God to get trapped, so to speak, with qualities such as eternity and immutability and simplicity? Do we want God to be imprisoned in some divine state, unable to become involved in our world and our lives? No. Christians believed God is free. God is so free that God can elect to become something else than God. God can choose to become incarnate, to ingress into the life of a baby lying in a manger, to suffer the slings and arrows of human misfortune, and thereby to take the entire human experience into the divine life. The eternal can become temporal. The unchanging can become subject to change. In other words, God could enter and experience the fallen world and thereby take the fallen world up into the divine life.

What we call *God* is on both sides of the cross. On the one hand, what we believe to be God incarnate is speaking through the mouth of Jesus, “Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?” that is, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (Matt. 27:46). On the other hand, we believe the Father in heaven to be hearing the voice of Jesus. Both of these belong to God’s life. This dynamic interaction between the Son and the Father constitutes the internal or immanent life of God as Trinity.

# The Immanent Trinity and the Economic Trinity

Get ready for some three-dollar phrases, *immanent Trinity* and *economic Trinity*. As the word *immanent* suggests, what we are talking about here is what goes on internal to the relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father begets the Son, so to speak, while the Son honors the Father. Father and Son love each other, and the Holy Spirit constitutes the love between the two.

Recall that Jesus prayed to the Father. "He threw himself on the ground and prayed, 'My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want'" (Matt. 26:39). Jesus was grieved at this moment, grieved unto death. The relationship between Jesus and his heavenly Father includes a dramatic give-and-take, testing and resolve, anguish and care, separation and reunion. Now, we ask: does this describe the actual relationship between the second and first persons of the Trinity? Is this historical drama itself internal to God's life? If we answer affirmatively, then we are talking about the immanent Trinity here. God relates to Godself in and through the world, the very same world in which you and I live and move and have our everyday being.

The ancient theologians came up with some big words to describe the dynamics within the immanent Trinity. *Perichoresis* is the Greek word and *circumincessio* is the Latin word meaning "proceeding around." More specifically, these terms mean that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit constitute three separate persons in a single substantial unity. One being (Greek: *ousia*; Latin: *substantia*) in three persons (Greek: *hypostasis*; Latin: *persona*).

In the Shield of the Holy Trinity, one can see God (*Deus*) in the center, defining the Father (*Pater*), Son (*Filius*), and Holy Spirit (*Spiritus Sanctus*, here abbreviated) as divine. Yet, the Father is not the Son or the Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father or the Son. This is the immanent Trinity.

When we turn to the economic Trinity, the word *economic* might remind you of the dollar bills in your purse or evening news announcements about the stock market. It's the same word but quite a different meaning. According to its theological meaning, *economic* means God is involved with the world or, more specifically,

God effects salvation in the world. How does the relationship among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit accomplish the work of redeeming the fallen world? That is the question that the concept of the economic Trinity tries to answer.

Sometimes for the sake of shorthand, the Father is dubbed the world's creator, the Son the savior, and the Holy Spirit the sanctifier. This sounds good at first, but it's misleading. The three members of the Trinity do not parcel out jobs and then go their separate ways to do them. The operations of the Trinity in the external world are undivided. Each member of the Trinity is fully God, and God is fully present in each.

We do not have two trinities here, one immanent and the other economic. We have only one Trinity, understood in terms of internal relations and external relations. What is significant for the work of redemption is that the three persons of the immanent Trinity relate to one another through the world. This brings the world within the divine life.

## East vs. West

The biggest divide in Christendom is between the East, where the Greek language dominates, and the West, where the Latin language dominates. Protestants in North America actually belong to the Latin West, even though while speaking English they may have forgotten this little fact.

Two items regarding the immanent Trinity are points of disagreement. First, Western Christians tend to focus on the primary action between the Father and the Son and then identify the Holy Spirit with the love between them. The Holy Spirit is the principle of relationality and unity both within the immanent Trinity and externally in the relationship of God to the world. Eastern Christians object. They believe this demotes the Holy Spirit to a go-between. They prefer to affirm equality among the three persons, defending greater independence for the Holy Spirit.

Second, the West changed the Nicene Creed without consulting with the East. The text of the Nicene Creed was first developed between 325 and 381 AD at ecumenical councils involving representatives from everywhere in Christendom, and it originally read in Greek as follows: the "Spirit proceeds from the Father." The Latin church rewrote the creed to read, the "Spirit

proceeds from the Father and the Son" (*ex Patre Filioque*), and by 1054 AD the Eastern churches were sufficiently perturbed by this that they declared independence. When the split between East and West is mentioned, *filioque* is usually cited as the central issue.

More is at stake than simply the political issue of the Latin church acting unilaterally against a previous decision by an ecumenical council. The West defends theologically its wording of the creed, because the Holy Spirit in the immanent Trinity provides the love between the Father and the Son. The East complains that this demotes the Spirit. The East wants the Spirit to embody as much personhood as do the Father and the Son. By reaffirming the original wording, that the Spirit proceeds from the Father only, this places the Spirit on equal footing with the Son in relation to the Father.

## Not Three in One and One in Three

So, you can see that what guides Trinitarian thinking is not arithmetic. It is misleading for Sunday school teachers or pastors to tell us that the challenge of the Trinity is to fit three into one and one into three. Rather, the challenge of the concept of the Trinity is to understand how the eternal God can enter and experience and transform the temporal world. The challenge of thinking about God as Trinity is to think about God on both sides of the ledger, both heaven and earth, both divine and human, both giving life and giving new life.

Unitarians have objected to the number three associated with God. Unitarians emphasize the unity and the oneness of God. To accomplish this, they deny the divinity of the second person, the Son. Divinity is reserved for the Father. Unitarians eventually merged with Universalists—who reject belief in eternal damnation in favor of universal salvation—to form the Unitarian Universalist Association in 1961.

Muslims also reject the concept of the Trinity because of the number three. Muslims are adamant: God is one and only one. Muslims are monotheists in the strictest sense. They fear that Christians flirt with polytheism, with tritheism, with belief in three gods. Muslims have a maxim: "say not three," to combat Christian theology.

The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only the Messenger of God,

and His Word that He committed to Mary, and a Spirit from Him.

So believe in God and His Messengers,

and say not, "Three." Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God.

(*Qur'an 4:171*)

Christians need not stress the number three. Christians, no less than Muslims, believe in one and only one God. Threeness itself is unimportant, even if unavoidable. What is important to Christians is that this one God straddles both sides of the distinction between God and the world, both the sublime divine and the incarnate divine. The birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Son are included in God's life. The Holy Spirit binds the Father to the Son and binds you and me into God's life. These are the dynamics of God so essential to constructing a concept of the Trinity.

## Conclusion

Christians begin with faith and then seek further understanding. The history of Christianity is filled with Christians pursuing further understanding. This is how the concept of the Trinity developed. The symbolic language for the Trinity was already present in the New Testament, yet, in the centuries that followed, Christians tried to construct a model for understanding God as Trinity.

Like a model boat, the idea of the Trinity has a few leaks in it. It is not immediately clear who is right, the East or the West, regarding *filioque*. It is not immediately clear whether the Holy Spirit should be understood as the love between Father and Son, plus inspiring love between ourselves and God, or whether the Holy Spirit should be thought of as a person exactly like the Father and the Son.

It appears that thoughtful Christians still have some more thinking to do.

## About the Writer

*Ted Peters is professor of systematic theology at Pacific Lutheran Theological Seminary and the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California. He is editor of Dialog: A Journal of Theology and coeditor of Theology and Science. He is author of God as Trinity (Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), For the Love of Children (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), and GOD—The World's Future (Fortress, 2000).*