

BIBLE FACTS ABOUT THE TRINITY

by Alex McFarland

One of the most misunderstood of all Bible doctrines concerns the teaching about God's nature, that is, the Trinity. Christians believe in **One** God, but many secularists and those of other religions accuse Christians of worshipping three gods, or setting forth a form of *polytheism*.

Throughout church history, great minds have pondered the mystery of the Trinity. Perhaps your church, as part of their worship service, has the congregation to recite the Apostle's Creed, which says, "I Believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ His Only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost . . ." The ancient church creed affirms the Trinity, ascribing equal position to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Athanasian creed is named after a 4th century man who was a great defender of the Christian faith in general, and defender of the Trinity in particular. Though named for Athanasius, the content of the creed goes back to the early church, and the creed states, "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity, neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance (or essence)." Though the Trinity is a difficult subject to comprehend, such creeds do their best to set forth the Bible truth that there is One God, yet manifested in three Persons.

In considering the subject of the Trinity, we are really asking, "What is God like?" This is especially relevant for Christians to be aware of, in light of many erroneous views of God that exists in our day. There are many unscriptural views of God that are currently competing for the allegiance of people. For instance, the New Age view of God is based upon *pantheism*, meaning that "all is God." A famous miniseries several years ago presented actress Shirley MacLane asserting that, "...Man's problem is not sin, but that he has *forgotten* that he is God." The new-agers say that *everything* (including you and me) is part of God.

Also in opposition to the Bible's depiction of God's nature, is the viewpoint held by Islam. Islam, says that God is *One*, but so singular as to not have personality. The Islamic conception of God was very much influenced by the views of Plotinus, a philosopher who lived in the 2nd century AD. Plotinus' ideas were very influential during the Middle Ages. Many scholars believe that Muslim theology concerning the Oneness of God, is a result of the influence of Plotinus. Plotinus, and later Islam asserted that God is One, yet so simple and undivided, that God is beyond knowing, and beyond consciousness. God is removed of all personality, relatability, and can't really be known in a personal way. This is in direct contrast to what God has revealed about Himself to humanity through scripture.

Yet another false view about the nature of God, comes from the Mormon church. The Mormon church calls itself Christian, but its theological teachings are frequently opposed to Bible doctrines that are central to New Testament Christianity. Mormonism teaches that gods are eternally giving birth to new gods. This belief in many gods is called polytheism, and also contradicts Bible truths about Who God is. Clearly, a strong understanding of the Trinity is something that each Christian should make a priority in this age of distorted views of God.

Much can be known about God just by looking at the world around us. The Bible teaches that "the heavens and earth declare the Glory of God." (Psalm 19:1). Much can be known about God from the world around us, and this is called **natural revelation**. But scripture has taught us many things about God, that otherwise, humanity would not have known. Theologians call this **special revelation**. God has revealed to mankind many things about Himself through His written Word, and the truths of such "Special Revelation" could not have been deduced by human reason alone. Among the truths of special revelation, is the Bible's teaching that God's nature consists of three Persons, equal in power, equal in glory, equal in might. Each is equal to the others, and entitled to the same worship, devotion, trust, and faith.

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT THE NATURE OF GOD

The Bible teaches that the Godhead consists of three Persons- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each is **fully** God, each showing forth the divine nature. The Bible teaches that the three members of the Trinity are distinct - The Father is *not* the Son, and the Son is *not* the Spirit, yet all three are of the same essence, or nature. Scripture distinguishes among the Persons (the Father and Son converse with each other, and Jesus prayed to the Father (John 17). The Father spoke from heaven about the Son, at Jesus' Baptism. (Matthew 3:15-17). The Spirit was present at the same time, demonstrating that the Three are distinct Persons, co-existing simultaneously.

Though God is One, the members of the Trinity have separate titles, and special functions. The Bible teaches that God exists eternally, having one divine nature, yet the three distinct Personalities carry out unique functions. Each Person is distinctive (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), but they share a common nature.

But let us be reminded what the doctrine of the Trinity does NOT mean: The Trinity is not the same as "Tri-theism" (three gods), "Polytheism" (many gods, perhaps innumerable), or "pantheism" (all is god). "Trinity" means that there while there is **One God**, there are yet three Persons within that one nature. This is a difficult subject, of course, but it is only fitting that an infinite God extends beyond our finite reasoning capabilities. It is only natural that we fall short of a *complete* understanding of the Supernatural. The doctrine of the Trinity is completely Scripture, yet many in our day seem unable or unwilling to accept by faith what the Bible presents on this subject.

Objection #1: "The Bible does not teach the doctrine of the Trinity . . . "

ANSWER: We see the Trinitarian nature of God clearly presented in passages such as Matthew 3:16-17: *"And Jesus, when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him: (17) And lo, a voice from heaven, saying, "This is my beloved Son, In whom I am well pleased."* Jesus is God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity, and here at His baptism, we see all three Persons of the Trinity were present and active. (This same incident is also clearly presented in the other Gospels, Mark 1, Luke 3, and John 1.

But the Trinitarian nature of God is also presented in other passages: "Then God said, Let **us** make man in our image, after **our** likeness" (Genesis 1:26). In the Hebrew language, the plural name for God is "Elohim," and this word is found 2570 times in the Bible. "Elohim" refers to God's power and might. Interestingly, in Genesis 1:26 this PLURAL noun, is joined to a SINGULAR verb . . . indicative of the fact that God is One singular in nature, yet plural in Personality. In this verse, God was not talking to angels, because the angels could not, and did not help create anything.

We see conversations within the Trinity in scriptures from Isaiah: "Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, (singular) and who will go for us? (plural)" (Isaiah 6:8). The Holy Spirit, Father, and the Son are all referred to in Isaiah 61:1, "The Spirit of the Lord Jehovah, is upon Me." It is important to note that Jesus read and affirmed this verse during His public ministry (Luke 4). As the Second Person of the Trinity, God's anointed Savior, and the only Person who has ever or could ever conquer the grave, Jesus' authority is established beyond question. Many deny the Trinity, or pervert what the Bible teaches about God's nature. But on what authority do they base their teachings? Jesus affirmed the doctrine of the Trinity, and by virtue of His bodily resurrection, His authority to speak as God, and for God, is established beyond all question.

***Father is God.** Jesus said in John 5:17 "My Father has been working until now, and I have been working." 1 Peter 1:2, makes reference to God the Father, and also to the other two Persons of the Trinity, saying that the believers are elected by God the Father, set apart by the Spirit of God, and washed clean in the blood through Jesus, the Son of God.

***Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man.** The Christmas hymn, "O Come All ye Faithful" accurately declares the Deity of Christ: "Word of the Father, now in flesh appearing..." Jesus is the Living Word, "the only begotten of the Father." If you want to know what the Father is like, look at Jesus. Jesus said in John 14:9, "He that has seen me, has seen the Father." Doubting Thomas declared that Jesus was Deity, when he bowed and said, "My Lord and **my God**" (John 20:28)

A vivid example of Christ's co-equality with both Father and Spirit, is found in passages such as from John 8. Here Jesus refers to His pre-incarnate existence, remarking that Abraham (who lived centuries earlier) had seen Him. The Jews confronted Him, asking, in verse 56, "Hast thou seen Abraham?" Jesus affirmed His Deity, His divine, eternal nature in the following response, saying, "Before Abraham was, I AM." He was ascribing to Himself the same Godhood that the scripture ascribes to the Father, God Almighty. Some have wrongly said that Jesus was teaching re-incarnation, no, He was speaking of His "pre-incarnation!"

***The Holy Spirit is God.** An example of the Deity of the Spirit, is found in Acts 5, the account of Annanias and Saphira. When they lied and deceived others, Peter asked, "Why has Satan filled thine heart, to lie to the Holy Ghost?" (Acts 5:3) "Thou has not lied unto men, but unto **God**." (Acts 5:4). Psalm 139:7-12 Speaks of the omnipresence of the Holy Spirit. The ability to be in all places at all times, is clearly an attribute that belongs only to God. The Holy Spirit is further attributed as Deity in verses such as 1 Corinthians 2:10-14. This passage teaches the omniscience of God's Spirit, that the Holy Spirit knows all. The Holy Spirit is eternal, as evidenced by verses such as Hebrews 9:4. Personality is ascribed to the Holy Spirit, in passages such as Ephesians 4:30. We can grieve the Spirit through our sin and rebellion.

The Holy Spirit prays for the believer (Romans 8:26). The Third Person of the Godhead has a multitude of ministries in the life of the Christian- He comforts, guides, reminds us of our need for repentance, reminds us of truth and duty, and helps us to pray.

Early Christian benedictions, such as is found in 2 Corinthians 13:14 attribute Deity (that is, "Godhood") to Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three Persons of the Godhead are treated as being equal, yet One. So the Bible *clearly* teaches that God is a Trinity, and that All three Persons of the Godhead exist eternally, and co-equally.

Objection 2: "Christianity teaches that there are 3 Gods..."

Christianity is **monotheistic**. The word "mono" means "one." The words of Deuteronomy 6 firmly set forth the truth that Christianity is based on monotheism, the belief in **One** God: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is One Lord." For the Muslim, the greatest of all sins is the *shirk*, or the assigning of partners to God. Islam opposes what the Bible teaches about the Trinity, wrongly supposing that Christianity is setting forth more than one God.

But Christians **do not** believe in more than One God. The New Testament apostles knew that God was One in His essence. 1 Corinthians 8: 4 states, "There is no other God but One."

One of the strongest points of disagreement that Muslims have with Christianity deals with the Deity of Christ. If one accepts the doctrine of the Trinity, then the Deity of Christ is a given, because Trinity acknowledges that there is more than one Person in the Godhead, and the second Person is Christ. Jesus is the Son of God, and is God the Son. Muslims feel that to acknowledge Jesus as Deity, the Oneness of God is compromised. John 1:18 and 3:16 call Jesus

the "**only begotten**" Son of God. For the Muslim, the words "Only Begotten" present a seemingly insurmountable problem. But when scripture refers to Jesus as "Only Begotten" or "One and Only Son" this does not imply something fleshly, or the product of some physical act. "Begot" does not mean that Jesus was physically made, or Created." Only Begotten means proceeding from, Jesus Christ, God the Son, Eternally Proceeds forth, from the Father.

But the phrase "Only Begotten" refers not to being physically generated or carnally formed, but refers to Jesus' special relationship to the Father. Jesus was not created by the Father, but does enjoy a special relationship to Him. "Begotten refers to both 'relationship' and 'time.'" Jesus was unique in both. He had a special and eternal relationship. to the Father, with whom He and the Holy Spirit share the nature and attributed of Deity, and Jesus was unique in His being "begotten," into time and space history. That is, as Galatians 4:4 states, "In the fullness of time (at precisely the right moment in history), God sent forth His Son (the Second member of the Trinity)." Jesus Christ entered the stage of human events to go to the cross for our salvation.

Objection number 3: "The Trinity is illogical . . . "

Thomas Aquinas (1224-1274) taught (rightly so) that the mysteries of the Christian faith (the Trinity, the Incarnation) cannot be known by human reason alone, but by faith in God's revelation of scripture. Nature can tell us that God exists, but scripture tells us what KIND of God exists. The Trinity, says Aquinas, goes beyond reason, but it is not unreasonable, not contrary to reason. Dr. Norman Geisler notes, "This may be a mystery, but it is not a contradiction."

The Bible says that the Father is fully God, but it does not say that He is the Only Person who is fully God; Likewise, the Bible teaches that Jesus is fully God, but He is not the only Person who is fully God. The Holy Spirit is fully God, but so is the Father and so is the Son.

Some things are provable, and other things are taken on faith. But remember faith is not blind trust; Because of the compelling evidences for Christianity, faith in what God has revealed about Himself is, as one writer called it, "justified true belief." In fact, disbelief in the presence of solid evidence is unjustifiable. Through investigation of historical and textual evidences, we can prove that Jesus lived, we can prove that we have an accurate record of what He taught, and that He rose from the dead. We cannot **prove** that God is a Trinity; we can only believe it, because God has revealed it.

CONCLUSION

The trinity is a mystery that one day we will understand fully. For now, the Bible teaches that God is One in essence, yet three in Personality. Father, Son, Holy Spirit, are all equal- One in nature, yet distinct in function. Some who deny the concept of the Trinity assert that the doctrine is "too complex." Groups like the Unitarians and Bahai's criticize historic Christian orthodoxy as being unnecessarily complicated; The doctrine of the Trinity is usually then presented as a case in point. But in answer to charges like this, consider the insightful quote from C.S. Lewis' 1943 work, *Mere Christianity*: "If Christianity were something that we were making up, *of course* we would make it easier. But it is not. We cannot compete, in simplicity, with those people who are inventing religions. How could we? We are dealing with Fact. *Of course, anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about.*"

The existence of the Trinity is beyond reason, but the Bible teaches it, Jesus revealed it, and the Christian church has confessed it. The Bible teaches that the first Christians filled the known world with the teachings of the Savior. The knowledge of this Great God, had

"Gone out through the whole world."

But man has turned away from God. "Because that when they knew God, they glorified Him not, as God, neither were thankful; but became vain their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened" (Romans 1:21). Like many throughout history, you may have exchanged the acknowledgment of the true God, in favor of allegiance to a more *convenient*, yet ultimately *false* god. It is just our nature to turn from the truth, to self-serving ideas that may seem appealing. The Bible warns of such people, "Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God..." (Rm. 1:22-23) If you do not know the real and true God, I urge you to trust Christ in faith today! Rejection of what God has revealed about Himself is a dangerous exercise. Romans 1, verse 28 goes on, "And as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate, or godless" mind."

Theologian A.H. Strong wrote of the Presence of this great Triune Lord: "God, in the totality of His essence, without *multiplication* or *division*, penetrates and fills the universe in all its parts." But the place God wants to fill is your heart! The things God desires to penetrate are your hurts, your fears, your disappointments, --- the things you want and need to change about yourself, but are unable to do. More than all this the Second member of the Trinity, God the Son, died in payment for your sins, and He will make you clean, absolved of guilt, and forgiven. God's Spirit is drawing you to Himself, won't you bow before this Awesome God, and make Him your Personal friend today?

Thomas confessed belief in Christ, (2nd Person of the Trinity), and his confession is actually the theme of the book of John, an appropriate purpose statement for what God teaches about Himself through scriptures such as John 20:31: "*But these are written, that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing, you may have life in His name.*"