

The Mystery of the Holy Trinity



The revelation of God's nature

A careful study of the nature of God is both fascinating and humbling. It opens our minds to consider realities in the spiritual world and moves us to worship our great God, the Creator of this universe. The study of God's revelation of Himself humbles the brightest minds, as we respond to the invitation to explore horizons that go beyond our best efforts to comprehend. We are only little humans. Over the years, Church Fathers and Church Councils seriously studied the Biblical evidence concerning nature of God. Their concern was to resist heretics and encourage sound doctrine in the Church. In their positive efforts, they coined the word 'Trinity' (three-unity) and provided a number of technical explanations. You may find some of these formulations helpful and some not. But what God reveals about Himself in the Bible is both important and decisive. As Christians, we need not *understand* all of God's revelation, but we do well to *receive* it. Ultimately the nature of our Creator God is a mystery.

A mystery

Human language has developed to describe earthly realities and experiences. To describe spiritual things, sometimes the Bible must use words that do not fit exactly with the spiritual reality. Our words are limited. Some descriptions of spiritual realities do not make sense to our natural way of thinking. Our mind is also limited. Sometimes the best way to describe a spiritual reality is through two or more statements that appear to be contradicting each other, by statements that are held together in tension. Some use the word 'mystery' to describe this type of revelation-in-tension. Risking misunderstanding, God sometimes reveals truth through mysteries. The Trinity is one of those biblical mysteries. But it's not the only one: The human and divine nature of Jesus is also a mystery. That Jesus is in heaven, but also with us is a mystery. That God is sovereign and yet our choices and prayers have an influence on the outcome is a mystery. Supernatural healing also involves mystery. Every thinking Christian must learn to appreciate mysteries. They surely make God's revelation more interesting - as we seek to understand the descriptions and explanations of another world, another existence, another reality. Mysteries can also be a rich source of wonder leading us to worship.

What is the Holy Trinity?

The truth about the nature of God that we find in the Bible is this: God is one, and that there are also three that are God - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The word Trinity is not found in the Bible but the ideas it describes are clearly present in the Bible. Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox Christians throughout the ages have accepted the doctrine of the Trinity because they found the following four truths in their Bibles:

Truth # 1: ‘The Father is God’

Jesus Christ refers to the Father as God. In many of His teachings, He uses the words “Father” and “God,” referring to the same person. See, for example, Matthew 6:26, 30. The apostle Paul affirms, “There is one God, the Father, of whom are all things” (1 Corinthians 8:6). The Bible describes God as the Father and the Father as God.

Truth # 2: ‘The Son is God and is different from the Father’

This truth consists of two parts. Let us explore them:

1. The Bible teaches that the Son is God.

The words of Jesus: It is worth noting that Christ never said “I am God,” but He did say things like “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30) and “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:7, 9). He applied to Himself one of God’s titles: “I AM” (John 8:58; Exodus 3:14, 15). Perhaps for us today some of these expressions are inconclusive, but for His critics in those days, there was no doubt: Christ was claiming to be God, and that is why they wanted to stone Him (John 8:59; Leviticus 24:16). Before Pilate, they accused Him saying “He made Himself the Son of God” (John 19:7). Christ accepted the accusation. He did not try to correct them. The high priest said to Him, “I put You under oath by the living God: Tell us if You are the Christ, the Son of God!” He could have easily avoided crucifixion by responding negatively. But Christ agrees with the statement by answering, “It is as you said. Nevertheless, I say to you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power...” (Matthew 26:63, 64). Everyone understood this as a clear affirmation that He claimed to be God, and they proceeded to crucify Him.

The deeds of Jesus: We read that the Lord Jesus takes upon Himself the right to forgive sins - even though it was widely known that only God can forgive sins (Mark 2:5, 7). In addition, He accepts the worship of Thomas, and only God is worthy of worship. Thomas said to Him, “My Lord and my God!” Christ does not tell him, “I am not God.” Instead, He reproves him for being slow to believe (John 20:28, 29).

The teaching of the apostles: There is no doubt that the apostles taught that Jesus was God. For example, “Christ... the eternally blessed God” (Romans 9:5); “For in Him [the Son] dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Colossians 2:9); “...our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).

2. The Bible describes the Father and the Son as distinct persons.

In the gospels, we read that the Lord Jesus prayed. To whom was He praying? The fact is that He was not talking to Himself (Luke 6:12). On the cross, He cried, “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” When He carried our sins, the Lord Jesus felt a distancing between Him and the Father. Moments before giving Himself over to be crucified, He prayed, “... nevertheless not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42). Notice that there are two wills: ‘Mine’ and ‘Yours’. This implies two persons. Consider the argument of the Lord Jesus in John 8:17-19: The law said that the testimony of *two* persons was valid. The Lord Jesus said that there are *two* who give testimony of Him. Who are these *two*? Himself and the Father. He shows Himself as distinct from the Father. As a last example, notice the use of “we” when He prayed for us in John 17:11, 12: “... that they may be one as we are.”

Truth # 3: 'The Holy Spirit is a person, He is God, and is distinguishable from the Father and the Son'

The Holy Spirit is the person in the Trinity that makes the Godhead real to us. God works in the believer and in the Church through the Holy Spirit. That is why we notice that the Holy Spirit is associated with power and with action. We should notice that the Spirit enables and empowers, but that does not make Him a force or an impersonal power or energy. The truth we are now considering consists of three parts:

1. The Bible describes the Holy Spirit as a person.

When referring to the Holy Spirit, the Scriptures always use the pronoun for a "person" and not for a "thing." Why? Because He is a person. In John 14:16, Jesus Christ says, "I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper." The word translated "another" means "of the same kind." It implies both personality and divinity. We notice also that the Holy Spirit demonstrates characteristics of a "person" like having intelligence (John 14:26), a will (1 Corinthians 12:11), and emotions (Ephesians 4:30). In Acts 15:28, the apostles and elders wrote, "For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us..." The Holy Spirit has an opinion. These are not characteristics of energy or a force but of a being, a person.

2. The Bible describes the Holy Spirit as God.

We notice how the Bible ascribes to the Holy Spirit divine attributes, such as knowing all things (1 Corinthians 2:10,11) and being eternal (Hebrews 9:14). It is interesting to notice that when Ananias and Sapphira sinned, Peter asked "why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit...?" Then he adds, "You have not lied to men but to God" (Acts 5:3,4). Why this clarification? Because the Holy Spirit is God. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17, we are told that we are "the temple of God." Later on, we are told that we are "the temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). If someone were to think that the Holy Spirit is inferior in some way to the Father or the Son, he would benefit from reflecting on the words of the Lord Jesus over blasphemies in Matthew 12:31,32. Every blasphemy will be forgiven, even blasphemies against the Son, but not those against the person of the Holy Spirit.

3. The Holy Spirit is a person distinct from the Father and the Son.

Let's look carefully at some of the activities of the Holy Spirit: (1) When the Lord Jesus was baptized, the Father declared from Heaven, "You are My beloved Son; in You I am well pleased." Then the Holy Spirit descended on Him like a dove (Luke 3:21,22). Here the three persons of the Godhead are distinguished, each one doing a different activity. (2) We notice something similar in the work of redemption: It is the Father who loved us and gave His Son (John 3:16). It is the Son who was crucified for our sins (1 Peter 2:24). It is the Holy Spirit who works in our hearts so that we become conscious of sin, seek Christ, and receive forgiveness of sin (John 16:7-10). (3) Notice the activity associated with the coming of the Holy Spirit: The Son asks the Father to send the Holy Spirit. Then the Father and the Son, together, send the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-26; 15:26).

Truth # 4: 'There is only one true God'

Both the Old and the New Testament are emphatic in stating that there is only one God. "The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deuteronomy 4:35, 39; 6:4). "I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God" (Isaiah 44:6). "God is one" (Galatians 3:20; James 2:19). The Bible does NOT allow us to think of the existence of three gods.

Conclusion

Putting these four truths together, we conclude that the Bible teaches that there is only one true God, that the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are God, and that, without ceasing to be one God, the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are 'persons' and are distinct. This is what the Bible teaches and this is what has been given the name: Holy Trinity. It is a mystery.

In closing, it is worth mentioning that there is a certain authority structure within God Himself. The Holy Trinity is not symmetrical. For example, in his vision, Stephen saw Jesus standing at the right hand of God (the Father). He did not see three thrones. We learn that God is the head of Christ (1 Cor. 11: 3). Moved by love for us, God the Father gave His one and only Son. God the Son, Jesus, came to do the will of the Father. Later, we read that the Father and the Son together send the Holy Spirit to earth.

Although the nature of almighty God remains a mystery to us, may the Lord keep us from simplifying or changing God's revelation to make it easier to understand or explain to others. The truths behind the word 'Trinity' are an important part of God's self-disclosure. Let us rather "contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints" (Jude 1:3). Perhaps the following diagram may help you remember these important truths and also assist you in explaining them to others.

Step 1	Step 2	Step 3	Step 4
Father	Son	Holy Spirit	Oneness
Is God	1. Is God	1. Is a person	There is only one true God
	2. Is different from the Father	2. Is God	
		3. Is different from the Father and the Son	

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