

2025-2026

**ACBC Theology Exam - Question #7**

**#7. Explain the doctrine of the Trinity and provide its biblical basis**

The Trinity of God is a doctrine that is fundamental to the Christian faith; belief or disbelief in the Trinity marks orthodoxy from unorthodoxy. Human reason, however, cannot fathom the Trinity, nor can logic explain it, and, although the word itself is not found in the Scriptures, the doctrine is plainly taught in the Scriptures. The early church was forced to study the subject and affirm its truth because of the heretical teaching that arose opposing the Trinity.

**Definition:** A proper definition of the Trinity would be: *The Trinity is three united Persons without separate existence – so completely united as to form one God. One divine essence subsists in three distinctions – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

***One God- Three Persons- One essence.***

The Council of Nicaea in 325 was a critical theological and institutional watershed between the local and often diverse theologies of one God as Trinity in the second- and third century Christian communities.

**Nicene Creed:**

I believe in one God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried. And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven and sits at the right hand of the Father. And He will come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom will have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And I believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church, I acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

God is a Triune God and always has been a Triune God—a God who is three-in-one, consisting of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, all equally divine but fully distinguished persons.

But God's revelation of himself as triune unfolds progressively in redemptive history and culminates in the incarnation of the Son and in the pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

### Explanation of the Trinity

#### I. God is One in regard to Essence.

Early in church history the question developed whether Christ was the same as the Father in substance or in essence. **Arius** taught that Christ was like the Father in substance ("of similar substance," omouiosios), yet the Father was greater than Christ; **Athanasius** opposed Arius and correctly taught that the Son was of the same substance as the Father (omoousios). Although some equated the terms substance and essence, the proper way to designate the Trinity ultimately became "one in essence" (ousia).

The essential oneness of God is linked to **Deuteronomy 6:4**, "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, The Lord is one" (Heb. *echad*, "compound unity; united one").

This statement stresses not only the uniqueness of God but also the unity of God (cf. also James 2:19, "you believe that there is one God...").

It means all three Persons of God possess the summation of the divine attributes but yet the essence of God is undivided.

Oneness in essence also emphasizes that the three Persons of the Trinity do not act independently of one another. This was a constant theme of Jesus in rebuffing the charges of the Jews (cf. John 5:19; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10).

#### II. God is Three with Respect to Persons.

The word *persons* tends to detract from the unity of the Trinity, and it is readily recognized that persons is an inadequate term to describe the relationship within the Trinity.

In suggesting God is three with respect to His Persons it is emphasized that (1) each has the same essence as God and (2) each possess the fullness of God.

In God there are not three individuals alongside of, and separate from, one another, but only personal self-distinctions within the Divine essence.

This is an important deviation from modalism (or Sabellianism), which teaches that one God merely manifests Himself in three various ways. This unity within three Persons is seen in OT passages such as **Isaiah 48:16** where the Father has sent Messiah and the Spirit to speak to the restored nation. In **Isaiah 61:1** the Father has anointed the Messiah with the Spirit for His mission. These references emphasize both the equality and the unity of the three Persons.

### III. **The Three Persons Have Distinct Relationships.**

Within the Trinity exists a relationship that is expressed in terms of subsistence (existence). The Father is not begotten nor does He proceed from any person; the Son is **eternally begotten** from the Father (John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9).

The term *generation* suggests the Trinitarian relationship in that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 14:26; 16:7). The word *procession* suggests the Trinitarian relationship of the Father and the Son sending the Spirit. **It is important to note, however, that these terms denote a relationship within the Trinity and do not suggest inferiority in any way.** (Because the terms can tend to suggest inferiority some theologians deny their usefulness.<sup>1</sup>)

### IV. **The Three Persons are Equal in Authority.**

Although terms like *generation* and *procession* may be used in referring to the functioning within the Trinity, it is important to realize that **the three Persons are equal in authority.**

The Father is recognized as authoritative and supreme (1 Cor. 8:6); the Son is also recognized as equal to the Father in every respect (John 5:21-23); the Spirit is likewise recognized as equal to the Father and the Son (cf. Matt. 12:31).

Their equality is often described as the *ontological Trinity* (*essence or nature of being*); the fact that the Son placed Himself under the Father and likewise the Spirit under the Son is described as the *economic Trinity* (*how function or relate to one another*).

### **Old Testament Teaching = Biblical Basis**

Unquestionably the OT emphasizes the unity of God. However, there are clear suggestions that there are Persons in the Godhead.

Therefore, one might say that the OT contains intimations which allow for the later revelation of the triunity of God. What are these intimations?

#### I. **Multiple Persons Spoken of.**

In the creation account of Genesis 1 both God the Father and the Holy Spirit are seen in the work of creation. It is stated that God created the heaven and earth (**Gen 1:1**) while the Holy Spirit hovered over the earth to infuse it with vitality (**Gen. 1:2**).

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<sup>1</sup>Buswell, *Systematic Theology*, 1:111-12, 119-20.

## II. Plural Words

The term God in **Genesis 1:1** is *Elohim*, which is a plural form of God. To conclude plurality of Persons from the name itself is dubious. It is often asserted by theologians and commentators that when God speaks of Himself in plural pronouns (**Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Is. 6:8**) and plural verb (**Gen 1:26; 11:7**), it does seem to indicate distinctions of Persons, though only plurality, not specifically Trinity.

## III. Angel of Yahweh (Angel of God; Angel of the Lord)

Though this designation may refer to any of God's angels (**1 Kgs. 19:7; cf v. 5**), sometimes that Angel is referred to as God, yet distinguished from Him (**Gen. 16:7-13; 18:1-21; 19:1-28; Mal. 3:1**). This points to personal distinctions within the Godhead. Since the Angel is called God, He could hardly be only a prophet, functioning in pre-prophetic times as the prophets did in later times.

The Old Testament reveals this person as a divine person whom some passages refer to as Yahweh and God, and other passages depict as speaking to Yahweh. So the Old Testament presents the angel of Yahweh as Yahweh and yet also distinct from Yahweh.

Proofs that the Angel of Yahweh was divine include the following:<sup>2</sup>

- A. His name was used interchangeably with God's name (**Gen 16:7, 13; 21:17, 19-20; 22:11, 14; 31:11, 13; 48:15-16; Ex 3:2, 4; Jud 6:11, 14, 16, 20-21, 23; 13:3, 22-23**).
- B. When the Angel of Yahweh made promises, God made them (**Gen 16:10; 22:15-17; cf. 12:2; 13:16**).
- C. Yahweh's name was in the Angel of Yahweh (**Ex 23:20-21**).
- D. People offered sacrifices to the Angel of Yahweh (**Gen 22:11-13; Judg 6:21; 13:16, 19-22**).
- E. People who saw the Angel of Yahweh identified him by name as divine (**Gen 16:11-13; Judg 6:22-23; 13:21-22**).
- F. The Angel of Yahweh could forgive sins (**Ex 23:21; Zech 3:3-4**).
- G. The Angel of Yahweh claimed to be "God" (**Gen 31:11, 13; Ex 3:2-6**).

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<sup>2</sup> MacArthur and Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine*, 195-196. This paragraph and the list below

- H. When the Angel of Yahweh appeared, people often fell before him in worship (Josh 6:13-15). The word worship in Hebrew means to prostrate oneself in respect, or to render religious worship. Therefore, Joshua must have rendered to the Angel such homage as due Jehovah, and the Angel did not refuse, but rightly accepted that worship.
- I. What is especially important for Trinitarianism is that the Old Testament shows that the Angel of Yahweh was called Yahweh and God but was also distinct from Yahweh:
  - 1. Yahweh sent the Angel of Yahweh (Ex 23:20-23; 33:24; Num 20:16).
  - 2. The Angel of Yahweh and Yahweh spoke to each other (Zech 1:12-13).

#### IV. Distinction of Persons

- A. The Lord is distinguished from the Lord (**Gen 19:24; Hosea 1:7**). See also **Psalm 110:1**.
- B. The Redeemer (who must be divine) is distinguished from the Lord (**Is. 59:20**). Note also **Isaiah 7:14**.
- C. The Spirit is distinguished from the Lord (**Is. 48:16; 59:21; 63:9-10**). In these verses the Spirit is personal and active.

#### New Testament Teaching = Biblical Basis

Though the NT contains no explicit statement of the doctrine of the triunity of God (there is the question of **1 John 5:7**), it does contain a great deal of evidence.

That evidence lies along two paths: **One insists that there is only one true God, and the other presents a Man Jesus and the Holy Spirit who both claim to be God.**

To emphasize the oneness while disregarding the threeness ends in unitarianism.

To emphasize the threeness while disregarding the oneness leads to tritheism (as in Mormonism). To accept both leads to the doctrine of the triunity of God.

#### I. Evidence for Oneness.

Like the Old, the New Testament also insists that there is only one true God. Passages like **1 Cor. 8:4-6; Eph. 4:3-6; and James 2:19** are clear.

## II. Evidence of Threeness.

- A. The Father is recognized as God (**John 6:27; 1 Pet. 1:2**).
- B. Jesus Christ is recognized as God.
  - 1. He Himself claimed attributes only God possesses, like omniscience (**Matt. 9:4**), omnipotence (**28:18**), omnipresence (**28:20**).
  - 2. He did things which only God can do (and the people of His day acknowledged this, though sometimes reluctantly), like forgiving sins (**Mark 2:1-12**) and raising the dead (**John 12:9**).
  - 3. The NT assigns other works which only God can perform to Christ, like upholding all things (**Col. 1:17**), Creation (**John 1:3**), and future judging of all (**John 5:27**).
  - 4. The last phrase of **John 1:1** correlates true and full Deity with the Word (Christ). The phrase is best translated “the Word was God.”
- C. The Holy Spirit is recognized as God.
  - 1. He is called God (**Acts 5:3-4**).
  - 2. He possesses attributes which only God has, like omniscience (**1 Cor. 2:10**) and omnipresence (**6:19**), and He regenerates people (**John 3:5-6, 8**), an exclusive work of God.

## III. The Evidence for Triunity.

**Matthew 28:19** best states both the oneness and threeness by associating equally the three Persons and uniting them in one singular name. Other passages like Matthew 3:16-17 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 associate equally the three Persons but do not contain the strong emphasis on unity as does Matthew 28:19.

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