

**DO CHRISTIANS
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THREE GODS?**

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Muslims, Jews, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Mormons say yes. They insist that the orthodox Christian doctrine of the Trinity is unbiblical and is a hangover from the polytheism of Greek and Roman mythologies. Is this true? Or is believing in a three-in-one God foundational to biblical faith?

To help answer these questions, RBC senior research editor Herb Vander Lugt has written the following pages to show what the Bible says about the relationship between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is our prayer that this booklet will help you to see why followers of Christ believe in a three-in-one God, and why this doctrine of the Trinity has such great significance.

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QUESTIONS AT THE DOOR

It's 10:15 Saturday morning. A slow-starting weekend yawns one more time. Sections of the newspaper try to make conversation with a half-empty coffeemaker. A nearly overdrawn checkbook waits to be balanced. Breakfast dishes lie in state on the kitchen table. Then the doorbell reminds you that you owe the paperboy for 2 months of news.

As you open the door, two young men dressed in white shirts and ties greet you with a smile. You've never seen them before. Yet you recognize them and their briefcase. Other members of their faith have visited you in the past. You expect that these two will ask similar questions about your spiritual interests. They will politely try to give you pamphlets linking our social problems to a national spiritual crisis. They are looking for people who are willing to study the Bible with them.

You don't invite them in, but you find it hard to turn them away. You sense they have earned a few minutes of your time simply by their willingness to stand at your door. You wonder if you'd be willing to do as much for your own faith. Would you knock on the door of strangers to talk to them about the future, about God, and about their soul?

These members of a faith different from yours are doing that. These serious-minded visitors have a message of warning about average, normal, run-of-the-mill church people. They say they can show you from your own Bible that much of what church people believe is actually contrary to the Bible. Christians, they say, have believed a lie.

Take, for instance, the church's doctrine of the Trinity, they say. Christians worship a Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Yet Moses, the great lawgiver revered by Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike, declared that there is only one God when he wrote, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength" (Deut. 6:4-5).

How, your visitors gently prod, can Christians be faithful to Moses and to the foundations of the Old Testament while worshiping three distinct Persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? Is it possible, they ask you, that you have bought into a doctrine that violates the most basic teaching of the Bible? Is it possible that you have unknowingly accepted a teaching that puts you at risk with God?

The visitors at your door are not alone in their anti-Trinity conviction. They join with Jews, Muslims, and several other Bible-quoting voices who insist that anyone believing in the Trinity has violated the sacred Hebrew Shema recited twice daily by devout Jews: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!"

Anti-Trinity groups insist that when we speak about God as existing in three Persons, we are in reality establishing three Gods. They rightly declare that the word *trinity* never appears in the sacred Scriptures. But then they go on to say that this idea of three-in-one was transplanted into Christianity from Greek and Roman paganism.

Is it possible that they are right? Is there evidence that this teaching had its origin in paganism? Is the doctrine of a three-in-one God biblical?

HOW IMPORTANT IS THE TEACHING OF THREE IN ONE?

Opponents of the teaching of the Trinity make very serious claims. They insist that anyone who believes in a three-in-one God violates the first commandment of Moses in which the Lord states, "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods before Me" (Ex. 20:2-3).

Yet, for many centuries church theologians have also made serious claims in support of the Trinity. This doctrine, according to church fathers, is not a matter of pagan philosophy. It is not polytheistic. It is not a matter of semantics. That the one true and Most High God exists in three distinct Persons is, according to church theologians, a biblical teaching of the greatest importance.

Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox branches of the church all agree that the New Testament teaching of a three-in-one God is a doctrine firmly grounded in Scripture not in philosophy. Together they agree that the Trinity shows us the extent to which God's own existence is rooted in the joys of eternal relationship. The three-in-oneness of God shows us the eternal reality of His love and the enormous price that God paid in giving His Son as a sacrifice for our sin. The three-in-oneness of God shows that our own relationships are important to a God in whom relationship and love are foundational to His existence. A three-in-one God gives us the example of one who exists not merely as one, but in the inexpressible joy and creativity of a perfectly shared relationship. Unlike the many warring gods of pagan religion, and unlike our own history of broken relationships, this God is always one in mind and heart and action.

All major branches of Christendom also agree that a three-in-one God is consistent with the trail of Old Testament evidence for the same doctrine. The Old Testament gives strong implications that though God is one, He is not a solitary Being. Old Testament writers often use language that makes us think of a plurality within this unity.

For example, the word translated "God" some 2,570 times in the Old Testament is *Elohim*--a plural term. In all except five instances, it clearly refers to the one God who is Creator, Sustainer, and Master of everything.

God sometimes used a plural pronoun when speaking of Himself. For example, He said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Later, after Adam and Eve had eaten from the forbidden tree, God said, "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil" (Gen. 3:22).

When Moses declared that God is one (Deut. 6:4), he used the same word he had employed to describe the "one flesh" relationship of a man and his wife (Gen. 2:24). The word *one* in Deuteronomy 6:4 definitely allows for the idea of a plurality of Persons within the unity of the Godhead.

Both Testaments, therefore, give us reason to believe that *one* can be more than one. That this is beyond our ability to fully understand is not reason to reject it, but to try to understand as much as we can of what God has revealed.

WHAT IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT?

Some Christians have attempted to explain the three-in-oneness of God by suggesting that God has three different ways of revealing Himself to us. Sometimes He portrays Himself as Father, sometimes as Son, and sometimes as Holy Spirit.

The explanation of one God in three different roles might carry more weight if it were not for the evidence for plurality within oneness that we have already considered. Since the Old Testament does reveal a God who says, "Let Us create man in Our image," it's much easier for us to understand the sense of relationship, submission, love, and loyalty that the Scriptures describe as existing between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

The New Testament does not reveal these three Persons to us separately, but in a profound sense of unity. It represents all three in a relationship of oneness and love for one another and for us as well.

The New Testament relationship between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit disproves the conclusion that the Father alone should be thought of as the only True and Most High God. While it is understandable that some would try to protect the oneness of God by seeing the Son and Spirit as lesser beings or forces, such a conclusion is not valid.

The Old Testament makes it clear that the one true God of the Bible is a jealous God. He is a God who, according to Isaiah, will not give His glory to another (Is. 48:9-12).

The God of the New Testament, however, links His own name in the threefold designation as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Just as important, the New Testament shows us that the Father makes our relationship to Him dependent on our relationship to the Son, and our relationship to the Son dependent on our relationship to the Spirit. This God certainly shares His glory among three Persons, who in turn offer Their love to all who will accept the love of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

To see how the glory of a jealous God is shared in this oneness of Persons, let's take a brief look at each Person of this one Godhead as described by the Bible.

[What Is the Relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit?](#)

THE FATHER AS GOD

Among those who recognize the authority of the Bible, few if any doubt the full deity of the Father. In many different ways, the Father is revealed as the personal God of creation. The Scriptures reveal God as the Father of the nation of Israel (Deut. 32:6; Is. 1:2; Hos. 11:1; Mal. 2:10). Jesus called God His Father (John 5:17-18) and taught us to pray, "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). He told us that we are to come to the Father in His name (John 16:23). He declared that both He and His Father would soon send His disciples a divine Helper (John 15:26).

It is clear from these verses that the Father is God. God is Father. The apostle Paul referred to Him as the "God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Cor. 1:3).

What is important about the Father's revelation of Himself, however, is that He made our relationship to Him dependent on our relationship to His only Son.

[What Is the Relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit?](#)

THE SON AS GOD

The New Testament writers repeatedly refer to Jesus Christ as the Son of God. But what does this title mean?

Jehovah's Witnesses take this expression to mean that He was *a* son of God, much like angels and other human beings. They believe that Jesus was the archangel Michael in human form.

Present-day leaders in Judaism say that Jesus was a great prophet, but nothing more. Muslims take the same view. Suzanne Haneef, a well-educated contemporary Muslim, points out that the Koran honors Jesus by teaching that He was born without the agency of a human father, and that He was a great prophet. But she insists that Islam's sacred book "states emphatically in passage after passage that Jesus is not God's Son, . . . that such a notion has much more in common with pagan mythologies in which 'gods' fathered semi-divine children by human women, than with a true religion coming from God" (*What Everyone Should Know About Islam and Muslims*, Haneef, 1979, Kazi Publications, Chicago).

The New Testament, however, teaches that Jesus Christ is the "only," the unique (see p.24) Son of God (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9). The Scriptures portray Christ as sharing the glory of a jealous God who, through Moses, insisted that no one deserved to be worshiped but God Himself. This God shares His love with angels and mortals. But with Christ the Son, He shares His glory.

To see the extent to which the Son shares the glory of the Father, let's consider the evidence of Christ's words, the testimony of the apostles, the predictions of the Old Testament prophets, and the declarations of the church fathers.

The Words of Jesus.

The four Gospels record many of the words Jesus spoke during His earthly ministry. Even if we did not believe in the inspiration of the New Testament, we would have good reason to accept what they wrote as accurate. We have strong evidence that Matthew, Mark, and Luke were written well before AD 70. And although the Gospel of John was not produced until around AD 90, the evidence is strong that it belongs to the apostle John, who was actually with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. The apostles undoubtedly repeated the words of Christ often as they began to proclaim the gospel. Jesus' words tell us that He definitely claimed to be God. We'll look at only two of the tremendous statements Jesus made about Himself.

In John 8:58 we find Christ's claim that He never had a beginning. Since only God is eternal, this amounts to a declaration of deity. To a group of hostile religious leaders, He said, "Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM." Notice, Jesus didn't say, "Before Abraham was born, I was born." He said, "Before Abraham came into being, I AM." Abraham was born within the framework of time. Jesus declared that His own existence transcends time. He has always existed. He had no beginning.

While this declaration that He never had a beginning is enough to establish Christ's deity, some Bible students see something more in this statement. They claim that Jesus Christ declared Himself to be the "I AM" of Exodus 3:14. While this point can be debated, the very fact that Jesus Christ said He never had a beginning is enough to establish the claim of deity.

The second statement of Christ in which He calls Himself God is found in John 10:30. While attending the feast of dedication at Jerusalem, He said, "I and My Father are one." The religious leaders recognized that He was claiming deity when He made this statement. They started throwing stones at Him and said they were doing so because of "blasphemy, and because You, being a Man, make Yourself God" (John 10:33). They understood our Lord's words better than present-day Jehovah's Witnesses do. They realized full well that He was saying more than if a man said, "I and my wife are one." This husband would mean simply that he and his wife are one in their desires, plans, or ambitions. Jesus obviously meant more than that. He was saying that He and the Father are one in essence. The Jews knew that Jesus had claimed deity for Himself.

Jesus clearly saw Himself as the Son of God. He viewed Himself as deity.

The Testimony of the Apostles.

The men who wrote the New Testament also had no doubt about the deity of Jesus Christ. Some of them could remember that day when their friend Thomas saw the resurrected Christ and exclaimed, "My Lord and My God!" (John 20:28). This was not an expression of surprise like, "Oh my God!" that we so often hear today. No Jew in the first century would use God's name that way. The apostles recalled full well that Jesus accepted this designation of deity.

When the apostle John, who was present on that occasion, opened his Gospel, he did so as follows: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). He proceeded to declare that this Word became a human being who reflected the glory of God (see v.14). The expression in verse 1, "And the Word was God," is so clear that almost all Bible students see it as a declaration that Jesus Christ is God. Jehovah's Witnesses, however, do not agree. They argue that the last phrase in John 1:1 should read, "And the word was a god." They point out that the word *God* does not have the definite article. It does not read, "And the Word was *the* God."

They are correct in this observation, but they are wrong when they conclude that it does not ascribe deity to Jesus Christ. Robertson, Wescott, Morris, and other reputable scholars tell us that John had good reason for omitting the article here. If he had written, "And the Word was *the* God," he would have denied the distinction between the Father and the Son--an error made by a man named Sabellius and rejected by the church fathers.

If John had meant to say that Jesus was a lesser form of deity, he would have used the Greek word *theios* instead of *theos*. Morris says, "This word was available, and it is found in the New Testament (e.g. Acts 17:29; 2 Pet. 1:3)."

Moreover, the context makes it clear that the Word is God, not merely a quasi-divinity--a being somewhere between God and created beings. The Word existed in the beginning (John 1:2). The Word was involved in the creation of everything (v.3). He possesses a life that is unique--an uncreated life that was His from eternity and is the source of spiritual light (v.4).

It is clear that the translation of John 1:1 is correct: "And the Word was God." The very word order in the Greek, the use of *theos* instead of *theios*, and the context demand this rendering.

In addition to John's testimony that Jesus Christ is God, we find clearer statements in the writings of Paul to the same effect. He declared that we as Christians are "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13). Notice, it is "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" not "our great God and *the* Savior Jesus Christ." Since Paul put no article before the word *Savior*, it is clear that he saw Jesus Christ as our great God.

The apostle Peter used a similar Greek construction when he addressed his readers as "those who have obtained like precious faith with us by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:1).

In Hebrews 1:8,10, we find the writer quoting several Old Testament verses that clearly refer to God and applying them to Jesus Christ.

But to the Son He says: 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever'
[a quote from Ps. 45:6] . . . You, LORD, in the beginning laid the
foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of Your
hands' [a quotation from Ps. 102:25-27].

The writer of this epistle, thoroughly schooled in the Old Testament Scriptures and therefore a strict monotheist, was not one bit reluctant to declare the absolute deity of Jesus Christ. He identified Jesus Christ as "God" and "LORD."

The Predictions of the Old Testament Prophets.

Even the Old Testament Scriptures, so dear to many Jewish people, declared the deity of the coming Messiah with crystal clarity. One of the remarkable prophecies that does so is Isaiah 9:6.

For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given; and the
government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be
called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father,
Prince of Peace.

Two of these names given to the coming Messiah undeniably express His deity-- "Mighty God" and "Everlasting Father." Jehovah's Witnesses translate the first expression "a mighty god" but are not consistent. They encounter the same Hebrew expression in Isaiah 10:21 where even they must admit that it refers to Jehovah, the God of Israel. The term "Mighty God" as we find it here is therefore a clear declaration of Messiah's deity.

The name "Everlasting Father" may be translated "Father of Eternity." But it really doesn't matter which term we choose. Either one expresses deity. Since only God is everlasting, only God can be given the name "Father of Eternity." And the prophet declared that this title belongs to the "Child" and "Son" who was to come as the Messiah.

The Declarations of the Church Fathers.

The early church fathers struggled to come up with a satisfying answer to the question, "Who is the Son?" They knew that the Scriptures ascribed deity to Him. They also saw in the Scriptures evidence that He was truly human. But they didn't know exactly how the human and divine blended in His one Person. Some put so much emphasis on His deity that they tended to deny His true humanity. Others erred in the other direction.

Finally a man named Arius came up with a teaching that actually denied Christ's deity. He said that before Jesus came into our world through the virgin Mary, He pre-existed as the first and highest of all created beings. This denial of our Lord's deity, though promoted by some prominent leaders at the time, simply could not stand in the face of serious biblical study. Little by little, careful scholars who worked with the biblical data, concluded that Jesus Christ is both fully human and fully God. Moreover, they said that these two natures--the human and the divine--were united in His one Person. The Athanasian Creed (Athanasius died late in the 4th century) put it this way:

So the Father is God; the Son is God; the Holy Spirit is God. And yet there are not three gods, . . . , neither confounding the essence, nor dividing the substance.

The result is that with few exceptions, Christians down through the ages have affirmed the deity of Jesus Christ as expressed in the Athanasian Creed. All the great divisions of the church--Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, Baptist, and Pentecostal--agree on this point. The vast majority of those who claim allegiance to Jesus Christ have held Him to be both God and man in one Person.

The fact that Jesus was fully human is clearly revealed in the Bible. He was born a baby, grew and learned like other boys (Luke 2:40,52), was a carpenter's son in Nazareth (Mark 6:3), became tired like the rest of us (John 4:6), even admitted there were some things He didn't know (Matt. 24:36), and on the night before His

crucifixion dreaded the ordeal before Him (Matt. 26:36-46). Yet, the Bible also teaches that Jesus is fully God.

The church fathers couldn't explain how Jesus could live as a genuine human being while remaining God (and neither can we). However, we are all grateful for the light the apostle Paul shed on this problem in the well-known passage about Jesus emptying Himself of His eternal glory:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death--even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted Him to the highest place and gave Him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil. 2:5-11 NIV).

Looking back to Jesus Christ in His glorious state before He became a human being, the apostle said, "Being in very nature God" (v.6). He used the Greek word *morphe*, translated "very nature," to make it clear that the outward glory He had in heaven reflected His essential being. In "very nature" He is God.

The apostle went on to say that Jesus "did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (v.6). He let go of the glory He possessed as God so that He might become a member of the human family and be our Savior.

The phrase "made Himself nothing" in the Greek literally reads "emptied Himself." Of what did He empty Himself when He became a member of the human family? Not of His deity! He remained God. What He did was empty Himself of the glory He possessed and place Himself in a dependent relationship with the Father and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, though He remained God, He became truly human.

Jesus had to be a member of our race to be our proper substitute on the cross. This accounts for the fact that He depended on the Holy Spirit in the same manner He expects His followers to do. He was "filled with the Holy Spirit" when He went into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan (Luke 4:1). He cast out demons "by the Spirit of God" (Matt. 12:28). Although Jesus remained God, He voluntarily lived with the limitations of our humanity.

We may not understand fully the relationship of our Lord's human and divine natures while He lived here in the state of humiliation. However, the Scriptures

make it very clear that though He was God, it was in His elemental manhood that He faced trial, trouble, and pain--even the cross.

This is the Son with whom the Father shared His glory. This is the Son so closely identified with God that the Father makes our relationship to Him dependent on our relationship to His Son.

Our relationship with the three-in-one God, however, does not end there. As the Father made our relationship with Him dependent on our relationship with the Son, so the Son has made our relationship with Him dependent on our relationship with the Spirit. As the Father shares His glory with the Son, the Son shares His glory with the Holy Spirit.

[What Is the Relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit?](#)

THE HOLY SPIRIT AS GOD

Some who claim to be Bible students do not believe that the Holy Spirit is God. A writer for Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, said, "The Holy Spirit is a controlled force that Jehovah God uses to accomplish a variety of purposes. To a certain extent it can be likened to electricity, a force that can be adapted to perform a great variety of operations" (*Should You Believe in the Trinity?* p.20). They believe that the Holy Spirit functions much like the Force that New Agers portray as pervading the universe. They flatly reject the idea that the Holy Spirit is a divine Person.

In so doing, however, they contradict Jesus Christ. He clearly perceived of the Holy Spirit as a Person. Speaking to the apostles on the evening before His crucifixion, Jesus said:

I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever--the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you (John 14:16-17).

The Holy Spirit is "another Helper." The implication is clear: Although Jesus would be leaving them, He would send them the Holy Spirit to guide them and empower them. This is clearly the function of a personal being.

Other Bible passages also make it clear that the Holy Spirit is a Person. Paul spoke of the "love of the Spirit" (Rom. 15:30). He also told us not to "grieve the Holy Spirit of God" (Eph. 4:30). Only a personal being can love and be grieved.

In addition, the Holy Spirit leads and guides (Rom. 8:14), teaches (John 14:26), and calls and commissions (Acts 20:28).

Moreover, this Person is named with the Father and the Son in passages like Matthew 28:19. The apostle Peter expressly declared the Holy Spirit's deity when he confronted a sinning husband and wife. He asked them why they had conspired together to "lie to the Holy Spirit" (Acts 5:3). Then he told them that in so doing, they had "not lied to men but to God" (v.4).

Who is the Holy Spirit? According to the Scriptures, the Holy Spirit is a Person who rightly shares with the Father and the Son the title and the glory of the Most High God.

DO CHRISTIANS BELIEVE IN THREE GODS OR ONE?

The Bible definitely teaches that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Holy Spirit is God. It also shows that each has a distinct personality. That adds up to three Gods, right? Yes, if we are working with mathematics or thinking of three separate people. But we are dealing with a God who is revealed in the Bible as one God, who has existed eternally as three distinct (not separate) Persons.

God is one Being, not three. It follows that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three separate Persons. We can distinguish between them, but we cannot separate them.

As distinct Persons, each functions in His own unique manner. The Father is the Originator, the Son is the Agent, and the Holy Spirit is the Administrator or Applicator. Each lives with the other two in an I-You relationship. Each Person is self-conscious and self-directing. Yet one Person never acts independently of the others or in opposition to them. The mind, will, and emotions of each Person is in perfect unity with the mind, will, and emotions of the other two.

All three Persons were involved in the creation of all things. It was "by Him" (Jesus Christ) that God created all things (Col. 1:16). The creation story in Genesis 1:2 portrays the Spirit of God as "hovering over the face of the waters."

In salvation, "God [the Father] so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son" (John 3:16). After Christ's resurrection and ascension to heaven, both He and the Father sent the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 16:7).

The distinction between the three Persons in the Godhead was clearly in evidence at the time of our Lord's baptism. In Matthew 3:16-17 we see the Son coming up out of the water, the Holy Spirit descending in the form of a dove, and we hear the

Father in an audible voice declaring, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."

Jesus affirmed the Trinity when He commanded His disciples to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19).

One God in three Persons! He is the God Christians worship and serve. In this God we have a heavenly Father who loves us with parental love and at great cost sent His one and only Son to die on the cross for our salvation. In this God we have Jesus Christ, a brother who became one of us to take the punishment we deserved, who understands our pain, and who isn't ashamed to call us His brothers and sisters even though we continue to be weak and imperfect. In this God we have the Person of the Holy Spirit as our Helper--a divine Comforter who lives in us to strengthen us and give us victory over sin.

This triune God hears us when we pray. He understands us and feels with us when we suffer. He will be with us at the time of death to see us safely home. How important and how comforting it is to believe in the triune God of the Bible!

QUESTIONS PEOPLE ASK

What about the charge made by Muslims and Jehovah's Witnesses that the doctrine of the Trinity came from paganism?

This charge is without foundation. The pagans worshiped many gods. Sometimes these gods were arranged in groups of three, but they were always separate beings. They never worshiped one God who existed in three persons.

Anti-trinitarians often cite the Hindu triad Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva as a trinity. But these three gods are by no means a unity. They quarrel and fight and indulge in wicked passions.

Sometimes people try to see a similarity between the Lord Jesus and Lord Krishna, the Hindu god who is portrayed as the incarnation of Vishnu. But Krishna is not a historical person. Moreover, the myths portray him as a god with both good and bad characteristics. He had his lovers and was not always honest.

Since all three Persons in the Trinity are equally God, isn't it wrong to refer to them as the first, second, and third Persons?

No, these terms do not indicate rank. They refer to the function of each Person--the Father as Originator, the Son as Agent, and the Holy Spirit as Applicator. Salvation, for example, originates in the Father's love, is provided in the coming

of Jesus, and is made real in our lives through the Spirit. In this sense we can speak of the first, second, and third Persons of the Trinity.

The Bible speaks of Jesus as the "only begotten" and "firstborn." Doesn't this indicate that He had a beginning?

The Greek word *monogenes* is used to refer to Jesus Christ five times in the New Testament (John 1:14,18; 3:16,18; 1 John 4:9). The King James Version translates it as "only begotten." In the past, Christian scholars, believing as they did in the deity of Jesus Christ, referred to Him as having been "eternally begotten." Today, however, new light on the Greek word has led scholars to see *monogenes* as the compound of the words *only* and *kind* or *class*. Jesus Christ is "the unique Son," "the only one of His class." Every other "son" of God (angelic and human) is a created being. Jesus always existed.

The term *firstborn* is used two ways in the New Testament. In Colossians 1:18 and Revelation 1:5, it refers to Jesus as the first to rise from death in a glorified resurrected body. In Romans 8:29, Colossians 1:15, and Hebrews 1:6, it refers to Jesus Christ as the God-man who has the place of pre-eminence over all creation, just as the firstborn in a Jewish family had over his siblings. These references in no way deny Christ's deity.

If Jesus is God, how could He die? Who held the world together while God was dead?

Jehovah's Witnesses seem to think they have dropped a bombshell on Christians with these questions. What they don't realize is that in the Bible, death for humans is not cessation of existence. It is the separation of the soul-spirit from the body.

When Jesus cried out, "It is finished!" (John 19:30) and said, "Father, into Your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46), He didn't pass out of existence. His soul-spirit went to Paradise where He was soon joined by the thief who had repented. On the third day, His soul-spirit was united with His glorified resurrection body.

If Jesus is God, why did He say, "My Father is greater than I"? (John 14:28).

In His humanity, having voluntarily laid aside His glory as God, He had made Himself temporarily "lower than the angels" (Heb. 2:9). In this state of humiliation, He could speak of the Father being greater than He. He would not have said this before the incarnation, nor would He say this today in His state of exaltation.

Why did Jesus seemingly deny that He claimed deity for Himself by pointing out that the Old Testament prophets applied the term "gods" to human judges?

The incident to which this question refers is found in John 10:31-39. The Jewish leaders were about to stone Him for saying, "I and My Father are one" (v.30). At this moment, He called to their attention the fact that Psalm 82:6 says of human judges, "You are gods." But Jesus was not putting Himself on the same level as these mere humans. He set Himself apart from them by affirming that He had been uniquely sent from heaven. However, He didn't proceed to explain clearly His absolute deity because these people were not ready for this truth.

Therefore, just as Jesus had used parables to reveal truth to those who were ready for it, and to conceal it from those who were not ready (Matt. 13:10-17), He now spoke in terms that would both reveal and conceal. The prejudiced people did not understand. As a result, it was possible for Peter a few months later to address people who had agreed to Christ's crucifixion and say, "Yet now, brethren, I know that you did it in ignorance, as did also your rulers" (Acts 3:17). In short, Jesus did not deny His deity. He simply referred to it in such a way that He didn't anger those not ready to receive it.

If Jesus is God, why does 1 Corinthians 15:24-28 tell us that at the end of time, He will deliver the kingdom to God the Father and become subject to Him?

In this passage, Paul told us that the time is coming when Jesus will have completed His work as Messiah and Mediator. While here on earth, He fulfilled the law for us, paid the price for our sin, and broke the power of death. Today He is the head of the church. Sometime in the future, He will call the church to heaven at the rapture (1 Thess. 4:13-18). Then He will return to earth to rule as depicted in many Old Testament passages (Is. 2:1-4; 11:1-9; Jer. 23:5-6). After His reign of 1,000 years, He will crush one final rebellion (Rev. 20:7-10), purge our present earth-system with fire, and bring out of it the new heavens and new earth (2 Pet. 3:10; Rev. 21-22).

Paul declared that at this time, Jesus Christ as the God-man Mediator will leave His place in the center of the stage, subject Himself to God the Father, and resume His original place within the Trinity as before His incarnation. The only difference will be that He shall, throughout all eternity, retain His glorified humanity.

If Jesus is God, why did He say He was going to return to His God?

Jehovah's Witnesses often ask this question. The verse to which they refer is John 20:17, which says, "I am ascending to My Father and your Father, and to My God and your God." They say that Jesus placed Himself in the same relationship to God as Mary Magdalene, the person to whom He was speaking. But if that is what Jesus meant to do, why didn't He just say, "I am ascending to our Father and our God"?

Jesus made this statement to make sure Mary Magdalene would recognize that His relationship to God was different from her relationship to God. Jesus is God's Son by nature. Mary Magdalene was God's child by adoption. Jesus could speak of God as His God through an eternal relationship. Mary Magdalene could think of God as her God by virtue of the grace He revealed in Christ.

The words of Jesus recorded in John 20:17, therefore, depict the fact that Jesus' relationship to God the Father is unique.

Is it all right to address our prayers to Jesus or the Holy Spirit?

We know that it is right and proper to pray to God the Father. Jesus told us to say, "Our Father in heaven" (Matt. 6:9). We also know that we are to come to the Father in the name of Jesus, expecting Jesus to respond (John 14:14). Stephen, at the moment of his death, addressed the Lord Jesus (Acts 7:59-60). We have no Bible passage that either directs us to pray to the Holy Spirit or gives us the example of doing so. However, we know that He is involved when we pray. Paul told us that the Spirit "helps in our weakness" and "makes intercession" when we do not know what to pray for (Rom. 8:26).

It follows that we probably should normally address the Father when we pray. We should come to Him in the name of Jesus. We should rely on the Holy Spirit to lead us in our praying. We should also depend on the Spirit to intercede for us when we don't know what to say. We probably need not be unduly concerned about which Person we address. All three hear us when we pray. All are involved in the answers. Besides, no envy or jealousy exists within the Trinity.

Can we use any illustrations to explain the doctrine of the Trinity?

Probably not. I've seen people hold up an egg and say, "The yolk, the white, and the shell make up the egg. This is three in one." But the yolk is fat, the white is albumen, and the shell is calcium--no real unity there. Some have said that water can exist as ice, liquid, and steam. But in any form, it is just water--not three in one. A minister thought he had a remarkable illustration when he said, "I am a *father* to my family, a *pastor* to my church, and a *citizen* in my community--three in one." But he was actually repeating the heresy that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three characteristics or modes or relations of the Godhead--three ways God works.

The closest analogies probably can be found in these clusters of three: (1) in the universe--space, time, and matter; (2) in matter--energy, motion, and phenomena; (3) in time--past, present, and future.

But these analogies add little light to the subject of the Trinity. At best they may only *reflect* the three-in-oneness of the Creator.

We must learn to live with a God we cannot fully comprehend. As C. S. Lewis has written: "If Christianity was something we were making up, of course, we could make it easier. But it isn't. We can't compete, in simplicity, with people who are inventing religions. How could we? We're dealing with fact! Of course, anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about" (*Beyond Personality: The Christian Idea of God*, London: Geoffrey Bles, 1944, p.19).

WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE?

Why put so much emphasis on the doctrine of the Trinity? What if a person has faith in a personal God, views Jesus as the highest of all created beings, believes He died for sinners and arose from the grave, and is trusting in Christ for salvation? Isn't that faith adequate for salvation? Yes it is, but that person will believe in the Trinity when it is presented to him. It is one of the most basic and most life-related teachings of the Bible.

To underscore its importance, we will see how it impacts the most well-known verse in the Bible:

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son,
that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have
everlasting life (John 3:16).

If you don't believe in the Trinity, you would have to say that this verse teaches that God sent the first created being to die that we might be saved. But why is sending one created being (even the first one) to save other created beings such a big deal? What makes that a supreme demonstration of God's love? It's nothing more than God sending one of His creatures to save others.

But if you do believe in the Trinity, you accept this verse as a declaration of a breathtaking truth. It tells us that God loves us so much that He, in the Person of Jesus Christ, came to share our pain and provide salvation at great cost. The apostle Paul declared that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). This statement makes Calvary the supreme manifestation of God's holiness and love.

We often speak of what Jesus suffered on the cross. But what of the Father? What of the Holy Spirit? If a mother and father suffer as they watch their child endure pain, why not the Father and the Holy Spirit? The relationship of the Persons within the Godhead is closer than that of family members.

We have a triune God who has shared, and still shares, the pain of His creatures. He who chose to create and give His moral creatures freedom to sin, and thus bring pain and death into His world, also chose to share our suffering and sorrow.

We serve a God who in Christ suffered for us, a God who in Christ conquered death for us, a God who in Christ understands our pain, a God who because of what He did in Christ will someday bring all of His children into a world where there will be no more suffering, death, or tears.

KNOWING GOD

A professor who realized that because he had clashed with certain leaders he would never receive academic advancement said to J. I. Packer, "It doesn't matter, for I've known God and they haven't." To Muslims and many others this sounds blasphemous. They think of God as so great and so different from us that all we can expect to do is know His will and surrender to Him the best we can.

Yes, God is so different from us and so awesomely great that we cannot comprehend Him fully. He is incomprehensible. But He is knowable!

Why? Because He has reached down to us. He made Himself known to people during past ages by supernatural appearances and audible speech. Then about 2,000 years ago, He made Himself known in the Person of Jesus Christ. Hebrews 1:2 tells us that "in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son" (NIV).

You can know God by looking to Jesus and believing on Him. Read the portrait of Him in the Gospels. Pay attention to His words. Set yourself to obey Him. Jesus promised, "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether My teaching comes from God or whether I speak on My own" (John 7:17 NIV).

When you see that He is indeed "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6) and receive Him as your Savior, you will become God's child (John 1:12). Before long, you too will be able to say, "I have come to know God."