

New City Catechism—Week 3
The Trinity

Q: How many persons are there in God?

A: There are three persons in the one true and living God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. They are the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

Deut. 6:4: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord, our God, **the Lord is one!**”

Phil. 2:9-11: “Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the **name that is above every name**, so 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.”

Lesson

The Trinity is the source and heart of all Christian thought. God is always far beyond our comprehension, so our theology always has for its center the mystery of God, and theology is a process of putting a “hedge” around that mystery.

The word “Trinity” is never used in the Bible, but the concept has long been held by the Church and its truth has been the subject of two millennia of debate. It has always held in tension a God who is inconceivable transcendent (or “beyond”) and that same God who is inconceivably immanent (or “close”). The debate has always focused on the divinity of Jesus, so a thorough understanding of His divinity as seen in the OT and NT must be our first focus.

Scriptural Background:

The OT theological discussion that Jesus entered into:

Two Yahwehs?:

At Sodom and Gomorrah—Yahweh or God?

Gen. 19:24

Amos 4:11

Is. 13:17-19

The Angel of Yahweh or Yahweh?

Ex. 3:1-4—Yahweh or Angel?

Gen. 48:14-16—God or Angel?

Judg. 6:11-14—Yahweh or Angel?

The Pillar of Cloud and Fire—Angel or Yahweh?

Deut. 4:35-37—Yahweh

Judges 2:1-3—Angel of Yahweh

Ex. 13:21—Yahweh

The "Name" or *focused presence* of Yahweh

2Sam. 6:2—the Name dwells on the ark of the covenant
1 Chr. 13:6—the Name dwells on the ark of the covenant
Jer. 7:12,14—the Name dwelt in Shiloh
2Sam. 7:13—the Name dwells in the temple (cp. 2Chr. 7:2)
Ps. 20:1-2—the Name protects His people
Is. 30:27
Ps. 102:15-16
Ps. 124:8
Ps. 148:4-5
Ps. 75:2—the Name is near
Ex. 23:20-21—"I am sending my angel...my Name is in him."

The Visible/Invisible Paradox:

Ex. 33:20—Yahweh is invisible
Ex. 24:9-11—Yahweh is visible
Gen. 32:30—Yahweh is visible
Ex. 33:11—Yahweh is visible
cp. 1John 4:12
cp. John 1:18

Daniel's "Son of Man":

Dan. 7:1-14—"Son of Man" as cloud-rider
Deut. 33:26
Ps. 68:33
Ps. 104:3
Is. 19:1
Ex. 13:21
Ex. 16:10
Ex. 40:34
1Kin. 8:10
Ezek. 1:4,5,22,26

Jesus' claim to be Yahweh:

Jesus as Daniel's "Son of Man":

Matt. 13:41-3
Matt. 16:27-8
Matt. 24:36-37
Matt. 25:31-2
Mark 8:38
Mark 13:32
Luke 9:26
Luke 12:8-10
Luke 18:31

Jesus as Yahweh:

Matt. 21:16—Jesus quotes Ps. 8:2 (“from the mouths of children and babies you [Yahweh] have received praise”) to explain why the children were calling Jesus the Messiah.

John 1:51—Jesus quotes Gen. 28:12, Jacob’s dream at Bethel, and says that the angels of God will “ascend and descend for the Son of Man,” though in the OT context, they do so for a *visible* Yahweh.

John 3:31; 6:41; 8:23—Jesus “came from heaven”

John 8:47; 16:28—Jesus is “from God”

John 8:57—Jesus existed before his ancestor Abraham (8:57).

John 10:30; 17:21—Jesus and the Father “are one,” which His audience saw as “equal to God” (10:33)

John 17:5—Jesus shared the “glory” of the Father before the world’s creation

Rev. 1:17; 22:12—Jesus is the “first” and the “last”

Apostolic assertions of Jesus as Yahweh:

John 1:14—John assigns to Jesus an attribute—“full of grace and truth”—that Yahweh gave of Himself when He passed before Moses in Ex. 34:6.

John 12:27—John says that the “glory” that Isaiah saw, clearly in his vision in the temple in Is. 6, was the glory of Jesus, the *visible* Yahweh.

John 19:37—John applies Zech. 12:10 (“and they will look on whom they have pierced”) to Jesus, a text that clearly has Yahweh in mind.

Rom. 10:13—Paul quotes Joel 3:5 (“everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”) and applies it to calling on Jesus.

Rom. 10:17—Paul calls Isaiah’s oracle in Is. 53:1 the “word of the Messiah.” In

Rom. 11:26—Paul identifies Jesus, by context, as the Divine Warrior in Is. 59:20.

1 Cor. 10:4—Paul says that the “spiritual rock that followed” their ancestors in the wilderness was the Messiah

1 Cor 10:9—Paul says that it was the Messiah that their ancestors tested in the wilderness.

Heb. 13:8—The author of Hebrews said that Moses shared the “reproach of the Messiah”

1 Pet. 1:10—Peter says that it was by the “spirit of the Messiah” that the prophets prophesied.

Jude 5—Jude says that it was Jesus who had “rescued the people from the land of Egypt.”

John 1:1—Jesus “was with God” and yet “was God” as well.

John 1:2-4, 10—Jesus created the universe

John 1:18—Jesus is the “only-begotten God” who “reveals” the God who “cannot be seen.”

Rev. 3:14—Jesus is the “first of God’s creation.”

Col. 1:15—Jesus is “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all life, for by Him all things in heaven and earth, both visible and invisible, were created.”

Phil. 2:6—Before His incarnation, Jesus was “in the form of God”

Phil. 2:11—After his resurrection, He was given the seat of executive authority in heaven until every human and divine being alike confess that “Jesus is Lord (Yahweh),” the “Name above every name” (2:9).

1Tim. 3:15-16—He is the “living God” who “became visible in flesh.”
John 2:24—He “knows all humans” (John 2:24) and has the right to forgive their sins against the Father.
Matt. 26:53—Jesus commands all the host of heaven.
Heb. 1:3—He is what visibly bursts forth of the Father’s invisible Glory and is the material imprint of the immaterial work of the Father.
Tit. 2:13—He is indeed our “great God and Savior”
John 20:28—He is our Lord and our God
Rom. 9:5—Jesus is the “Messiah who is God over all. Amen!”

The Holy Spirit as a distinct person of the Trinity:

John 15:26—The Holy Spirit comes from, and is therefore distinct from, the Father
John 13:24—The Holy Spirit will proceed from the Son
John 16:7—The Holy Spirit will come once the Son has ascended to the Father
Is. 63:10—The Holy Spirit can be sinned against
Acts 5:3—Peter says that Ananias lied to the Holy Spirit, whom he then calls “God”
Acts 15:28—The Holy Spirit has His own will
Eph. 4:30—The Holy Spirit can be “grieved”
Ps. 139:7—The Holy Spirit is omnipresent

The Role of the Holy Spirit:

Giver of Wisdom: Ex. 31:3; 35:31; Neh. 9:20; Is. 11:2; 1Cor. 2:11-14
Giver of Life: Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ez. 37:14
Giver of Leadership (Judges/Kings/Prophets): Is. 42:1; Num. 27:18; Is. 61:1; Ezek. 36:27; Micah 3:8; Matt. 3:16
Giver of Revelation (Prophets): Is. 59:20; Joel 2:28-29; 2Chr. 15:1-2; Num. 24:2; 1Sam 10:10; 19:20; 2Chr. 24:20; Ezek. 11:24

Development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the Church:

With the rise of trinitarian thought, there came a reaction, especially in the West. The desire was to protect the *monarchy* (μοναρχία) of God, the oneness of God. Two basic forms of monarchianism arose: Dynamic monarchianism (adoptionism) and modalistic monarchianism (modalism).

I. Dynamic Monarchianism

- a. **Ebionites:** Forerunner of dynamic monarchianism. A Jewish Christian group that rejected the virgin birth of Jesus, they taught that Jesus was a normal man and was appointed by God to be the Messiah at his baptism. Islam will later develop from this sect.
- b. **Theodotus the Tanner:** brought adoptionism to Rome around 190. He taught that at his baptism the Spirit descended upon Jesus. Theodotus was condemned by Pope Victor (186-198).

- c. **Paul of Samosata**, Bishop of Antioch (260-268): The Father Son and Holy Spirit are not equally God. The Father is God alone. The Son is a man and the Holy Spirit is the grace given to believers. Paul distinguishes the Logos from the Son. The Logos comes upon Jesus and dwells in him, thus making him the Son. Jesus differs from the prophets only by degree. Paul was condemned by the Synod of Antioch in 268. The bishops attending insisted that the Logos was a *being* (ουσια) in his own right, not just a verbal utterance. He is a distinct subject. Thus they rejected that the Logos was *homoousios* with the Father, since that would mean for them that the Logos and the Father would be one and the same. This raised problems later on (see Athanasius, *De Synodis* 81; Basil, *Epistle* 52). The Council of Nicaea would declare that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father. Note the similar view of the Jehovah's Witness sect.

II. **Modalistic Monarchianism**: More widespread than dynamic monarchianism. It is founded on two principles: 1. God is one. 2. Jesus is divine.

- a. **Noetus of Smyrna** (end of 2nd century): God is one and is the Father. The Father became man and suffered- Patripassianism. If Jesus is God, then he must be the Father or there are two Gods.
- b. **Sabellius**: He came to Rome in the 3rd century and was more sophisticated than Noetus. He said that God was a *monad*, but expressed himself in three different ways (Sun/Light/Heat). He expresses himself as Father in creation and the giving of the law. He expresses himself as Son in redemption and expresses himself as Spirit in grace. Thus there are different modes of appearance, but no real distinction within the nature of God.

Trinitarian response to early non-Trinitarian thought:

Tertullian

A native of North Africa, probably Carthage, Tertullian's literary activity spanned the last years of the 2nd century and the first two decades of the 3rd. (c. 193-c. 217) He probably was an ordained priest. He gradually became a Montanist (a charismatic schismatic group) and separated from the Catholic church, but his theology changed very little (except for his view of the church).

Theology of Tertullian (answering Modalistic Monarchianism)

1. Doctrine of the Trinity

- a. adopts and refines Logos theology
- b. "stage" theory
 - i. faculty of thought (*ratio*)
 - ii. actual thought (*sermo*)
 - iii. thoughts spoken as words (*verbum*)

2. One and Three

- a. one in quality (*status*) – three in degree (or sequence) (*gradus*)

- b. one in substance – three in form
- c. one in power – three in manifestation
- d. also uses ‘monarchy’ for oneness
- e. also uses ‘persona’ (Latin for “face/mask/person”) for threeness

3. Christology

- a. real humanity
- b. unity of divine Word and human flesh, uses ‘mixing’ as metaphor, but:
 - i. not *confusio* (a “fusing” of spirit and flesh)
 - ii. not ‘juxtaposition’
 - iii. rather ‘co-penetration’

The Councils of Nicea and Constantinople:

We 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 Son of God, the Only-begotten, Begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten, not made; of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made:

Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and was made man;

And was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate, and 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 shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead, Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, and Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, Who spoke by the Prophets;

And we believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.

We acknowledge one Baptism for the remission of sins.

We look for the Resurrection of the dead,

And the Life of the age to come. Amen.

Key Take-Aways and Applications of the doctrine of the Trinity:

Take a few minutes to think through some of the implications of a Trinitarian God:

Implications on: relationships? leadership? personal purity? etc.