

# How Can God Be Three and One?

God is a three letter monosyllable word and yet the idea of God is far bigger than our finite minds can fully comprehend. But while we cannot fully comprehend God, and who would want a God we could comprehend? If so, our God would be no bigger or better than we are? While we cannot comprehend the infinite God with our finite minds, we can apprehend God, that is, we can discuss God in a meaningful way. We can apprehend what we cannot comprehend. Because we do not know everything about God does not mean that we cannot know something about God.

Today I am going to discuss the most difficult thought that the human mind has ever been asked to handle. This is a truth for the heart; no human could ever imagine it. The doctrine is not easy, but it is true. Its difficulty may be proof of its divine revelation because man could not make it up, and if man were making up religion, it would be simple. And as C. S. Lewis observed, if you don't bother with facts, you can be simple. What we are dealing with today is not simple. However, just about everything that is vital in Christianity hangs on this doctrine. That is how important it is. I am taking about the fact that the God of the bible is one essence, one being, you might say one what, but three persons or whos. God is one in one frame of reference and he is three in another frame of reference. God is a tri-unity, or a Trinity. This is not a contradiction. It would be a contradiction if it were in the same frame of reference.

Let's begin by asking, What is the nature of God?

The first Bible, the Bible of the Jewish people, was and is what we know as the Old Testament. The second part of our Bible, the New Testament, grows out of the O.T. The O.T. is the root and the N.T. is the fruit. In order to understand the N.T. we need to begin in the O.T. What does the O.T. say about the nature of God?

The O.T. affirms that God is from everlasting to everlasting, that God cannot be seen by man's mortal eyes, and that God is so awesome and glorious that man would be destroyed if he were to come as he is into a face to face presence with God. The OT affirms that God created the world and all things in it that are good. The O.T. affirms that God is gracious, loving,

merciful, present all around us, and full of wisdom, knowledge, power, and is capable of anything that does not violate his nature. Hear the word in the most frequently quoted passage in the Bible from the Bible: (read Ex. 33:7--)  
The OT strongly attests that there is only one God. Hear the word of the Lord in Deut. 6:4 (read) and in Isa. 44: 6-8; 45:5).

Yet the O.T. intimates that there is a diversity in this one God. For example have you noticed in the creation story, Gen. 1:26; and in 2: the “us” usages? (read the verses, 1:26)

Also the word for God, *elohim*, is a plural noun and takes a plural predicate.

Note also the OT speaks of God as distinct from his Holy Spirit. Listen to Gen. 1:2 (read) and Isa. 63: 9 (read the verses)

Also the OT speaks of the angel of the Lord. This appears to be a theophany, an appearance of God in human form. Notice in the story of Abraham that three men came to see him, that two angels went on into Sodom, and that Abraham stood talking to the Lord. This was the angel of the Lord. This angel is known as the angel of the Lord and is given the titles of deity and is called Lord. This is God appearing in human form. This enfleshment was not permanent but was a practical, occasional appearing for the purpose of communicating with man. Some believe that the angel of the Lord was a pre-incarnation appearance of the second person of the Godhead whom we know in the flesh in N.T. times as Jesus of Nazareth.

The OT also prophesied in the most frequently quoted verse from the OT in the NT that “the Lord said unto my Lord....(Psa. 110:1). Who is talking to whom here? Daniel also prophesied about one who was to come in the awesome power of the Lord. Listen to him in chapter 7, verse 13 of his prophesy: (read).

So the strict monotheism of the O.T. and of the Jews makes room for diversity of plurality in personality within the essence of God.

So then we come to the N.T. In the first century of this common era, Jesus of Nazareth appeared on the scene. His miraculous conception in the womb of Mary is by the power of the Holy Spirit. Hear the word of the Lord: (read Lk. 1:32-33 and then again in Matt. 1:18-21. Notice that his name will be Immanuel which means “God with us.” At the age of 12, this boy Jesus,

who was growing up in a carpenter's shop in the hills of Galilee during the reign of Tiberius Caesar knew that he had a unique relationship with God the Father. At the age of 12, he said to his mother and Joseph, his earthly guardian, "Did you know know that I must be in my Father's house?"

At the age of 30, Jesus went to be baptized in the River Jordan. John the Baptist did not want to baptize him since his baptism was based on repentance of sins and for the forgiveness of sins and he recognized that there was something different about his cousin, Jesus. John knew that he needed to be baptized by Jesus and not the other way around. But Jesus persuaded him because Jesus wanted to obey God in everything and to begin his ministry of preaching and teaching the kingdom of God and healing the sick, diseased, demon-possessed and dying. When the man Jesus was dripping wet in the middle of the Jordan as a result of his immersion, something unusual occurred. The text says, (read Matt. 3:16-17). Here is a voice from heaven, the of God the Father, here is the Holy Spirit that we mentioned earlier from the OT, And here is Jesus on earth and the voice says, "This is my Son, in him I am well pleased." The word "Son of" in the Jewish thinking does not mean in this context "a biological generation" like Rick is the son of Calvin, but it means one who bears the image of, one who shares the same DNA, the same essence. Hear is God the Father in heaven confession that Jesus on earth is of the same essence as he is. Here we have a diversity or plurality within God.

For the next three years, Jesus goes about his ministry. He constantly speaks of God as his Father. Jesus says that he came from God and is returning to God. Jesus says that he and the Father are one. Jesus says that he that has seen him has seen the Father. Especially is this true in the gospel of John. Notice the opening to this gospel, chapter one. (read vs. 1-3, then 11-14, 18). Here we red of his eternality, his equality and his deity, then his humanity. Notice in chapter 3: (14-18) Then in chapter 8:58---. Then esp. in chapters 14-16. read verses from each chapter. Notice the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

After his resurrection Jesus told his disciples, (read Matt. 28:19)

How do we explain these verses? Ow do we explain this diversity of persons? This plurality within the one God?

Hundreds of N.T. verses speaks of the Father, the son, and the Holy Spirit.

Notice just a few—

Eph. 1:5-17, then 3:14-19, then 4:4-6

Then I Cor. 12

Then 2 Cor. 13:14

Then Jude 24-25

Then Peter in I Pet. 1: then John in I Jn. 4:3 and 11-13

Then Rev. 1:4-5

We could go on and on. There are hundreds of verses like these.

There is much NT evidence for this. Look at your bulletin. The front page—read from it—then the back page—notice all the Scriptures—the evidences

So this is N.T. teaching.. It was the appearance of Jesus of Nazareth as the Christ and the coming and work of the Holy Spirit that made clear the diversity in the Godhead and the persons in the Godhead.

Within the tri-unity of God there is love, communication, knowledge.

(explanation here of God's essence, oneness, harmonious wills, undivided, whatever Jesus knows and wills the father wills, whatever one knows the other knows, the kenotic hypothesis based on Phil. 2 and the voluntary limited nature of Jesus during his incarnation)

So the NT evidence is that there is one God and yet within that one God, deity, there is a plurality of persons. What is a person? A person is someone who speaks, who listens, who loves, who has will and feelings, a center of consciousness. . God is personal. And God exists as one essence and three whos. An imperfect analogy is Calvin is human, Jim is human, and Dorothy is human. We are all human but we are not each other. The reason this analogy is so imperfect is that The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are united in a way that they can never be divided, they have harmonious wills, and that they share all knowledge, but such is not true of three humans. Three humans are separate and distinct, the the persons of the Trinity, while distinct, can never be separated.

God is one God, one essence, one being, one substance one what, but three persons, three persons with such unity that nothing in this world knows of it. God is one in one frame of reference and three in a different frame of

reference. We do not believe in tri-theism, three gods, but on the other hand, we do not believe in Unitarianism that denies Jesus and the Holy Spirit.

We must not confuse identity with predication. Jesus is God means in the predicate of the sentence here “is God” that Jesus is deity, not that Jesus is God the Father. The Father is God means that the Father is deity, not that the Father is identical with Jesus. The Holy Spirit is God means that the Holy Spirit is of the divine being, but not that the Holy Spirit is Jesus or the Father. So in identity we can say, The Father is God, Jesus is the son of God, and the Holy Spirit is God. This does not mean that Jesus is the Father and that the Father is the Holy Spirit. The word “is” here in these sentences is one of identity. So we must understand when we use the word “is,” are we using it as an identity statement or as a predicate statement. For example, Calvin is human, Jim is human, Dorothy is human. We all are human but we are not each other. So the word “is” in those sentences is predicate. But if I say, “Calvin is the preacher, Jim is the song leader, and Dorothy is the listener and participant,” I am using the word “is” as an identity statement. So in speaking of God, we must be careful to understand what we mean by the words we use. Even the word “is” must be defined in context. If we do not we can end up in heretical teachings.

So the unity and diversity of God is not a contradiction. A contradiction violates all the laws of rationality. To believe a contradiction is to believe an absurdity. God is not absurd, nor is he a contradiction. God may be a paradox, which means that we do not fully understand him, or there is more than our finite minds can get our arms across, or that there are some mysteries about God. There better be, or he would not be God. He would be like me. The mysteries of God are there. The Bible says, Deut. 29:29.

—how do we compute what we do know from the biblical revelation that God has made known to us?

This evidence was all in the Scriptures for the early church of the first, second, third and fourth centuries. Some of the greatest minds, in philosophy and theology lived then. They have not been surpassed in our day.

As they faced false teachers and heresies that developed as Jesus and the apostles said they would they needed to renounce these false teachers and to

speaking exactly what orthodox theology was. They thought on these passages just like we do today.

They wrote letters and books examining the Scriptures and explaining their thinking. They met in church-wide conferences and councils to clearly delineate orthodox teaching from heretical philosophies that were widely circulating.

Heresies were being propagated even by church leaders in various parts of the world. They wrote down their thinking, taught it in the churches and spread it to others. The early church fathers knew that not everyone talking about God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit were describing the realities of the N.T. They were teaching false views of God which meant they were in reality teaching false gods. Nothing but a correct understanding of the relationships within deity could account for all the N.T. teaching.

Among the most prominent of the false teachers was Arius of Alexandria, (dates). Arius taught that Jesus was not eternal, that he was not God, that he was created. And that the Holy Spirit was not a person but rather an impersonal force, the power of God, something like divine energy or spiritual electricity. This doctrine robs Jesus of glory, of worship, of majesty. It means that God himself did not die on the cross for us but only a creature of God. Jesus did the things that only God can do: he forgave sins, he said he would judge the world, he said that men should worship him. The worship of a creature instead of the creator is idolatry. It violates the first commandment.

Arius has his followers today. The Jehovah Witnesses are Arians. They deny the deity of Jesus and the Holy Spirit. They say that Jesus was Michael the archangel, a created being, not eternal deity.

Another prominent false leader in the early centuries was Sabellius (dates). He said that Jesus was just a role that God the Father played. He taught that God acted as Father in the OT, as Jesus the son in NT times, and then as the HS in the apostolic age. There was just one person playing three different roles. Like I am a son, a father, and a preacher. I have three different roles but it is the same one me. This emphasizes the unity of God at the expense of the plural personhood of God. This means that when Jesus the son was on earth that there was no one in the heavenly world. This means that at the baptism of Jesus that the voice from heaven was just Jesus on earth

acting as a ventriloquist. This means that when Jesus prayed, as for example, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he was praying to himself, no one was up there listening. This means that God the Father died on the cross and sw in the tomb for three days. Who then was Jesus speaking on on the cross when he said, “My God, my God why have you forsaken me?” and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.” This false view today is seen in the Oneness Pentecostal people, the United Pentecostal Church.

It is also very close to some of our explanations of the Trinity when we say that God is like water that is either a solid (ice), a liquid (water), or a vapor (steam). Today, I would caution you not to use human analogies to describe God. All human analogies, while they may illustrate one fact of God, no thing in creation can illustrate God. All analogies have inherent failures built within them. So don't say that God is like a three leaf clover, or the three parts of an egg (yolk, white, shell), or the three parts of an apple (core, skin, meat), or the three parts of a man (thinking, feeling, willing). Do not talk about the “parts” of God because God cannot be divided in his essence. All our analogies of God break down at some point. We have nothing on earth to compare God to. He is far beyond anything he as created in this natural world and cannot be compared to it. Every human analogy of God has a fatal flaw in it, so I suggest that we not use them at all.

Another false view of the early centuries taught by Apollinarius (dates) was that Jesus was not really human. That he did not have a human mind, that he was just a human body with a divine mind. But this robs Jesus of his fully humanity. The early fathers refuted this and concluded that “what has not been assumed cannot be redeemed” so if Jesus did not have a mind like ours, then our minds are not saved by his cross and resurrection.

Another false view of Jesus is that he was not God in the flesh. Cerinthus in the time of John the apostle taught this view. That God only adopted this good Jew at his baptism and worked in his life. Then this God was not crucified because God left Jesus when he went to the cross. So God was not really man, only a pretend so, a god in human disguise, masquerading as God, but not really so, and God did not give himself for us. It was only a good Jews who died at Calvary.

Both the views above, those that deny the deity of Jesus and those that deny the humanity of Jesus were already beginning in the late first century and the

apostle John wrote his two short letters, I John and 2 John, to combat these heresies.

The early church fathers thought through all the ramifications of God, his unity, his diversity of person and with the brightest and best theology they could they wrote in philosophical terms what they understood about God. These church councils and their writings gave a understanding of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit that are accepted in most all Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches. These written decisions became known as creedal statements, that is, statements of belief. We all have creeds, whether written or unwritten. To say that I believe in one God, the father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and in his son Jesus Christ, who was born of the virgin Mary, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, who was crucified, buried, and resurrected on the third day, and who ascended to haven to rule as Lord and King, and in the Holy Spirit” is to make a creedal statement. To say that “I believe that Jesus Christ is the son of the living God” is a creedal statement. Every religious person has creeds. The question is not whether it is right or wrong to have a creed, but the question is Is the creed a correct and biblical one? Or is it a false or heretical one?

I find the creeds of these early church fathers to be correct theologically. I do not know of one thing in the church councils of the first four centuries that are written in what is known as the apostles creed, the Nicene creed, the creed of Chalcedon, and the Creed of Constantinople that I would disagree with. The church fathers did the very best they could in stating the views of the Scriptures about God. Let me read you some of the way they phrased things: (read from the creeds summary statements, in **Doctrine**, Driscoll, pp. 26-27))

It is very important to know what we believe and why we believe it. We are faced today with all kinds of false teaching about God and Jesus. I have spoken of the false views of those who deny the deity of Jesus, who deny the humanity of Jesus, those who think that Jesus is a created being like the Arians and the Jehovah Witnesses, or that God the Father just wore different hats or roles as the Sabellians and the United Pentecostal Church of our time. The Mormons, CoCoLDS, believe that God is just an elevated man, that Jesus was born to God’s wife, that we will all be gods someday. Their mantra is, “As man is now, God once was; as God is now, man will become.” These are heresy. In reality, all heresies have their root in a false view of God, either God the Father, Jesus the Son, or the Holy Spirit.

This lesson is theological and philosophical. I know but it is the truth and we need to get to know our God as he has revealed himself..

So what does all this mean for us in practical terms?

1. This means that the second person of the Godhead willingly volunteered to become flesh to come to his earth to die for our sins. God the father loves us. The Son loves us. The Holy Spirit loves us. The Father directed, the son redeemed, and the Spirit equips and empowers. We have hope, assurance and salvation because of the actions and work of our tri-une God.
2. This means that all that we know about love, communication, sharing, generosity, helpfulness comes from our tri-une God. These virtues are to be in the church because they are in God himself. We are to model on earth the love and communication that is within God.
3. This means that we pray to the Father, through the Son, by the help of the Holy Spirit. All three are involved in our prayers.

[Driscoll lists some ways the Trinity is practical, pp. 34-35]

Some day on the other side of death in the land that is fairer than day we will be with God and we will have all eternity to explore God. Now we see in a glass darkly but then we shall see him as he is. Oh, what a great day of rejoicing that will be to delight in God forever. We sing then with the saints in the book of Revelation, “Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty”, who was, who is, and who is to come.

Let’s now praise our glorious God..

(close by singing “Holy, Holy, Holy”)