

An Open Letter in response to a question regarding the Holy Trinity-

Dear Michael,

Thank you for the question. I am always happy to dialogue about these often confusing and misunderstood tenants of our faith. First I want to be up front, I believe in the Trinity. I also believe it is biblical and I think it is crucial to understanding God for who He revealed himself to be to us; as well as understanding *ourselves* in light of who He is.

The word "trinity" is a term used to discuss the Christian doctrine that God exists as a unity of three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each of the persons is distinct from the other, yet identical in essence. In other words, each is fully divine in nature, but each is not the totality of the other persons of the Godhead. Christians hold to the doctrine of the trinity because of the three revealed persons of God in the Bible. The three together are not independent of each other nor do they depend upon each other for full divinity, (ie: Jesus is just as much divine as the Father). Each member is fully God and yet, are only together as one God. After reading that I am sure the first thought to go through your mind is that it makes no sense nor does that model seem logical. Trust me, you aren't the first to think that. The early church fathers wrestled with this very same thing. I think the best way to go about understanding the Trinity is coming to grips with the fact that there is no answer that will fully define God. I think Rob Bell says it best, "The moment God is figured out with nice neat lines and definitions, we are no longer dealing with God."

Nonetheless we try to piece together what God has revealed to us and the model we see is that God is a community of three distinct beings or persons. The Father is not the same person as the Son, who is not the same person as the Holy Spirit, who is not the same person as the

Father. Each is divine, yet there are not three gods, but one God. There are three individual subsistences, or persons. The word "subsistence" means something that has a real existence. The word "person" denotes individuality and self-awareness. The Trinity is three of these, though the latter term has become the dominant one used to describe the individual aspects of God known as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The idea of viewing God as a trinity came about at a very early stage in Christian history. The early church fathers or Patristics had argued for it when confronted by heretics and from skeptics. The church was still young and these arguments had to be sorted out and the church needed to come to a consensus on who Jesus is. Patristic Trinitarian theology is grounded in a number of significant foundations. First and foremost among these is the Scripture itself, both the Hebrew Scriptures and the collection of documents now known as the New Testament. In addition to those, there were early liturgies and short creeds that provided resources and guidelines for key church fathers as they contemplated the reality of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Both the practices and documents of the church finally led the Patristic fathers to propose a Trinitarian model of God, but the formation of this model took place over many years and in many contexts, councils, and communities. As the Church worshiped, studied, prayed, and meditated it increasingly realized that the God whom it encountered in Jesus Christ was mysterious and complex in a manner that defied human comprehension and linguistic analysis. They wrestled through the implications of a Triune God, they understood God to be one (Deut. 6:4). Yet, they had to synthesize their understanding of God with Jesus and the Spirit. Trinitarian theology is a strict monotheism (Isaiah 43:10; 44:6,8), but it gives attention to who God is as three distinct persons. The conclusion of the church, reached in the Nicene ecumenical council toward the end of the fourth century, was that God must exist as both a unity and a trinity.

I believe the words of the Athanasian Creed best describe what it is that we believe when we say we believe in a triune God:

That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternals; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion (universal Christianity); to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords. The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts. And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.

In the end, the reason we hold so tightly to this doctrine is that it allows the church to understand Christ as fully God, therefore making our understanding of atonement possible and how we understand the Scriptures to relate to us today. It also gives a precedence to our

understanding of the Holy Spirit as God, and that His presence in the life of the church is bringing about our conformity to Christ (Romans 8) and convicting the world of its need for Christ. All of this being said, we do not want to negate the importance of the Father, who wills and orders all things. It is this understanding of God that separates the orthodox church (that is the unified Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, Coptic, and the Protestant churches) from heresies like Gnosticism, Islam, Mormonism, and Jehovah's Witnesses.

I do hope this helps and if you have further questions I would love to meet and discuss these matters more, perhaps we may even do a sermon series on this topic soon!

Sincerely,

Pastor Nathan

*For further study and a more detailed and elegant understanding of what the church means when we say we worship the One Triune God I recommend reading "[The Trinity](#)" by Roger E. Olson. It isn't too technical and is a relatively easy read.