

God is One Person

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According to the Bible, there is only one God. The Old Testament frequently affirms that God is one (cf. Deut. 6:4). However, I believe the one God of the Old Testament is identified in the New Testament as the Father and the Father alone. No passage of Scripture teaches that the one God is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or that the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit are co-equal, co-eternal persons in one God. In fact, this theory is refuted by the very language of the New Testament itself.

God and Jesus are Distinct

Paul prefaced each of his letters with a formula that carefully distinguishes between "God the Father" and "our Lord Jesus Christ".¹ Not only is the Father God (Phil. 4:20); the Father is the *only* God ("one God and Father of all," Eph. 4:6). This Father is the God of Jesus Christ. "We always thank God," Paul writes, "the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Col. 1:3; cp. Eph. 1:17). There is one God, the Father, and this God is distinct from Jesus, his Son.

This observation is not new. In 1531, Michael Servetus wrote: "For that only the Father is called God by nature is plainly enough shown by Scripture, which says, God and CHRIST. CHRIST and God. It so joins them as though CHRIST were a being distinct from God."²

Servetus went on to quote (among other verses) I Corinthians 8:6, which states that "there is but one God, the Father ... and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ." Similarly, I Timothy 2:5 states that "there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." God and Jesus are two separate beings.

Jesus himself referred to the Father as his God. In John 20:17, he instructed Mary Magdalene to tell his disciples that "I am returning to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God." In John 17:3, Jesus said in prayer to God: "Now this is eternal life: that they may know *you*, the *only true God*, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent"

(emphasis mine). Jesus carefully distinguished between the only true God and himself.

This distinction is clear on nearly every page of Scripture. The most famous verse of the Bible proclaims it: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (John 3:16). Notice what that verse does *not* say. It does *not* say that "God so loved the world that he went down into it," nor does it say that "God the Father sent God the Son" or that "the Father, who is God, sent the Son, who is also God." There are two persons in this verse: God and Jesus. God is the one who sends, and Jesus is the one who is sent. God is one person, Jesus is another.

Not only is God distinct from Jesus; he is superior to Jesus in rank. Jesus said "the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28). Paul wrote: "For he 'has put everything under his feet.' Now when it says that 'everything' has been put under him, it is clear that this does not include God himself, who put everything under Christ. When he has done this, then the Son himself will be made subject to him who put everything under him, so that God may be all in all" (I Cor. 15:27, 28). Can these verses be reconciled with the teaching that the Son is co-equal with the Father? I do not believe that they can.

Jesus' human experience differentiates him from God. "Jesus *grew in wisdom* and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52, emphasis mine). God, on the other hand, possessed wisdom already (Prov. 8). Jesus "*learned obedience* from what he suffered" and was "*made perfect*" (Heb. 5:10, emphasis mine);³ God was already perfect (Matt. 5:48). Jesus was tempted in the wilderness and died on the cross; God cannot be tempted (James 1:13) and cannot die (I Tim. 6:16). Jesus "*became* as much superior to the angels as the name he has *inherited* is superior to theirs" (Heb. 1:4, emphasis mine); God was superior to the angels already and has "*inherited*" nothing. The Father, and the Father alone, is God.

The Son of God

If only one person is God - and that person is the Father - then who is Jesus? Again the answer is clear from Scripture. Jesus is God's Messiah, the Son of God. This was Peter's confession of faith (Matt. 16:16). The Gospel of John was "written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of

God" (John 20:31). Jesus everywhere claimed to be the Son of God, but neither he nor the writers of the New Testament proclaimed him to be God Almighty. "If the New Testament writers believed it vital that the faithful should confess Jesus as 'God'," G.H. Boobyer asks, "is the almost complete absence of just this form of confession in the New Testament explicable?"⁴

On rare occasions Jesus is called "God" in a secondary sense as a representative of God, such as in John's Gospel (20:28). But "it is a misunderstanding to believe that the gospel of John makes Jesus into God, or identical with God," writes Jacob Jervell. "Jesus is not God but God's representative, and, as such, so completely and totally acts on God's behalf that he stands in God's stead before the world."⁵

This is what Jesus meant when he stated that "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). He meant that he and the Father were united in purpose (cp. 17:11). His enemies prepared to stone him, accusing him of "blasphemy, because you, a mere man, claim to be God"(v. 33). Many Bible students stop at that verse and assert that Jesus' enemies were correct. If we read on, however, we see that Jesus defined his ministry rather in terms of Sonship and divine representation: "Is it not written in your Law, 'I have said you are gods'?"⁶ If he called them 'gods,' to whom the word of God came - and the Scripture cannot be broken - what about the one whom the Father set apart as his very own and sent into the world? Why then do you accuse me of blasphemy because I said, I am *God's Son*?" (10:34-36, emphasis mine). Astonished at Jesus' skillful handling of the Scriptures and enmeshed in unbelief, Jesus' enemies were outraged (v. 39). As God's agent, Jesus functions as God, but he is not God himself.

Nor is the Son "eternal" as is commonly taught. He has risen from the dead and conquered death (cf. I Cor. 15:20-26, 57); he is now immortal. But that immortality was given to him at his resurrection. His existence does not extend into eternity past; he was created at a particular point in time.

Luke 1:35 explains the origin of the Son: "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God'" (emphasis mine). Notice

the cause-and-effect relationship here: Mary's child is the Son of God because of the descent of the Spirit, not because his Sonship extends into eternity past. Raymond Brown writes that "the child is totally God's work - a new creation."⁷ James D. G. Dunn adds that "it is a begetting, a becoming which is in view, the coming into existence of one who will be called, and will in fact be the Son of God, not the transition of a pre-existent being to become the soul of a human baby or the metamorphosis of a divine being into a human fetus."⁸

The doctrines of the preexistence and deity of Christ are conspicuously absent in the early Church's sermons as recorded in Acts. The apostles' biographical sketches of Christ's life (as in Matthew, Mark, and Luke) begin with his earthly ministry. "Jesus of Nazareth was a man" through whom God worked miracles and whom God raised from the dead (Acts 2:22ff; cf. also 10:36-43). Luke recorded no apostolic sermon which began "God came down from heaven and was born as man."

The Holy Spirit

What of the Holy Spirit, the alleged "third person" of the Trinity? The New Testament nowhere implies that the Spirit is a divine person distinct from God and Jesus.

Unlike God and Jesus, the Spirit has no name. Nor does the Spirit get "equal time" on the pages of Scripture (cf. note 1), which is strange if the Spirit is a separate co-equal person.

Matthew 11:27 states that "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." Some Polish Christians in the seventeenth century asked a very good question: Where does this leave the Holy Spirit? "If the Holy Spirit were a divine person, the Father would not alone know the Son and the Son alone know the Father. The Holy Spirit also, without a revelation from anyone, would know both."⁹

The Holy Spirit is God, but it is not a person separate from God. It is the presence and power of God himself. "Where can I go from your Spirit?" the psalmist asks. "Where can I flee from your presence?" (Psalm 139:7). Clearly God's Spirit is synonymous with his presence.

The Spirit is also the presence of Christ after his resurrection. In John 14:16-17, Jesus told his disciples he would ask the Father to send "another Counselor to be with you forever - the Spirit of truth." Then he said that "I will come to you" (v.18, emphasis; cp. Matt. 28:20). Lastly, he said that "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make *our* home with him" (v. 23, emphasis mine). The indwelling of God's Spirit is the indwelling of the Father and the Son.

The Father, the Son and the Spirit

This brings us to an important point. The Bible does talk about the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (cf. Matt. 28:19). I very much believe in them. I believe that God, the Father, is fully revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ, and that they dwell in us through the Spirit. There is clearly a "threeness" here. However, the Bible does not say that these three are one God, or that the one God includes these three as co-equal, co-eternal persons.

¹Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:1, 3; Eph. 1:2, 3; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:3; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1,2; 1 Tim. 1:2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Tit. 1:4; Philem. 1:3. Notice also the conspicuous absence of the Holy Spirit.

²*On the Errors of the Trinity*, p. 12.

³Although he was sinless (Heb. 4:15), Jesus had to be tested and tried and had to reach a state of completion so he could "become the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (5:9; cf. 2:10).

⁴"Jesus as 'Theos' in the New Testament," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. 50, p. 253.

⁵*Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House), 1984, p. 21.

⁶Psalm 82:6. The reference is to the judges of Israel. They were "gods" in the sense that "the word of God came" to them and they spoke as God's representatives. If a ruler of Israel could be called "god," how much more may we say this of Jesus, the supernaturally conceived Messiah of God.

⁷*The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, New York: Image Books), 1977, p. 314; cf. also pp. 290, 291.

⁸*Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 1980, p. 51.

⁹*Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press), 1980, p. 51.

⁹Quoted in "The Racovian Catechism and the Holy Spirit," *Wisdom & Power*, November/December 1993, Vol. 7, No. 3, p. 7