

The Trinity

What the Bible Teaches Concerning the Tri-Unity of God

Introduction

The Bible teaches emphatically that there is but one God, but the Bible also teaches that the unity of God involves plurality. Thus in describing the nature of God, we speak of a plural unity, or more specifically a Tri-Unity.

The Old Testament Emphasized the Unity of God

The Old Testament stressed the fact that there was only ONE GOD. Israel was surrounded by nations which served and worshiped many gods. God's people needed to understand that there was but ONE GOD, and all the other gods were false gods, and did not actually exist except in the imaginative minds of sinfully depraved idolaters. Polytheism, or the worship of many gods, was the false concept of the heathen nations surrounding Israel. Monotheism, or the belief that there is only one true God, was the God-revealed faith of the Hebrew nation. In Old Testament times God did not choose to emphasize His plurality, but He chose to emphasize His unique UNITY as the only true God:

"Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is **one LORD**" (Deut. 6:4).

"The Lord, HE is God; **there is none else beside Him**" (Deut. 4:35).

"**Is there a God beside Me? Yea, there is no [other] God; I know not any**" (Isaiah 44:8).

"**I am the LORD, and there is none else, There is no God beside me...that they may know from the rising of the sun, and from the West, that there is none beside Me. I am the LORD and there none else**" (Isaiah 45:5-6).

These verses convey two basic ideas: 1) **Jehovah is one**. This defines the nature of God (**God's ONENESS**). 2) **Jehovah is the only God**. This excludes all other gods (**God's ONLYNESS**).

The Old Testament Hinted at the Plurality of God.

The Old Testament, while strongly emphasizing the UNITY of God, is not silent with respect to the PLURALITY of God's Nature. Many Old Testament passages while teaching that there is ONE GOD, also give hints that this ONE GOD is in some sense PLURAL. How God's plurality harmonizes with His unity is more clearly defined in the New Testament, but the Old Testament lays some important groundwork for the fuller New Testament revelation which was to come. Let us consider some of these Old Testament assertions of God's plurality.

1. The Hebrew word for GOD ("Elohim") is plural in form.

"In the beginning **God** CREATED" (Genesis 1:1). God is the omnipotent CREATOR! The name for "God" found in Genesis 1:1 is the Hebrew word "ELOHIM" (el-ō-heem). The ending of this word ["...IM"] is a **plural ending** ("plural" means more than one). In the English language "S" is a plural ending. We make English words plural by adding the letter "S." Can you make the following words PLURAL?

1) **DOG**

Plural: DOGS

2) **PENCIL**

Plural: PENCILS

3) **WATERMELON**

Plural: WATERMELONS

Make the following HEBREW words plural [Use the Hebrew plural **IM**]:

1. CHERUB ____ (Exodus 25:18-20)
2. SERAPH ____ (Isaiah 6:2,6)
3. TERAPH ____ (Judges 17: 5) "Teraphim" were household gods or idols.

The Hebrew word ELOHIM is a PLURAL word. Many times it is used in the Bible to describe **gods** (false gods):

"Thou shalt have no other _____ [ELOHIM] before Me" (Exodus 20:3).

"And make no mention of the name of other _____ [ELOHIM]" (Exodus 23:13).

". . .then will they turn unto other _____ [ELOHIM]" (Deuteronomy 31:20; see also verse 18).

"God forbid that we should forsake the LORD, to serve other _____ [ELOHIM]" (Joshua 24:16; see verse 2).

In these passages the meaning is obviously PLURAL. These verses are speaking of false gods (plural, more than one).

When ELOHIM is used to describe the TRUE GOD (as in Genesis 1:1) the word is translated "**God**," even though the word is plural in its form. Since the word "Elohim" is plural and since "Elohim" is sometimes translated "gods," should Genesis 1:1 be translated this way: "In the beginning **Gods** created the heavens and the earth"? How many true Gods are there (Mark 12:29-30; 1 Corinthians 8:5-6; Deuteronomy 4:39; Isaiah 44:6-8; 45:5-6)? Did three Gods create the universe? _____ There is only one ONE GOD, and there is only ONE CREATOR, and it is correct and proper to translate "Elohim" as "God" in Genesis 1:1.

In Genesis 1:1 the verb "CREATED" is a SINGULAR verb, and it means "HE (singular) CREATED." Two answers may be given to the question, "Who created the heavens and the earth?"

1. **HE DID** (singular) because the verb means "**HE CREATED**." The verb does **not** mean "**THEY CREATED**."

2. **GOD DID** (plural) because the word ELOHIM is a plural word!

So, there is a sense in which God the Creator is singular. There is only one God and He is the Creator. There is no other God. It is also true that there is a sense in which He is plural. This brings us to our next point:

2. God is a plural unity.

Deuteronomy 6:4 says: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD [singular] our God [ELOHIM-plural] is one Lord." Because our God is ONE LORD, we can love Him with ALL our heart (Deuteronomy 6:5). If there were two Gods, then our love would be divided between the two of them and each one would not get our full devotion. If there were three GODS, then our love would be divided between the three and our love would be even more diluted. God is ONE and He deserves and demands our complete, undivided love and devotion.

The Hebrew word "**one**" found in Deuteronomy 6:4 is a word that can be used to describe a plural (composite) unity (a unity made up of more than one component). This is easily illustrated in Genesis 2:24 where the same word "one" is found: "Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother and shall cleave unto his wife and they shall be **one** flesh." Here we have a plural unity. It is a ONENESS made up of two persons--a husband and a wife. They (plural) shall be **one** (singular) flesh. The two are one.

Another example of a plural unity is found in Genesis 11:5--"Behold, the people is **one**." The people (plural) at Babel were united together as ONE. It was a UNITY, but it was made up of many people (a plural unity).

Just as Genesis 11:5 speaks of a plural unity (many people being ONE), and just as Genesis 2:24 speaks of a plural unity (two people being ONE), so also Deuteronomy 6:4 describes God who is a PLURAL UNITY. Later we will learn that this plural unity is actually a TRI-UNITY.

3. Plural pronouns are used to describe the one God.

God is first described by plural pronouns in Genesis 1:26--"And God (Elohim) said, let **US** make man in **OUR** image, after **OUR** likeness" (Genesis 1:26 and compare verse 27 where singular pronouns are used: "God created man in **HIS** own image...etc.").

Verse 26: God said, "Let US make man in OUR image" (plural).

Verse 27: God created man in HIS image (singular).

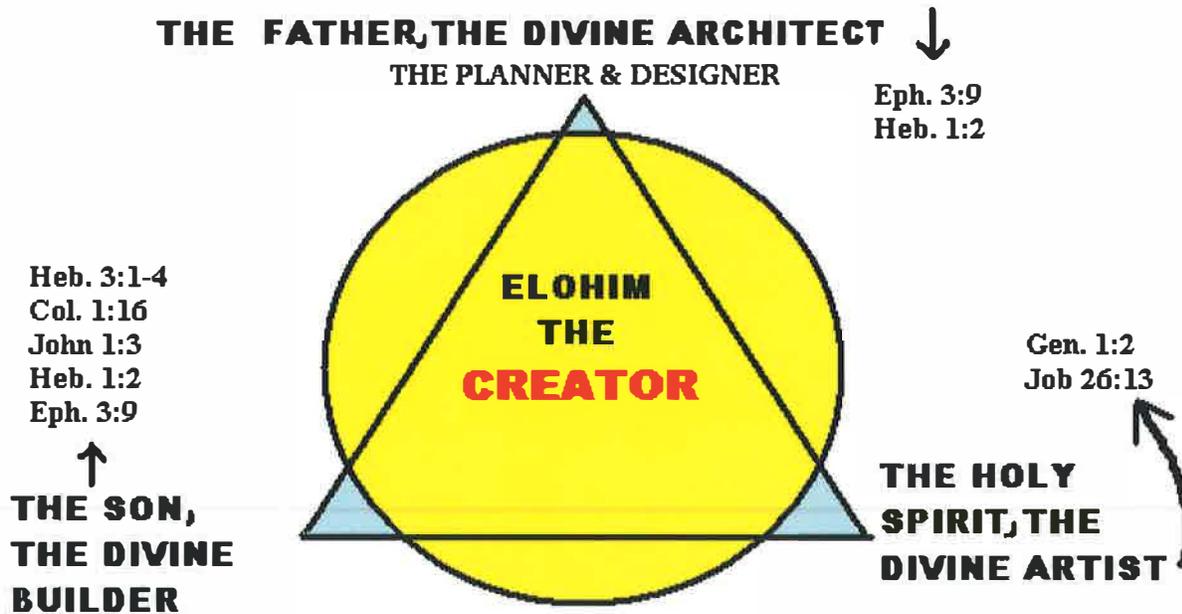
When God said, "Let US make man in OUR image" to whom was He referring? We would expect God to say, "I will make man in My image." Why the plural pronouns? If a person says, "WE are doing something," this indicates that the person is not acting alone, but that one or more other people are acting with him. When God made man, who was acting with Him? Who made man with Him? In whose image was man made? Was man made in God's image and someone else's image? Why was a plural pronoun used?

It is important to remember that it was God and no one else who made man. Only God can create. Only God can make man. There is only one God and one Creator, and He alone is responsible for man's origin. It was in God's image and God's image alone that man was made.

Some have attempted to explain that the "us" in "Let **us** make man," refers to God and the angels who helped Him in the creation of man. However, the Bible never teaches that angels had a part in the creation of man. They were present as witnesses, and they rejoiced in God's work of creation (see Job 38:7 where "the morning stars" and the "sons of God" refer to angels), but they never participated in man's creation. Only God can create and God alone created man. The "us" must refer to God, but if God is singular, how can He be plural? Once again we see that the Old Testament hints at the fact that God is, in some sense, **both** singular and plural.

As we study the doctrine of creation as it is unfolded in progressive revelation, we discover that there are three Persons who all participated in creation. This fact is illustrated below:

The Work of the Triune God in Creation

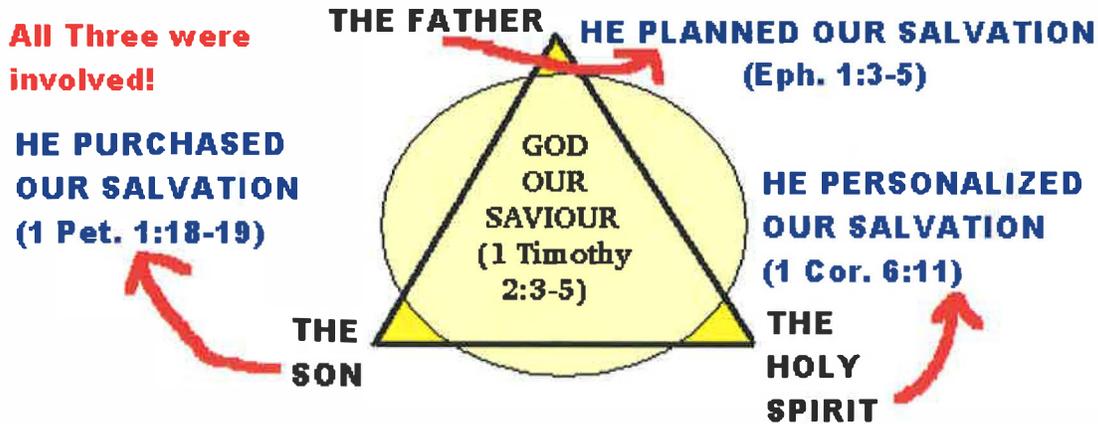


Not only was the TRIUNE GOD involved in the work of CREATION, but the TRIUNE GOD was also involved in the work of the NEW CREATION (2 Corinthians 5:17), that is, the work of SALVATION. God could have accurately said, "Let us SAVE man and renew Him after our image."

The Work of the Triune God in Salvation

1. THE FATHER	He planned our salvation (Rom. 8:28-31). He sent His Son (1 John 4:9-10). He gave His Son (John 3:16; Rom.8:32).
2. THE SON	He did the actual WORK of salvation (John 17:4;19:30). He was the Great Saviour (Titus 2:13-14). He died to provide salvation (1 Tim. 2:6).
3. THE HOLY SPIRIT	He gives the saved person a NEW LIFE (2 Cor. 3:6). He gives the saved person a NEW BIRTH (John 3:5; Tit. 3:5). He garnishes and makes the sinner beautiful by placing him IN CHRIST (2 Cor. 5:17), and thus He provides him with the beautiful garments of redemption, sanctification and justification (1 Cor. 6:11, and see 1 Cor. 1:30).

The Work of the Triune God in the New Creation



The second Old Testament example of plural pronouns being used of God is Genesis 3:22, "And the LORD God said, Behold, the man is become as **ONE OF US**." Compare Genesis 3:4, "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods [or better translated, "ye shall be as God (Elohim)"]."

The third example is found in Genesis 11:7-8, "Go to, **LET US** (plural) go down, and there confound their language...So the LORD (singular) scattered them." God, and God alone, was the One who confounded their language and scattered the people. God, who is a plural unity, did this.

The fourth example of plural pronouns being used of God is found in Isaiah 6:8, "Also I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall **I** (singular) send, and who will go for **us** (plural)? Then said I, here am I, send me." The God (Elohim) who commissioned and sent Isaiah, is a plural unity.

4. A Threefold Ascription of God's Holiness

In the same passage where God describes Himself by using a plural pronoun ("Who will go for **us**?"--Isaiah 6:8), we have a threefold declaration of God's holiness: "And one cried unto another, and said, **HOLY, HOLY, HOLY** is the LORD of hosts: the whole earth is full of His glory" (Isaiah 6:3). Is this mere repetition for emphasis, or is there an intimation here of what we learn elsewhere in Scripture, namely that 1) **God the Father is Holy** (John 17:11); 2) **God the Son is Holy** (Heb. 7:26 and compare Luke 1:35); 3) **God the Holy Spirit is Holy** (as His very Name declares)? John 12:37-41 refers to the Isaiah 6 passage and John makes it clear that the glory that Isaiah saw was the glory of Jesus Christ (verse 41). The King which Isaiah saw high and lifted up (Isaiah 6:1,5) was none other than the pre-incarnate Christ.

5. The Old Testament makes a Distinction Between the Divine Persons

The Old Testament, while strongly teaching that there is only ONE GOD, also teaches that there is more than one Divine Person, and these Persons are mentioned often. Here are some examples:

In the creation account, **God** (Elohim) is repeatedly mentioned as the Creator who spoke and "it was so" (Genesis 1:3,6,9,11,14,20,24, etc.). In Genesis 1:2 the **Spirit of God** is mentioned as being actively involved in creation: "The Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters." In the New Testament we learn that it was through **Jesus Christ** that all things were created (John 1:3; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2; Eph. 3:9).

The Old Testament clearly teaches that the Messiah is no one less than God. In Isaiah 9:6 He is called "the MIGHTY GOD." In Isaiah 7:14 He is called "Emmanuel," meaning GOD WITH US. In Micah 5:2 He is referred to as the Eternal One who has been from everlasting. In Jeremiah 23:6 He is called JEHOVAH OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS. Even though He is identified with God in such passages, there are other passages in which He is distinguished from God and clearly presented as a separate Person. One familiar place where this occurs is Isaiah chapter 53. "Yet we did esteem Him (the Messiah, God the Son) smitten by God (God the Father) and afflicted...the LORD (God the Father) hath laid on Him (the Messiah, God the Son) the iniquities of us all...Yet it pleased the LORD (God the Father) to bruise Him (the Messiah, God the Son), etc." (Isaiah 53:4,6,10). Compare 2 Corinthians 5:21.

The ANGEL OF THE LORD appears frequently in the Old Testament. In several passages the Angel of the LORD is identified as God or as Jehovah, the One true God. However, in some of these same passages the Angel of the LORD is seen as distinct from God. How can He be both God and yet distinct from God? We face the same question in the New Testament: How can Jesus Christ be God and yet distinct from God? How can Jesus Christ be "with God" and at the same time be identified as God (see John 1:1)? Only when we understand the TRI-UNITY of God can these questions be satisfactorily answered. For a detailed study of the ANGEL OF THE LORD see our study on [The Deity of Christ](#).

In Psalm 45:6-7 the Messiah is addressed as "God" ["Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever"] but this same passage speaks about Messiah's God ["Therefore God, thy God, hath anointed Thee (the Messiah)"]. Compare also Hebrews 1:8 where God makes it very clear that in Psalm 45:6-7 God the Father was speaking to God the Son. Psalm 45:6-7 is another passage where the Messiah is identified as God but also is presented as being distinct from God. There is only ONE GOD, but there is a distinction of PERSONS.

Psalm 110:1--"The LORD said unto my Lord." David wrote this Psalm. He was saying, "The LORD (Jehovah) said unto my Lord (Master)." David's Lord and Master was none other than God, and yet in some way He was also distinct from Jehovah. In this passage, just as we saw in Psalm 45:6-7, we have God speaking to God! Compare Matthew 22:41-46 where Jesus asked how the Messiah could be both David's son and David's Lord. Romans 1:3-4 answers the question. In His humanity He was David's Son because He came from the line of David. In His deity He was David's Lord because He was the Son of God.

In Psalm 2:7 and in Proverbs 30:4 the Old Testament suggests that God has a Son, and these (God and His Son) are described as two separate Persons.

Isaiah 48:16 suggests that there are three Persons: "And now the LORD GOD, and His Spirit, hath sent Me." So we have 1) the LORD GOD, 2) His Spirit, 3) the One who was sent (the Messiah).

Isaiah 61:1 also presents these same three Persons: "The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me (the Messiah); because the LORD hath anointed Me (the Messiah) to preach good tidings..." Again we have: 1) the LORD (Jehovah), 2) the Spirit of the Lord GOD, 3) Me (the Messiah). Note that Isaiah 61:1 was recognized by the Jews as referring to the Messiah (compare Luke 4:16-30 where the Jews were angry that Jesus applied this Messianic passage to Himself).

Isaiah 63:9-10 also presents these same divine Persons: "In all their affliction He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them: In His love and in His pity He redeemed them...but they rebelled and vexed His Holy Spirit." 1) The pronouns "He, His" refer to God, presumably to God the Father; 2) The angel of the LORD, who is also God, is distinguished from God, presumably referring to the preincarnate Christ; 3) His Holy Spirit obviously refers to the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament Also Teaches the Unity and Oneness of God.

The foundational truth of the unity of God is clearly taught in the New Testament. Perhaps the clearest New Testament declaration that there is only one God is from the lips of our Saviour Himself: "And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is **HEAR O ISRAEL; THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD**" (Mark 12:29). Many attempt to corrupt the doctrine of the Trinity (the triune nature of God) by falsely accusing God's people of teaching TRITHEISM, that there are THREE GODS. The Lord Jesus Christ made it very clear that there is ONE GOD and ONLY ONE GOD. The Bible nowhere teaches that there is more than one TRUE GOD. Both Testaments agree that there is only one God.

The New Testament elsewhere teaches that there is but ONE GOD:

"For there is ONE GOD" (1 Tim. 2:5).

"We know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one....there is but ONE GOD" (1 Cor. 8:4-6).

In the New Testament Three Persons Appear, and Each is Recognized as God.

1. One is called "**God the Father**" (John 6:27).

2. Another is called **God the Son**: "But unto the Son He saith, 'Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever'" (Hebrews 1:8). In this passage the Son is referred to as God. Other passages where the Son is clearly identified as God are John 1:1; Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; John 20:28 and 2 Peter 1:1. For a detailed study showing that Jesus Christ is God, see Dr. McClain's study on [The Deity of Christ](#).

3. The third Person is the **Holy Spirit** who is also identified as **God** (see Acts 5:3,5). Some teach that the Holy Spirit is just an impersonal force, or an impersonal "it." However, read John 16:13-14 and notice the abundance of personal pronouns ("He, Himself") which describe Him as a Person, not just an impersonal force or power. The fact that He is a Person is also seen in John 14:16 where the Holy Spirit is referred to as "another Comforter," another Comforter just like Jesus Christ. The word "another" means "another of the same kind." Just as Jesus was a blessed Person and a wonderful Comforter to the disciples, so also the Holy Spirit was also a blessed Person and would be a wonderful Comforter to the disciples.

The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God, but there is only ONE GOD. There is one God, but there are three Persons:

Matthew 3:16-17--"And **Jesus**, when He was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto Him, and He saw the **Spirit of God** descending like a dove, and lighting upon Him; and lo **a voice from heaven**, saying, This is **My beloved Son**, in whom I am well pleased." In this remarkable passage, God the Father is speaking audibly from heaven; the Son of God has just been baptized in water; the Spirit of God comes down upon Him as a dove. Three Persons are doing different things and are clearly distinguished from each other.

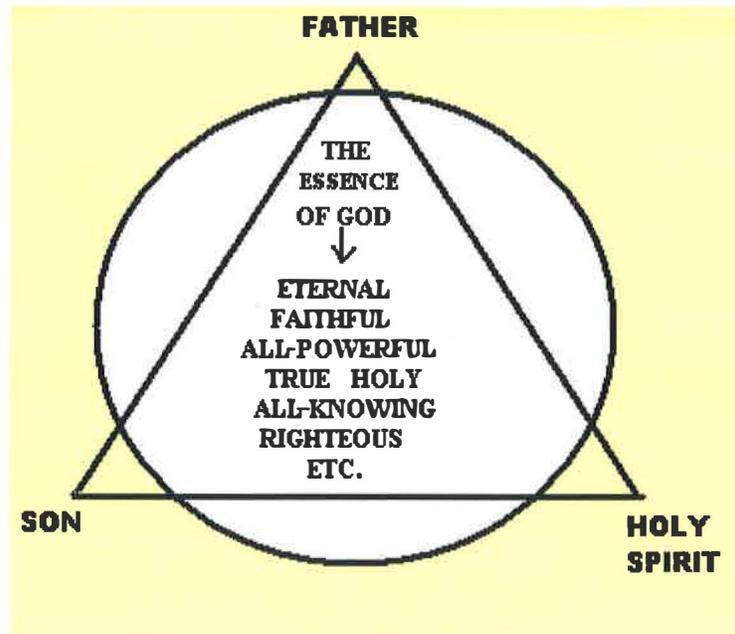
Note: Some argue that there is only one Person under three names. This view is known as modalism, and is sometimes referred to as "Jesus only." The passages cited above clearly refute this error. The Son is not the same as the Father. The Spirit is not the same as the Son. God the Father did not die for our sins on the cross. The Son of God did not come down on the Day of Pentecost. The Father did not appear as a dove on the day of Christ's baptism. The Son of God did not say, "This is My beloved Son."

These Three Persons are Set Forth as One God, Not as Three Gods.

Although each of the Three Persons are separately identified as God, the Bible never speaks of THREE GODS. This would be TRI-THEISM, and this doctrine is nowhere found in the Scriptures. Rather, there is ONE GOD, eternally existing in THREE PERSONS--the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Jesus did not say, "I and My Father are two separate Gods." Instead He said, "**I and My Father are ONE**" (John 10:30).

Theologian Benjamin B. Warfield stated the doctrine of the Trinity in this way: "The doctrine [is] that there is only one true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three eternal and co-equal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence." "Same in substance" means that each Person of the Godhead possesses all of the attributes of deity. "Distinct in subsistence" means that each Person of the Godhead is individual and separate and distinguishable from the other two, even though they are one in essence.



These Three Persons are Equal in Being, Power and Glory

These three Persons are associated together in a way that is consistent with equality, rather than with inequality:

Matthew 28:19--"Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

2 Corinthians 13:14--"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all."

Consider the following passages and look for all three Persons of the Godhead in each passage:

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

1 Peter 1:2-3

Ephesians 4:4-6

Ephesians 5:18-20

1 Corinthians 12:4-6

Jude 20-21

Notice that these Persons are mentioned apart from any fixed numerical order, indicating their equality.

There exist certain distinctions of priority and subordination among the three Persons, but these concern their respective functions. These distinctions involve what they DO, not what they ARE. There is submission in the Godhead, but not inequality and not inferiority. The Son submits to the Father; the Spirit submits to the Father and Son. The Son glorifies the Father (John 17:1); the Spirit glorifies the Son (John 16:14). In a godly marriage, the wife submits to the husband because this is God's order, but this does not mean that the wife is inferior to the husband. Spiritually they share in the riches of Christ equally and they are ONE IN HIM (Gal. 3:28). In the Trinity, the Father is generally referred to as the First Person of the Trinity, the Son as the Second Person of the Trinity and the Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity. However, this ranking in no way indicates superiority or inferiority. The members of the Godhead are co-equal in power and glory and share all of the attributes of deity.

Some understand the title, "Son of God" to mean that Christ is inferior to God or less than God. This is not the case at all. In John 5:18 we learn that the term "Son of God" meant EQUALITY WITH GOD. The Jewish people knew that the expression "Son of God" signified that Jesus was of the same nature as God. To the unsaved Jews, for a mere man to claim to be the "Son of God" was considered to be blasphemy of the worst kind. When Jesus claimed to be the Son of God, He was in essence saying, "I want you to know that I am God!"

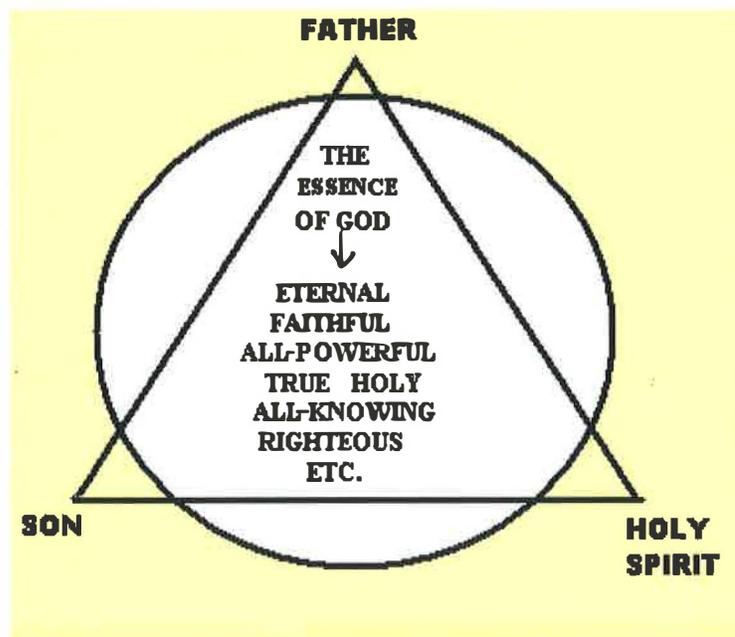
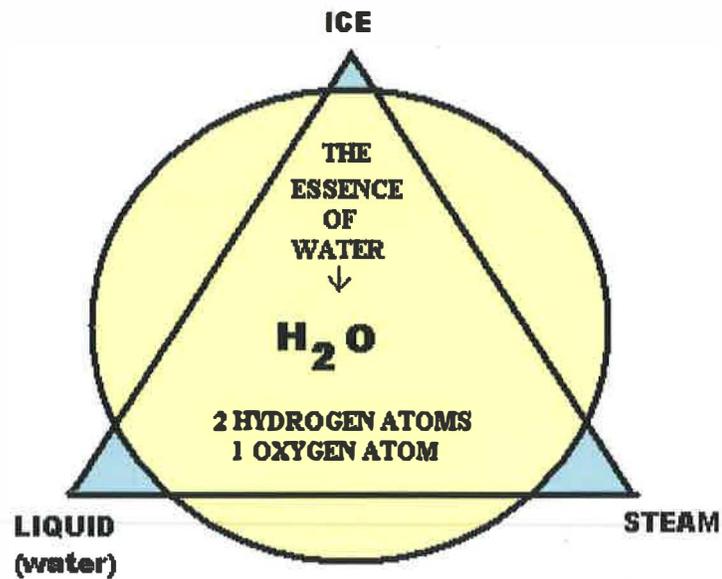
Illustrations of the Trinity

The following is an analogy to help you understand the idea of the Trinity, although we recognize that any illustration is inadequate to explain the true nature of God and is inherently faulty:

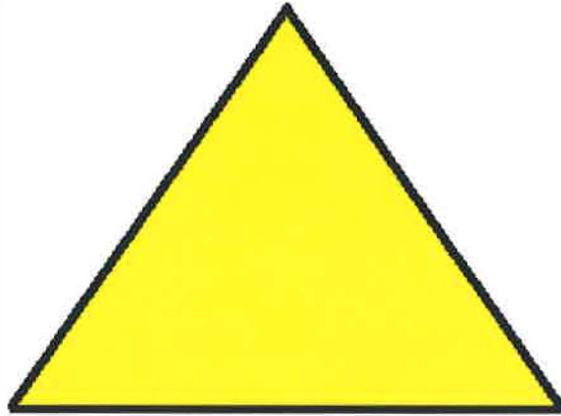
WATER appears in three different forms: **1. ICE 2. LIQUID 3. STEAM.** Each of these forms is WATER and is made up of the same SUBSTANCE (H₂O). Likewise, God is in three different PERSONS (1. Father; 2. Son; 3. Holy Spirit), but each of these PERSONS is GOD, and each is made up of the same substance or ESSENCE. God's essence is everything that God is!

God's Essence		
God is...		
All-Powerful	All-Knowing	Wise
Everywhere Present	Unchangeable	Faithful
True	Eternal	Love
Holy	Righteous	Sovereign
and He is much more!		

GOD is MUCH MORE than ALL OF these qualities or attributes!



Another illustration of the Trinity that may be helpful (and which has already been used in the above diagrams) is that of an EQUILATERAL TRIANGLE.



The undivided area suggests unity. The three sides are distinct parts surrounding unity. Each side is distinct from the others and yet the sides are equal. Each side faces the whole of the enclosed area, just as each Person of the Trinity is wholly God and possesses all of the attributes of God. You may approach on three distinct sides, yet you come to the same triangle.

How Can We Understand the Trinity?

We can't! How can a finite person understand an infinite God? Our responsibility is to believe what God has said about Himself, even if we do not fully understand what God has revealed about Himself. There are many doctrines that we are responsible to believe even though we may not fully understand them. With childlike faith, we can bow before the authority of God's revealed Word and take Him at His Word:

At that time Jesus answered and said, I thank Thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because Thou hast hid these things from the wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes.

Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in Thy sight.

All things are delivered unto Me of My Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal Him. (Matthew 11:25-27).

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