## The Nature of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity states that there is only one God, who exists in three Persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let us investigate this important, but highly problematic teaching.

### А. Biblical Analysis

**1. Testimony of the Old Testament**

**а. God’s “Oneness”**

One of the chief characteristics of Old Testament faith, which distinguishes it from other ancient religions, is the uncompromising conviction that there is only one God. God’s Old Testament people are famous for their article of faith called the *Shema*: “Hear, O Israel! Yahweh is our God, Yahweh is one!” (Deut 6:4), or, in Hebrew: שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יהוה אְֶלֹהֵיווּ יהוה אֶחָד. In translating this verse, it is important to note that the word אֶחָד (*ehad*) is a simple numeral, indicating the number “one.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Therefore, the sometimes-encountered idea of a “unity” implied by this term is not accurate.

Nonetheless, since the numeral אֶחָד (*ehad*) can also mean “only,” several variants for translation are possible:[[2]](#footnote-2)

Hear O Israel! Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one.

*The “oneness” of Yahweh is stressed. He is one Being.*

Hear O Israel! Yahweh our God is one Yahweh.[[3]](#footnote-3)

*The only God worthy of the name “Yahweh” is the God of Israel.*

Hear O Israel! Our God is Yahweh, Yahweh alone!

*Israel is called to faithfulness to Yahweh their God.*

Listen to Yahweh, O Israel! Yahweh our God is Unique.

*Yahweh’s uniqueness is emphasized.*

The fourth variant is unlikely, since the Hebrew expression, “Hear, O Israel” (or a similar expression), is usually set off separately from the main part of the sentence.[[4]](#footnote-4) The third variant is supported by the following context, which exhorts Israel to whole-hearted dedication to Yahweh. The second option is supported by other Old Testament texts (including some in the book of Deuteronomy) that stress God’s worthiness of devotion and trust (see Deut 4:35-39; 32:39). The first option is the most straightforward translation, following the Hebrew word order. It also draws support from the Deuteronomy verses just listed.

Besides the *Shema*, we see references earlier in the Torah to Yahweh’s oneness. In the beginning, the one God created the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1). Abraham called Him “the Judge of all the earth” (Gen 18:25). The descendants of Abraham also held to the monotheistic faith of their father. Jacob, for example, commanded his household, “Put away the foreign gods which are among you” (Gen 35:2).

The Psalms join the Torah in testifying to Yahweh’s oneness:

- That they may know that You alone, whose name is Yahweh, are the Most High over all the earth (Ps 83:18).

- For who is God, but Yahweh? And who is a rock, except our God (Ps 18:31).

Others among God’s people also recognized this truth. Hannah declared, “There is no one holy like Yahweh, indeed, there is no one besides You” (1 Sam 2:2). David affirmed, “O Yahweh, there is none like You, nor is there any God besides You (1 Chr 17:20). Solomon claimed, “O Yahweh, the God of Israel, there is no God like You in heaven above or on earth beneath” (1 Kin 8:23). According to Hezekiah: “O Yahweh, the God of Israel, who are enthroned {above} the cherubim, You are the God, You alone, of all the kingdoms of the earth. You have made heaven and earth” (2 Kin 19:15). Even the Gentile Naaman acknowledged, “Behold now, I know that there is no God in all the earth, but in Israel” (2 Kin 5:15).

In connection with the battle against polytheism in Israel, much is said in Isaiah’s prophecy about Yahweh’s oneness. Israel is God’s witness, that “before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me” (Isa 43:10). Furthermore, “I am God, and there is no other; {I am} God, and there is no one like Me” (Isa 46:9), and, “I am the first and I am the last, and there is no God besides Me…. And you are My witnesses. Is there any God besides Me, or is there any {other} Rock? I know of none” (Isa 44:6-8). Furthermore, the Lord declares through Isaiah:

For thus says Yahweh, who created the heavens (He is the God who formed the earth and made it, He established it {and} did not create it a waste place, {but} formed it to be inhabited), “I am Yahweh, and there is none else” (Isa 45:18; сf. Neh 9:6).

The Lord said that as a result of the restoration of Israel after the exile, all peoples would know that “there is no one besides Me. I am Yahweh, and there is no other” (Isa 45:5-6, сf. 14). Consequently, He summons all peoples to turn to Him: “Turn to Me and be saved, all the ends of the earth; for I am God, and there is no other” (Isa 45:22). Not Isaiah alone, but Jeremiah also declares that God is one: “Yahweh is the true God; He is the living God and the everlasting King” (Jer 10:10).

Along with direct statements about Yahweh’s oneness, the Old Testament abounds with rebukes for idolatry. It will be adequate to simply refer the reader to a small sample of such passages, which are spread throughout the Old Testament: Ps 81:9; 106:19-20; 28-29; Isa 42:17; 44:9-20; 57:3-13; Mal 2:11-12.

In light of the clear Old Testament teaching on Yahweh’s oneness, we must conclude that passages such as Deuteronomy 10:17, Psalm 77:13, and other similar text do not affirm the existence of other gods: “For Yahweh your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords” (Deut 10:17); “Your way, O God, is holy; What god is great like our God?” (Ps 77:13). These passages are written from the perspective of pagan nations who believe in other gods. These texts claim that the God of Israel is greater than the gods of other nations, although they give no recognition of their actual existence.

However, some theologians feel that ancient Israel embraced not monotheism, but so-called “henotheism.” According to this view, Israel acknowledged that there are many gods, but worshiped only their “patron god,” that is, Yahweh. Although we recognize that some Israelites, who were weak in faith, did worship idols, it is clear from the evidence presented that the official position of God’s people from the beginning was an uncompromising monotheism.

The claim that Israel was henotheistic derives from the liberal view that Israel “evolved” into a monotheistic faith, a view allegedly supported by the JEDP theory. In volume 2 of this series (chapters 1 and 13), we refute this view.

**b. God’s “Threeness”**

The following texts speak of a plurality in Yahweh. First, some indirect allusions may be indicated in the books of Proverbs and Job, where the wisdom of God is given divine attributes (Prov 1:20-23; 8:1-9:6; Job 28). Additionally, sometimes it seems that the “power” of the Lord operates separately from Him (Ps 147:4; Isa 55:10-11). Are these possibly hints at a plurality in God?[[5]](#footnote-5) However, many think that ascribing to God’s wisdom or Word divine attributes is simply an employment of figurative speech, namely personification.[[6]](#footnote-6)

We do note that Messiah is assigned divine attributes. According to Isaiah 9:6, Messiah is the “Mighty God,” and the “Eternal Father.” In Ps 110:1, Messiah is David’s “Lord.” Jeremiah 23:6 speaks of Messiah as “Yahweh our righteousness.” In Psalm 2:7, Messiah is the Son of God. We can confidently conclude that such passages support the divinity of Messiah.[[7]](#footnote-7)

The Old Testament not infrequently speaks of God’s Spirit in distinction from God Himself, creating the impression that He is a separate Person in the Godhead.[[8]](#footnote-8) Note the following examples:

- Isa 48:16 – “And now the Lord Yahweh has sent Me, and His Spirit.”

- Gen 1:2 – “The Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.”

- Ps 103:30 – “You send forth Your Spirit, they are created.”

- Ezek 37:14 – “I will put My Spirit within you.”

- Isa 63:10 – “But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

However, we must consider that people may speak of parts of their body in a way similar to how the biblical text here speaks about the Spirit. A person may say “my hand,” while God may say “My Spirit.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

It is well known that the common Hebrew terms for God in the Old Testament, namely אְֶלֹהִים (*elohim*) and אְַדֹנַי (*adonai*), stand in the plural. The plural is also present in the term בּוֹרְאֶיךָ, “Maker” in Ecclesiastes 12:1,[[11]](#footnote-11) and in other examples.[[12]](#footnote-12) The common assumption is that this phenomenon indicates plurality in God.

Supporting this view is the fact that in the Hebrew language, a plural is sometimes used of a singular object that consists of multiple parts or changes its physical appearance. For example, the word “sky,” which changes its appearance over time, is always in the plural in Hebrew. If this observation applies to the words אְֶלֹהִים (*elohim*) and אְַדֹנַי (*adonai*), we may have evidence for a plurality of Persons in the Godhead.[[13]](#footnote-13)

At the same time, one must take into consideration another usage of the Hebrew plural – the “plural of majesty.” The Hebrew plural can express honor for a highly respected figure. For example, in Isaiah 19:4 the word אְַדֹנִים (*adonim*), “master,” stands in the plural, yet it refers to one individual since the accompanying adjectiveקָשֶׁה (“cruel”) is in the singular. Likewise, in 1 Kings 1:43 David is called אְַדֹנֵינוּ (“our lords”), a title given to Joseph as well in Genesis 42:30.[[14]](#footnote-14) Finally, in 2 Chronicles 18:16 the word אְַדֹנִים (*adonim*) is translated by the singular “master.” In addition, Heidt observes, “The plural form as a designation for a single divinity had long become common in Semitic before the age of biblical literature, as witnessed by inscriptions from Boghazkoi, Tell-el-Amarna and Phoenicia.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

The word אְֶלֹהִים (*elohim*) may refer to other singular people or objects as well. In Exodus chapter 32, the golden calf is designated אְֶלֹהִים (*elohim*). Pagan gods mentioned individually are sometimes called אְֶלֹהִים (*elohim*) (see Judg 8:33; 11:24; 16:23; 2 Kin 1:2; 19:37). Sometime Messiah is אְֶלֹהִים (*elohim*)(Ps 45:7; Zech 14:5), yet Messiah, of course, is an individual person. One must also note that אְֶלֹהִים (*elohim*) is usually accompanied by an adjective in the singular, indicating that an individual may be in view. For example, in Psalm 7:9 we read, צַדִיק אְֶלֹהִים, “righteous God.”[[16]](#footnote-16)

Among the most convincing indications of the Trinitarian doctrine in the Old Testament is the use of plural pronouns in reference to Yahweh. In Genesis 1:26, we read, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness.’” Heidt expresses doubt that God is speaking here with angels, since there is no previous mention of angels in this context.[[17]](#footnote-17) Genesis 3:22 reads, “Then Yahweh God said, ‘Behold, the man has become like one of Us.’” We observe this phenomenon again in Genesis 11:6-7: “Yahweh said… Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language,” and in Isaiah 6:8, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?”[[18]](#footnote-18)

However, other examples exist of using a plural pronoun to refer to an individual. This can again be a case of the “plural of majesty,” where a respected figure is addressed in the plural or refers to himself in such a way. The following words were addressed to an individual or by an individual: “This {was} the dream; now we will tell its interpretation before the king” (Dan 2:36); “The document which you sent to us has been translated and read before me” (Ezra 4:18); and, “We (i.e., King Artaxerxes) also inform you…” (Ezra 7:24).[[19]](#footnote-19) Others advance the less convincing argument that the use of the plural for God simply reflects His “self- deliberation.”[[20]](#footnote-20)

In defense of a plurality in God, some cite Genesis 19:24: “Then Yahweh rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from Yahweh out of heaven.” God refers to Himself in a similar way in Genesis 9:16: “When the bow is in the cloud, then I will look upon it, to remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.” The following text is especially striking in this regard:

“For behold, I will wave My hand over them so that they will be plunder for their slaves. Then you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent Me. Sing for joy and be glad, O daughter of Zion; for behold I am coming and I will dwell in your midst,” declares Yahweh. “Many nations will join themselves to Yahweh in that day and will become My people. Then I will dwell in your midst, and you will know that Yahweh of hosts has sent Me to you. Yahweh will possess Judah as His portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

Furthermore, Genesis 1:27 states, “God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.” Some feel that God’s image includes plurality, since He created in His image two genders: male and female.

The “Angel of the Lord” is a curious figure in the biblical narrative. Since several divine attributes are ascribed to the Angel of the Lord, some conclude that he is not a common angel, but God Himself in the guise of an angel. We would not expect God to completely abandon heaven to come as an angel, but He could come in one of His Persons, which would indicate a plurality in the Godhead.[[22]](#footnote-22) Others see in the thrice repeated refrain of the seraphim, “Holy, holy, holy,” a reference to God’s “threeness” (Isa 6:3). More likely, though, repetition is simply used here for emphasis.

In conclusion, we affirm that, although the Old Testament does indeed contain some shadowy hints of the Trinity’s existence, this truth is not clearly revealed in it. The reason for this is plain. At that time, God’s people were surrounded by polytheistic nations. Therefore, it was imperative for Yahweh to emphasize the truth of His oneness. Bray adds the thought that since making distinctions in the Trinity is most significant in regard to a future redemption in Christ, the Old Testament did not need to reveal the Trinity at that time.[[23]](#footnote-23) Nonetheless, the Lord did leave some suggestions of plurality, which received greater light in the New Testament.

**2. Testimony of the New Testament**

**а. God’s “Oneness”**

The New Testament joins the Old Testament in affirming God’s oneness. Note the following key passages:

- Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is one Lord (Мк 12:29).

- There is no God but one (1 Cor 8:4).

- There is one God (1 Tim 2:5).

- Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God… (1 Tim 1:17).

- You believe that God is one. You do well (Jam 2:19).

As expected, the New Testament repeats the Old Testament warning about idolatry: “Do not be idolaters… flee from idolatry” (1 Cor 10:7, 14). When Paul observed the idols in Athens, “his spirit was being provoked within him” (Acts 17:16). He himself refused to receive worship from people (Acts 14:11-15), as did the apostle Peter (Acts 10:25-26). So then, in spite of the New Testament’s emphasis on the Trinity, it nonetheless insists on the existence of only one God.

The New Testament Greek word referring to the Lord’s oneness is the common numeral εἷς (*heis*), or “one.” Therefore, the point we made earlier about not translating אֶחָד (*ehad*), as “unity,” applies to εἷς (*heis*) as well. The New Testament, of course, teaches the triune God, but the word εἷς (*heis*) does not carry that connotation.

**b. God’s “Threeness”**

Along with affirming God’s oneness, the New Testament writers reveal that He is “Three in One.” The New Testament clearly teaches that each Person of the Trinity is God. First, God the Father is God. Jesus said, “It is My Father who glorifies Me, of whom you say, ‘He is our God’” (Jn 8:54). Paul wrote, “Yet for us there is {but} one God, the Father” (1 Cor 8:6).

Scripture speaks of the Son as God. John writes of Him, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (Jn 1:1-2). Paul affirms, “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9).

The Holy Spirit is also God. To lie to the Spirit is to lie to God (Acts 5:3-4). He is called “the Lord” (2 Cor 3:17). To be the “temple of the Holy Spirit” is to be the “temple of God” (1 Cor 3:16-17). The following Scripture texts mention the three Persons of the Trinity together in one context: Matt 3:16-17; Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13; 1 Cor 12:4-6; Eph 4:4-6; 1 Pet 1:2; Jude 20-21; Rom 15:16.[[24]](#footnote-24)

However, the titles “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” are not simply three names for the one God. They are distinct Persons in the Godhead, listed separately from one another. Yet, the intrinsic unity between them is shown in Matthew 28:19, where these three names are accompanied by the singular noun “name”: “…in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”

Maybe the most remarkable instance of the Trinity’s manifestation was during Jesus’ water baptism. At that time, the Holy Spirit descended on Him and the Father spoke from heaven. Thus, we see all three Persons of the Trinity at the same time acting independently of one another.

In our search for Scriptural proofs of the Trinity, we must address 1 John 5:7, which appears to state the doctrine directly. The King James Version reads, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” This verse, though, is found only a small number of very late Greek manuscripts, the earliest being from the tenth century.[[25]](#footnote-25) Sometimes, this verse in not even found in the body of the text in these manuscripts, but added later in the margin. All early New Testament documents lack this verse.

Additionally, of all the ancient translations of the New Testament, this verse is found only in the Latin Vulgate. It is felt that it was first introduced there, then incorporated into later Greek manuscripts.[[26]](#footnote-26) The fact that Eastern Church Fathers do not refer to it confirms that it originated in the Western, Latin Church.

Even though in Scripture the word “Trinity” is absent, it nonetheless expresses well the biblical truth that one God exists in three Persons. Alister McGrath writes, “The doctrine of the Trinity can be regarded as the outcome of a process of sustained and critical reflection on the pattern of divine activity revealed in Scripture, and continued in Christian experience…. Scripture bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a trinitarian manner.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

**3. Conclusions**

The Bible presents us with a picture of a triune God. It clearly teaches the existence of one God who exists in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Therefore, on the one hand, we must not reject the deity of each Member of the Trinity, but on the other hand, we must not propose three Gods. The Trinitarian formula, i.e., one God in three equal Persons, appropriately expresses the biblical teaching.

However, the Bible does not go into great depth in describing the relationship between the Persons of the Godhead. Therefore, in our next section, we will join the discussion about this question that has been ongoing throughout Church history.

### B. Theological Analysis

**1. The Relationship between the Persons**

**а. The Relationship between the Father and the Son**

Throughout the New Testament, Jesus Christ is known as the Son of God. In some sense, God the Father is the “God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 1:3). At the same time, as we will demonstrate in detail in the following chapter, Jesus Christ Himself is God in the full sense of the word.

The New Testament unmistakably teaches that the Son is equal to the Father in quality and dignity. He possesses “equality with God” (Phil 2:6), and in Him “all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9). Christ said of Himself, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30), and called Himself the “I Am” (Jn 8:58), referring to the name Yahweh, which God revealed to Moses (Ex 3:14-15).

Furthermore, in Mark 14:36 Jesus addressed God as “Abba“ (Mk 14:36), an Aramaic expression of intimacy between a father and his child. We might say, “Daddy.” Jews of that time employed that expression when addressing rabbis, but not God. Jesus thereby showed that He possesses a deep and intimate relationship with the Father.

We must also note that Jesus claimed to possess what the Father possessed: “All things that the Father has are Mine” (Jn 16:15; сf. Jn 17:10). God “has given all things into His (i.e., the Son’s) hand” (Jn 3:35). Along with the Father, Christ is the source of eternal life (Jn 17:3). He also claimed to have enjoyed the glory of God before the world was created and was sent by the Father into the world (Jn 17:1, 5). He knows the Father better than anyone and imparts special revelation from Him: “No one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal {Him}” (Matt 11:27). Jesus is united with the Father to the degree that He can assert, “You, Father, {are} in Me and I in You” (Jn 17:21).

On the other hand, Scripture contains not a few indications of Jesus’ dependence on the Father.[[28]](#footnote-28) The Father is the “God” of Christ (Jn 20;17; 1 Pet 1:3; Mk 15:34; Rev 3:12). Jesus considered Himself God the Father’s representative on earth (Jn 10:36; 5:37; 8:17-18; 14:1, 6, 9). He submits to the Father (Jn 13:16; 8:42; 5:19; Lk 22:41-42), even after His ascension and exaltation (1 Cor 11:3; 1 Cor 15:27-28). The Father prepares a kingdom for the Son (Matt 20:20-23). Jesus came to bring revelation from the Father (Jn 7:16) and to do His will (Jn 6:38). Jesus prayed to the Father (Lk 6:12). The Father exalted the Son (Phil 2:9) and gave Him authority (Matt 28:18). Jesus acknowledged that the Father was “greater than” Himself (Jn 14:28). He receives life from Him (Jn 6:57).

In light of the convincing evidence for Christ’s deity, we must rule out the idea that the Son is inferior to the Father. The most plausible explanation for the Son’s dependence on the Father is that He voluntarily submits to the Father in order to accomplish the Father’s plan (see Phil 2:6-7). We also affirm that when Jesus speaks of His dependence on the Father, He is speaking from the perspective of His humanity. He is not only fully God, but also fully human.

Therefore, we conclude that as a human, the Son occupies a subordinate position in respect to the Father, even to the degree that He calls Him His God. Yet, we must always interpret this feature of Christ’s status in light of the biblical teaching of His full deity, considering the entire biblical portrait of Jesus Christ.

We must also examine the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son, that is, what relationship existed between them before the Son’s incarnation. Some theologians, beginning with Origen, appeal to the concept of an “eternal generation” of the Son. According to this view, the Son somehow is eternally generated by the Father without beginning, yet at the same time He remains fully God by nature. This concept is based, for the most part, on the title for Jesus in John’s writings – “only begotten.”

The expression “only begotten” translates the Greek term μονογενής (*mongenes*) and is ascribed to Jesus in Jn 1:14, 18; Jn 3:16, 18; and 1 Jn 4:9. Disagreement exists about the origin and meaning of this key term. Some consider it a derivative of the words μόνο (*mono*), or “only,” and γενής (*genes*) from the verb γεννάω (*gennao*), i.e., “give birth.” Others think that is derives from μόνο (*mono*) and γένος (*genos*), which means “genus, species.” Because of these variations, different translations are proposed for the term μονογενής (*моногэнэс*). First, it could mean, “only begotten” in the sense of a “birth” of the Son. Second, it could translate “special” or “unique” in the sense of “one of a kind.”

The first view is embraced by Eastern Orthodoxy, the reformer John Calvin, contemporary theologian R. C. Sproul, and others. They support their opinion by noting that the formula “only begotten” implies a birth.[[29]](#footnote-29) In addition, in John 1:18 Jesus is called “only begotten” just after believers are described as being “born of God” (1:13). They hold that this idea of “birth” carries over from verse 13 to verse 18. Therefore, both believers and Christ are born of God, yet in different senses.

The passage in 1 John 5:18 may also support this view: “We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him, and the evil one does not touch him.” It appears that Jesus is the one “born of God” who keeps the believer. The interpretation of this text, though, is complicated by the fact that some ancient manuscripts read “keeps himself,” which would mean that the believer is the one born of God. The first variant is supported by several weighty manuscripts, such as Codex Vaticanus (IV c.), Codex Alexandrinus (V c., in the margin), and the Vulgate and Coptic translations. Less weighty manuscripts support the variant “keeps himself.” However, the editors of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament text, who preferred the variant “keeps him” for their 27th edition, replaced it with “keeps himself” in the 28th edition.[[30]](#footnote-30)

Finally, the Nicene Creed, which is accepted by all Christian confessions, speaks of the Son being “born”: “I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages. God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made.” We must underscore here that the Nicene Creed insists on the truth that the Son was not created. The Early Church categorically rejected the idea that the Father created the Son, or that the Son had a beginning. Therefore, one must interpret the Nicene Creed as defending the “eternal generation” view of Origen.

What can be said in support of the rival position, that Jesus is not the “only begotten” Son of God, but the “unique, one of a kind” Son of God? We already mentioned that the term μονογενής (*monogenes*) can be understood in this way. Most contemporary interpreters take this position, especially in the Western Church. In addition, both in the Septuagint (Judg 11:34; *Tobit,* 3.15; 6.11, 15) and in the New Testament (Lk 7:12; 8:42; 9:38) the word μονογενής (*monogenes*) translates “only child” with emphasis on the idea of “only.” In Psalm 24:16 (Septuagint), no birth is in view at all, but μονογενής (*monogenes*) simply implies being alone.

We encounter an interesting example in Hebrews 11:17, where Isaac is called μονογενής (*monogenes*)*,* even though Abraham had another son. Isaac, then, is μονογενής (*monogenes*) not in the sense of being the only son of Abraham, but in being his favorite (unique) son.

Another feature supporting the “unique son” view is the observation that the second part of the compound word μονογενής (*monogenes*) has only one letter “ν”, which better corresponds to the word γένος (*genos*) than to the verb γεννάω (*gennao*). We recall that γένος (*genos*) means “genus, species,” while γεννάω(*gennao*) menas “give birth.” The presence of the single consonant “ν,” then, lends preference to the idea of uniqueness.[[31]](#footnote-31)

In conclusion, it is difficult to pin down a clear denotation for the term μονογενής (*monogenes*). Both theories have substantial support. At the same time, the “eternal generation” view could potentially lead to the heretical view that the Son either had a beginning (as Arius and the Jehovah’s Witnesses teach), or that He in some way is inferior to the Father. Therefore, those who join with Origen in embracing this view must be careful not to take it to this extreme.

**b. The Relationship between the Father and the Spirit**

How can one describe the relationship between the Father and the Holy Spirit? The Old Testament often refers to the Spirit as the “Spirit of God,” the “Spirit of the Lord,” or “My Spirit.” The first designation is found equally in both Testaments, while the second is more characteristic of the Old Testament. Any of these names reveal that the Holy Spirit represents the Father and accomplishes His work on earth.

The name “Holy Spirit” is more typical in the New Testament, and the name “Spirit of God” is sometimes equated with it. For example, in Isaiah 11:2 His name is the “Spirit of God,” while a quotation of that text in Luke 3:22 and 4:18 contains the name “Holy Spirit.” We observe the same occurrence when comparing Joel 2:28 with Acts 2:33. So then, the “Spirit of God” of the Old Testament is not merely some spiritual presence of the Father, but a separate Person of the Trinity – the Holy Spirit.

The New Testament provides even more details of the relationship of the Father and the Spirit. First, there exists a close relationship between them. 1 Corinthians 2:10 reveals, “The Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God.” Second, the Spirit submits to the Father to fulfill the latter’s plan. John 14:26 records that the Father “sends” the Spirit. At the same time, in accordance with the Trinitarian doctrine, we must acknowledge that the Spirit possesses deity equal to the Father and is Himself God.

John 15:26 states that the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father. A debate arose around this verse that contributed to a schism between the Western and Eastern Church that remains to this day.[[32]](#footnote-32) Let us examine the Eastern Orthodox position. John 14:26 declares that the Father sent the Spirit. John 3:16 relates that the Father sent the Son as well. In addition, in John 15:26 the Son sends the Spirit. Furthermore, as mentioned before, the Eastern Church accepts the doctrine of the “eternal generation” of the Son. In a similar way, it is thought that the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father.

In summary, according to the Eastern Church, the Father sends the Son and the Spirit, the Son also sends the Spirit, the Son is eternally generated by the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from Him. As in the case of the Son’s eternal generation, the procession of the Spirit is also eternal without beginning and in no way diminishes His divine nature or status.

In the Western Church, among the Roman Catholics, we encounter a different understanding. They acknowledge the Eastern view with one exception – the Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but also from the Son.[[33]](#footnote-33) They theorize a “double procession,” involving a single act by the Father and the Son.[[34]](#footnote-34)

The history of the Western view is as follows. At the Third Council of Toledo (589), the Western Church added to the Nicene Creed the so-called *Filioque*. This Latin word means “from the Son,” and its insertion asserts the double procession of the Spirit.[[35]](#footnote-35). The addition was made in reaction to the threat of Arianism, which denied the full deity of the Son and made Him a creation of the Father. Therefore, in order to enhance the status of the Son, the *Filioque* was added to the Nicene Creed. The Eastern Church, however, emphatically rejects the *Filioque*.[[36]](#footnote-36) The question was debated in the West for some time as well, and was fully endorsed only in the tenth century.

A third view goes as follows. Some contemporary Western theologians teach that the actions “proceed” and “be sent” are the same. Therefore, there is no “procession” of the Spirit. The Spirit is simply sent by the Father and the Son on mission. The “procession” does not concern the Spirit’s nature or essence, only His activity.

The Eastern Church defends their view by citing the Nicene Creed, which speaks of the Spirit’s procession only in regard to the Father. In addition, the idea of a double procession violates the Eastern conception of the “sole rule” of the Father. In Eastern thought, the Father serves as the “foundation” for the Trinity, since the Son is generated from Him and the Spirit proceeds from Him.

Also in support of the Eastern view is the use of the present tense in John 15:26 – the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father. In contrast, the idea of the Spirit being “sent” is in the future tense. Therefore, His procession differs from His mission.

The historian Phillip Schaff relates that the Eastern Church takes the issue of the Spirit’s procession very seriously. He writes, “The Eastern church regards the doctrine of the single procession as the corner-stone of orthodoxy, and the doctrine of the double procession as the mother of all heresies.”[[37]](#footnote-37)

McGrath attempts to compare the Eastern teaching on the Trinity with pronouncing words. He writes, “The Father pronounces his word; at the same time as he utters this word, he breathes out in order to make this word capable of being heard and received.”[[38]](#footnote-38) Thus McGrath associates the Son with a word, and the Spirit with breath.[[39]](#footnote-39)

The following arguments support the Western view. First, John 15:26 does not say that the Spirit proceeds *only* from the Father. One cannot exclude that He proceeds from the Son as well. Second, both the Father and the Son *send* the Spirit. If both send Him, He may well proceed from both. Third, the Spirit is both the “Spirit of the Father” (Matt 10:20) and the “Spirit of Christ” (1 Pet 1:11). Finally, after His resurrection, Jesus “breathed” the Holy Spirit on the disciples (Jn 20:22). This act demonstrated that the Spirit proceeds from Him as well.

All things considered, the evidence in favor of including the *Filioque* do not justify its insertion. It is possible that “proceed” and “send” are merely synonyms, but the bulk of the evidence appears to support the single procession of the Spirit.

**c. The Relationship between the Son and the Spirit**

Certain relationships exists between the Son and the Spirit as well. Several times in the New Testament, the Holy Spirit is called the “Spirit of Christ” (1 Pet 1:11), the “Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7), or the “Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil 1:19). This is not Jesus’ personal spirit, but the Holy Spirit, the Third Person of the Holy Trinity. In confirmation of that claim, we note that in Romans 8:9 the name “Spirit of Christ” is equated with the name “Spirit of God.”

In the role of the “Spirit of Christ,” the Holy Spirit serves as the representative of Jesus Christ on the earth. He testifies of Christ (Jn 15:26), glorifies Him (Jn 16:14), takes of His and discloses it to us (Jn 16:14), and was sent by Him (Jn 15:26). Scripture also teaches that the Holy Spirit directs the Church. Although Jesus is the head of the Church, in practice the Holy Spirit directs its activities as Christ’s representative. We see Him in action throughout the book of Acts (see Acts 13:2; 15:28; 5:3-4).

**2. Terminology**

Having investigated the general contours of the doctrine of the Trinity, we will attempt, as much as possible, to clarify this teaching. We must distinguish the three Persons from one another without dividing God into three “parts.” Each Member of the Trinity possesses not only “one-third” of God’s attributes, but rather all of them. Orthodox Metropolitan Illarion comments, “One Hypostasis is not one-third of the general nature, but rather contains the fullness of the Divine essence.”[[40]](#footnote-40) Similarly, Paul wrote about the Son, “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form”(Col 2:9). The Lutheran Mueller concurs, “Each Person in the Godhead is the entire God… each Person has the whole divine essence without division or multiplication.”[[41]](#footnote-41)

Another important concept in discussing the nature of the Trinity is “perichoresis,” meaning “interpenetration.” According to this principle, the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity is such that they somehow “penetrate” one another*,* or, in other words, are located “in” one another. This is seen in the teaching of Christ that “the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (Jn 10:38; 14:11), “All things that the Father has are Mine” (Jn 16:15), and “(the Spirit) will take of Mine and will disclose {it} to you” (Jn 16:14).[[42]](#footnote-42)

The Trinitarian relationships are also described by the term “general energy.” This means that all the Members of the triune God participate in all His works. For example, in Acts 2:24 we read that the Father raised Jesus from the dead, while in Romans 8:11, it was the Spirit who raised him. Furthermore, in John 2:19-21 Jesus claims that He will raise Himself. Therefore, the entire Trinity took part in that action[[43]](#footnote-43) and, presumably, in all God’s acts. According to the teaching of Gregory of Nyssa, “Divine action… always begins from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed in the Holy Spirit… the effect is not three actions but one.”[[44]](#footnote-44)

Related to the teaching of “general energy” is the concept of “appropriation.” According to this principle, although all Persons in the Trinity participate in all of God’s works and their combined contribution is considered a single act, nonetheless in each of God’s acts one Person is dominant. For example, the entire Trinity took part in creation (Father – Heb 1:2; Son – Jn 1:3; Spirit – Gen 1:2), yet we commonly consider the Father to be the initiator of the creative act. Additionally, in Hebrews 9:14 each Member of the triune God participated in redemption, yet the Son is the Savior of the world. Finally, the sanctification of the believer is a corporate work as well (see Gal 4:6; Tit 3:4-6; Eph 2:20-22; 2 Thes 2:13-14), but here the Spirit takes the leading role.

Finally, we encounter the concepts of the “essential” and “practical” Trinity. The first claims that all Persons in the Trinity possess the same, entire divine nature – they are equal in quality and dignity. The second concerns the function of each member – the Son and the Spirit voluntarily submit to the Father. Yet, the voluntary submission of the Son and Spirit in no way nullifies or minimizes their deity.

**3. Various Conceptions of the Trinity**

**а. Eastern View**

Along with differences in view about the Spirit’s procession, Eastern and Western Christianity propose different overall understandings of the nature of the triune God. This debate dates back to the time of the Council of Nicene.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The Council of Nicene, in refuting the Arian heresy, defined the relationship between the Father and Son with the term *homoousios*, that is, “having the same nature.” The Western Church was content with that definition, and some teachers in the East were as well, namely Athanasius and the Alexandrian school, since it emphasized the unity of the Godhead and the deity of Christ. However, some followers of Origen hesitated to accept it, fearing that might lead to dividing Yahweh’s nature into three parts or support the Monarchial heresy (see below).

The Cappadocians (Basil the Great, Gregory Nazianzen, and Gregory of Nyssa), the leading Eastern Trinitarian theologians, attempted to relieve the tensions this doctrine created by proposing the following formula. They used the term *ousia* to describe Yahweh’s nature or essence, i.e., that which is common among all Persons in the Trinity. Another term, *hypostasis*, refers to the separate Persons in the Godhead: Father, Son, and Spirit.[[46]](#footnote-46) Consequently, God is one essence, i.e., *ousia*, and three Persons, that is, *hypostases*.[[47]](#footnote-47) This formula is accepted to this day in Eastern circles.

In their theological treatment of the Trinitarian doctrine, the Cappadocians were guided by the dominant philosophical model of that day – Platonism. In this system, reality is perceived through the concepts of “universals” and “particulars.” A “particular” is a specific, physical entity. “Universals” are the representatives of each “class” of entities. For example, all books that exist in the physical world are particulars. Yet, the concept “book,” which arises in the mind, represents all actual books existing the physical world. This “ideal book,” though, does not exist in the world, but only in the mind. It is a universal. It represents all particulars (i.e. “books”), which belong to this class.

We have claimed that universals exist only in the mind. Plato theorized, though, that they exist as real entities in another dimension, which we contact through our minds. Aristotle differed from Plato in that he postulated that universals exist within the particulars themselves.

The Cappadocians, then, worked off this Platonic conception of particulars and universals. They understood the Trinity according to this model. Just as “humans” are particulars and “humanity” or “human nature” is a universal, so it is with the Godhead. There are three hypostases (i.e., particulars), that is, Persons in the Trinity, and one *ousia* (i.e., universal), which is God’s nature or essence.[[48]](#footnote-48) John of Damascus expresses it this way:

For we are never told that the Godhead is the Father alone, or the Son alone, or the Holy Spirit alone. For “Godhead” implies “nature,” while “Father” implies subsistence just as “Humanity” implies nature, and “Peter” subsistence. But “God” indicates the common element of the nature, and is applicable derivatively to each of the subsistences, just as “man” is. For He Who has divine nature is God, and he who has human nature is man.[[49]](#footnote-49)

So then, the Hypostases in God make concrete and personal the impersonal divine nature, i.e., *ousia*.[[50]](#footnote-50) Lossky comments, “We cannot think of God aside from the Persons… we cannot objectify the Divine essence outside of the Persons.”[[51]](#footnote-51) In addition, according to the Cappadocian view, the Hypostases differ from one another by the following criteria: the Father in unbegotten, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds.[[52]](#footnote-52)

The final characteristic of the Eastern view is the role of the Father in the Godhead, termed the “sole rule” of the Father. Although the Father is not superior to the Others in quality, nonetheless He serves as the “basis” or “foundation” of the triune God. From Him, the Son is generated and the Spirit proceeds.[[53]](#footnote-53) Pseudo-Dionysius makes this comment: “The Father is sole Fountain of the superessential Deity.”[[54]](#footnote-54) Lossky concurs, “In the order of the Divine economy, in the manifestation of the Holy Trinity in the world, every energy comes from the Father and is communicated through the Son and the Holy Spirit,[[55]](#footnote-55) and, “In the order of transmission of manifest energies, which are Divine, the Father is the possessor of the manifest quality, the Son is the manifestation of the Father, and the Spirit is the One, Who manifests it.[[56]](#footnote-56)

Lossky teaches that the Father is not only the source of “energy” for the Trinity, but also the source for the divine nature. The Father is “the source for all of the divine nature in the Trinity, emitting the Son and Holy Spirit, communicated to them His nature.”[[57]](#footnote-57) He also considers the order of divine names listed in Scripture (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) to be an indication of the “sole rule” of the Father.[[58]](#footnote-58)

Lossky claims that when we speak of God being “one,” we are speaking of the Father: “One God, because the Father is one.”[[59]](#footnote-59) He cites Gregory Nazianzen in support:

To us there is One God, for the Godhead is One, and all that proceedeth from Him is referred to One, though we believe in Three Persons…. When then we look at the Godhead, or the First Cause, or the Monarchia, that which we conceive is One; but when we look at the Persons in Whom the Godhead dwells, and at Those Who timelessly and with equal glory have their Being from the First Cause – there are Three Whom we worship.[[60]](#footnote-60)

He also cites John of Damascus:

When, then, we turn our eyes to the Divinity, and the first cause and the sovereignty… what is seen by us is unity. But when we look to those things in which the Divinity is, or, to put it more accurately, which are the Divinity, and those things which are in it through the first cause… the subsistences of the Son and the Spirit, it seems to us a Trinity that we adore.[[61]](#footnote-61)

The “sole rule” of the Father and His role as “First Cause” further substantiate the Eastern rejection of the double procession of the Spirit. If the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, then the procession does not proceed from God’s essence, which is rooted in the Father, but from the Hypostases.

However, Bray exercises necessary caution concerning this view. He considers it erroneous that the Father “delegates” to the other Persons divine power. Since the Son and the Spirit are fully divine, they possess by nature all of God’s attributes. Therefore, the teaching of the Father’s “sole rule” may undermine the status of the other Members of the Trinity. In addition, this teaching may lead to the erroneous conclusion that the Son accomplished His mission under compulsion, not voluntarily, since He was from eternity past under the Father’s authority.[[62]](#footnote-62)

Furthermore, we recall that God revealed His personal name to Moses, Yahweh, and He is repeatedly addressed by that name throughout the Old Testament, employing it as His self-designation as well. We noted earlier that Messiah is called “Yahweh our righteousness” (Jer 23:6), and Jesus Himself cited the key passage in Exodus 3:14-15, calling Himself “I Am” (Jn 8:58). The writer of Hebrews also attributes an Old Testament reference to Yahweh to the Son (Heb 1:10-12).[[63]](#footnote-63) If the Son is also Yahweh, then this cannot be solely the Father’s name, but applies to the entire Godhead. If the Godhead has a personal name, then we cannot reduce God to an impersonal divine nature, as is done in the East.

The doctrine of theosis exercises a substantial influence on the Eastern view of the Trinity. The goal of the theosis teaching is the deification of humans. In examining Lossky’s teaching, evangelical scholar Evgeniy Zaitsev concludes, “The Eastern Orthodox Trinity lays the foundation for theosis.”[[64]](#footnote-64) Mantzaridis adds, “When the early Fathers of the Church formulated their teaching on the Trinity and Christ, their point of departure was the reality of man’s deification, as experienced within the life of the Church.”[[65]](#footnote-65)

We must clarify this point. If the one God is not an impersonal essence, but a Person, then unification with the Divine, which is the goal of theosis, becomes problematic. In the process of theosis, it is necessary that the deifying influence of the *impersonal* divine nature (more precisely, the Divine “energies”) penetrated into the human nature of Christ and deified it, so that it can be transmitted to humans for their deification in turn.[[66]](#footnote-66)

In the teaching of Gregory Palamas, rejection of the double procession is imperative for the theosis doctrine. He argues that if the Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son, then the Spirit ends up with the same ontological status as creation. Consequently, He cannot communicate the “uncreated energies” necessary for theosis.[[67]](#footnote-67)

So then, the Eastern Orthodox view stresses God’s “threeness” at the expense of His personhood.[[68]](#footnote-68) In this teaching, the idea of “one God” lacks substance, since it either refers to the Father alone, which reduces the status of the other Persons, or it refers to a Platonic “universal,” which reduces God to an impersonal essence.

**b. Western View**

The Western view of the Trinity differs from its Eastern counterpart. Tertullian is a key figure in its development. He coined the phrase that God is “Three in One.”[[69]](#footnote-69) His description of the configuration of the Trinity, though, has much in common with the Eastern view:

Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, *who are yet distinct* One from Another. These Three are, one *essence*, not one *Person*, as it is said, “I and my Father are One,” in respect of unity of substance not singularity of number.[[70]](#footnote-70)

In explaining the relationships in the Trinity, Tertullian made the following comparisons: sun/light/rays, source/stream/bed, and root/sprout/fruit.[[71]](#footnote-71) He also termed Yahweh’s essence “*substantia*,” and the Members of the Trinity – “*persona.*”[[72]](#footnote-72) Inserting these terms into the Eastern Trinitarian formula, Tertullian described the triune God as one *substantia* in three *persona.*[[73]](#footnote-73)

Some objected to Tertullian’s use of the word *persona*, since its basic meaning in the Latin is “mask.” This was thought inadequate for delineating the difference in Persons. Nonetheless, the Council of Chalcedon deemed *persona* and *hypostasis* synonyms.[[74]](#footnote-74)

Augustine was responsible for the definitive development of the Western understanding of the Trinity. He insisted on the double procession of the Spirt.[[75]](#footnote-75) He also employed Tertullian’s term *persona*, but substituted *essentia* for *substantia*.[[76]](#footnote-76) Since humans were created in God’s image, Augustine supposed that one could find parallels between the configuration of the Trinity and the nature of people. One such parallel was comparing the Trinity to the tripartite structure of the human mind: memory, reason, and will.

Possibly the most famous analogy of Augustine is his comparison of the Trinity to human relationships. In human relationships, there is one who loves, one who is loved, and love itself. In Augustine’s mind, these features parallel the Persons of the Trinity.[[77]](#footnote-77) A final comparison: The Father is like the human mind, the Son is like the consciousness of one’s mind, and the Spirit – love for one’s mind.[[78]](#footnote-78)

After Augustine, Thomas Aquinas spoke of the Persons of the Trinity as “relationships.”[[79]](#footnote-79) Instead of “Persons,” the notable German theologian Karl Barth spoke of “three modes of existence” of the one God.[[80]](#footnote-80) The contemporary theologian Donald Bloesch defines the Trinity in similar terms:

God is his essence is one, but the way he interacts within himself is threefold. In the Godhead there is one being, but three modes of existence. There is one person but three agencies of relationship. There is one overarching consciousness, but three foci of consciousness. There is one will but three acts of implementing this will. There is one intelligence but three operations of intelligence.[[81]](#footnote-81)

Unlike the Eastern Orthodox Church, the Western mind stresses God’s personhood at the expense of His threeness. This is especially evident in Augustine’s analogy with the mind. All aspects of the mind – memory, reason, and will – belong to the same person. It is difficult to compare three features of the human intellect with the three Persons of the triune God.

Theodore de Régnon explains the divergence between Eastern and Western views as philosophical differences between Greeks and Latins: “Latin philosophy considers the nature in itself first and proceeds to the agent; Greek philosophy considers the agent first and passes through it to find the nature.”[[82]](#footnote-82)

Still another distinction between Eastern and Western views is that in the East, one speaks of “causality” in the Godhead, i.e., two Hypostases derive from the Third. In the West, however, one does not speak of “causality" in God, but “necessary interior relationships” between the Persons.[[83]](#footnote-83)

All things considered, we cannot affirm that either the Eastern or Western views adequately define the inner workings of the Godhead. In the East, God’s threeness is stressed at the expense of His personhood. In the West, the opposite is true. It may be advisable to content ourselves with the simple definition that there is one God who exists in three equal Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

**4. False Views**

**а. Tritheism**

One clearly errant view on the nature of the Godhead in tritheism. According to this teaching, the three Persons of the Trinity differ from one another not only on the level of personhood, but also in essence or nature. To refute this teaching, we refer the reader to the previously cited Scripture passages asserting the existence of one God.[[84]](#footnote-84)

**b. Arianism**

Arianism was a false teaching that shook the Early Church in the fourth century. Its founder, Arius, denied that Jesus Christ is God and a partaker of divine nature, but considered Him God’s first created being. Chapter 9 of this volume will serve for a refutation of this teachings, as well Appendix B, “Jehovah’s Witnesses on the Deity of Christ.” These chapters will present convincing proofs for the deity of Jesus Christ and refute the arguments posed against it.

**c. Subordination**

Another error introduced into Christian theology in its early years is the teaching of “subordination.” According to this view, the Son is inferior to the Father in quality and does not equally share with Him the divine nature. Adherents to this theory acknowledge that the Son is indeed the eternal God, but not in the same sense as God the Father is God. Furthermore, they assign the Holy Spirit a place beneath both Father and Son. The Spirit is also God, but again, in a sense inferior to both the Father and the Son.

Bloesch notes that some early Church Fathers showed a leaning toward subordination.[[85]](#footnote-85) We can cite Justin Martyr in this regard: “(Christ) is the Son of the true God Himself, and holding Him in the second place, and the prophetic Spirit in the third.”[[86]](#footnote-86) Burgess adds, “Here Justin is attempting to represent Christian teaching on the Trinity as in accord with best Greek philosophy with frequently presented levels of deity, resulting from the Neoplatonic belief in emanation.”[[87]](#footnote-87)

However, in light of the material we previously presented in support of the full deity of all Persons in the Trinity, we join the historical witness of the Church in rejecting the teaching of subordination. The biblical data confirm that all Members of the Trinity possess the fullness of deity, share a common divine nature, and each therefore enjoys the status of God in the full sense of the word. We do not see in Scripture “levels” of deity. If one objects that the order “Father, Son, Holy Spirit” indicates levels of deity, we respond that this order is not followed in all cases. Bray observes the following variations in Paul’s writings: Father/Son/Spirit – 2 times, Father/Spirit/Son – 4 times, Son/Spirit/Father – 3 times, and Spirit/Father/Son – once.[[88]](#footnote-88)

We must also keep in mind that Persons of the Trinity submit to one another voluntarily. In Philippians 2:6-7, we note that, although the Son enjoyed “equality” with the Father, he “humbled *Himself*.”

**d. Monarchism**

**1) Dynamic Monarchism**

This teaching appeared at the end of the second century. It was proposed by Theodore of Mopsuestia, but popularized by Paul of Samosata. The founders of this movement hoped by it to preserve the doctrine of God’s oneness. They feared that the traditional Trinitarian teaching could lead to tritheism.

Teachers in this movement viewed Jesus as a good person, who received the divine “Logos” from heaven. This resulted in Him receiving an elevation in status to “god,” but inferior to God the Father. He received this “promotion” either at His water baptism, or when He was raised from the dead.[[89]](#footnote-89) In this teaching, the Holy Spirit is not a separate Person in the Trinity, but the “divine energy” of the Father.[[90]](#footnote-90)

In refutation of this view, we can appeal to the proofs for Christ’s full deity and that of the Holy Spirit presented in subsequent chapters of this volume.

**2) Modalistic Monarchism**

**а) Description**

Monarchism appeared in yet another form – modalistic monarchism, or “modalism.” Modalism, in turn, comes in two forms: chronological modalism and functional modalism.

Chronological modalism appeared in the late second century in the teaching of Sabellius. As in all forms of monarchism, the goal is the preservation of God’s unity. Sabellius taught that God is one, but appears in three “manifestations.” The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not separate Persons in the Godhead, existing simultaneously, but different designations for the one God. These manifestations appeared at different times. At the incarnation, the Father became the Son and thereby ceased to be the Father. At the ascension, the Son became the Spirit and thereby ceased being the Son.[[91]](#footnote-91)

Functional modalism continues to this day in the teaching of the Oneness Pentecostals, or “Jesus Only” believers.[[92]](#footnote-92) They also teach that God appears in three “manifestations,” but unlike chronological modalism, these manifestations exist simultaneously.[[93]](#footnote-93) In other words, God in His transcendence, that is, when He is not in contact with others, is “one.” God in His immanence, that is, when He engages with others, manifests all three forms as Father, Son, and Spirit.

The transcendent Spirit, that is, the only God, came to earth and became incarnate as a man, Jesus Christ. When the transcendent Spirit joined with humanity, Jesus became the “Son,” and the transcendent Spirit became the “Father.” In other words, the human aspect of Jesus is the Son, and the transcendent Spirit that is incarnate in Him is the Father. Nonetheless, there remains only one God. The “Persons” of the Father and the Son are the same Person. These terms simply refer to different “parts” of the person Jesus Christ, or to two “modes” of existence of the one God.[[94]](#footnote-94)

When God, the transcendent Spirit, engages with believers and abides in them, He is known as the “Holy Spirit.” The Spirit, then, is not a separate Member of the triune God, but simply the transcendent Spirit in fellowship with people. He is a manifestation of the one God.

Proponents of “Jesus only” theology cite Scripture for support. It is written of the Son, “In Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9), “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Cor 5:19), and, “I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works” (Jn 14:10).

Finally, some in this movement feel that these “manifestations” of God are only temporary. Before creation, the transcendent Spirit had no other manifestation, and in the age to come the “manifestations” of God will be grafted into His intrinsic unity and cease to exist in distinction from Him. Such an interpretation is assigned to 1 Corinthians 15:28: “When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him, so that God may be all in all.” In the Early Church, Theophilus of Antioch advanced a similar theory that all the Persons of the Trinity were “concealed” in the Father from eternity past.

**b) Refutation**

The following Scriptures convincingly refute modalistic monarchism. Some are more appropriate for chronological modalism, while others contradict functional modalism. Some are useful for both purposes.

First, the apostle John writes that the Word, i.e., the Son, was God and was with God (Jn 1:1). Here, we see the simultaneous existence of both Father and Son. Second, in Matthew chapter 3, when Jesus was being baptized, the Son was in the water, the Father spoke from heaven, and the Spirit descended in the form of a dove. Here, we observe all three Persons of the Trinity acting simultaneously and independent of one another.

Third, Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Our Father who is in heaven” (Matt 6:9). Note that the Son is on earth praying to the Father in heaven. Furthermore, Jesus spoke of the Father (Jn 5:32) and of the Spirit (Jn 14:16) as “another” Person. They do not share Christ’s identity. In addition, the Father “sent” the Son. The sender certainly differs from the one sent.[[95]](#footnote-95)

We also consider that in John 8:17-18, Jesus refers to the Father as another witness. The Mosaic Law required two witnesses to settle a matter. Jesus appeals to the Father as a second witness, other than Himself, that He is from God. Therefore, they must be different Persons.

We also recall Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Not as I will, but as You will” (Matt 26:39). Jesus submitted His will to the will of the Father, indicating a difference in identity. Furthermore, in the passage John 10:30, “I and the Father are one (ἕν),” the numeral “one” stands in the neuter gender, indicating not identity in Person, but commonality in Nature. Finally, all three Members of the Trinity are often mentioned together in one Scripture text (see 1 Pet 1:2; Matt 28:19; Rev 1:4-5; Eph 4:4-6; 2 Cor 13:13).

We also note that when Yahweh is in His “transcendence,” i.e., apart from others, He still exists as Three. The Son, for example, shared heavenly glory with the Father before creation (Jn 17:5). In addition, before the creation of humans, God said to “Himself”: “Let us make man according to Our image” (Gen 1:26). Additionally, the fact that Jesus was “sent” by the Father shows that He (and the Spirit) had an independent coexistence with the Father in heaven.

Finally, concerning the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 15:28, the verse itself clarifies what is meant by God being “all in all”: “When all things are subjected to Him, then the Son Himself also will be subjected to the One who subjected all things to Him.” Here, we read nothing of the Son being “absorbed” into the Father, but rather of the Son submitting the kingdom to Him.

**e. The Jehovah’s Witnesses View**

Along with a denial of Christ’s deity, the Jehovah’s Witnesses also reject the doctrine of the Trinity. Let us examine their views.[[96]](#footnote-96)

Adherents of the Watchtower movement object that the idea of a Trinity leads only to confusion, but the Scriptures teach, “God is not {a God} of confusion but of peace” (1 Cor 14:33). They feel this teaching arose from pagan sources in Egypt, Greece, China, and Babylon, not from the Bible. The Early Church permitted this doctrine in order to attract unbelievers to the Faith. Jehovah’s Witnesses especially indict Tertullian and Theophilus of Antioch as propagators of this “error.”[[97]](#footnote-97) The apostolic church, they suppose, never tolerated such a doctrine. The word “Trinity” never appears in the New Testament.

When God said at the time of creation, “Let Us make man according to Our image” (Gen 1:26), He was addressing His Son, whom He earlier created, in order to involve Him in the work of creation. When the three Persons of the Trinity are listed together in Scripture, such as in 2 Corinthians 13:14 and Matthew 28:19, it never says that they are “one.” Other lists of three figures are found in Scripture that are not considered a “Trinity,” such as: “I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of {His} chosen angels…” (1 Tim 5:21).

Additionally, in Matthew 28:19 Jesus gave His Great Commission to Jews, who firmly believed in only one God (see Deut 6:4). The baptismal formula in the name of the Three does not confirm their deity, but is simply a recognition that the Son and the Spirit participate in the work of salvation. Moreover, Jesus Himself stated that Jehovah is the only true God (Jn 17:3), and only He is worthy of worship (Matt 4:10).

In response, we state the following. First, the difficulty in conceptualizing the Trinity in no way compromises its validity. We should expect that the nature of an infinite Being such as our Lord would be beyond human understanding. The difficulty this doctrine presents is actually a confirmation of its truth. Who would have thought up such a teaching? It is true that pagan nations sometimes recognized a triad of gods, but they had no concept of a “Trinity.” They did not believe in one God existing in three Persons, but in many gods.

In addition, the fact that in antiquity people worshipped a triad of gods does not force the conclusion that Christianity borrowed that conception from them. Tertullian, the supposed founder of the “Trinitarian heresy,” was himself vehemently opposed to compromising with pagan faiths.

The absence of the term “Trinity” in the Bible does not threaten this doctrine. This word simply expresses a concept that is clearly depicted in Scripture – that one God exists in three Persons. Concerning Genesis 1:26, God says to His “compatriot,” “Let Us create man *in Our image*.” Note that God’s compatriot not only participates in creation, but also has a common nature with the Father.

We concede that when listing the Three, the Bible never says that they are “one.” We appeal to these lists, though, not as primary evidence of this truth, but as supplementary and confirmatory. The main proof for the Trinity is the fact that deity is ascribed in Scripture to all the Members of the Trinity, yet God is one. In addition, the listing of the Three occurs in multiple places, confirming the validity of our conclusion. A single mention of a “triad” of the Father, Son, and angels does not overturn our position. In Matthew 28:19, the words Father, Son, and Spirit are joined by the singular word “name,” which reveals the intimate relationship between them. Finally, a discussion on John 17:3, where Jesus calls the Father “the only true God,” is found in Appendix B.

**5. Conclusions**

In summary, some Trinitarian heresies reject God’s threeness, namely Arianism, Subordination, and Monarchism. In an effort to defend God’s unity, these teachings went to the opposite extreme of denying His triune nature. On the other hand, tritheism rejects His unity. Within orthodox Christianity, the Western Church emphasizes God’s oneness, yet does not reject His threeness, while the Eastern Church underscores His threeness without denying His oneness.

Possibly, the most appropriate formula for defining the triune God is simply to state that there is one God who exists in three equal Persons. Beyond that, we are dealing with a mystery. Cyril of Jerusalem gave us good counsel in the fourth century:

And it is enough for us to know these things; but inquire not curiously into His nature or substance: for had it been written, we would have spoken of it; what is not written, let us not venture on; it is sufficient for our salvation to know, that there is Father, and Son, and Holy Ghost.[[98]](#footnote-98)

1. Brown F., Driver S. R., Briggs C. A. Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon (electronic ed.). – Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, 2000. – P. 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Merrill E. H. Deuteronomy // The New American Commentary. – Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1994. – P. 163; Christensen D. L. Deuteronomy 1–21:9 // Word Biblical Commentary. – Dallas, TX: Word, 2001. – P. 142. The quotation of this verse in Mark 12:29 follows the Septuagint, which is nearly identical to the Hebrew text except for the addition of a vowel at the end: κύριος ὁ θεὸς ἡμῶν κύριος εἷς ἐστιν. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Keil and Delitzsch prefer this option. See Keil C. F., Delitzsch F. Commentary on the Old Testament. – Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996. – V. 1. – P. 884. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See Deut 6:3; 9:1; 20:3; 27:9; Ps 50:7; 81:8; Isa 44:1; 48:12. Yet, Deut 4:1 and 5:1 support this variant. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. McGrath A. E. Christian Theology: An Introduction. – 4th ed. – Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007. – Р. 248-249. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Мышленик В. Дух Святой в Ветхом Завете // Студенческий реферат. – Киев: Евангельская теологическая семинария, 2005. – P. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Иларион А. Таинство Веры. – М.: Издательство Братства Святителя Тихона, 1996. – P. 41; Mueller J. T. Christian Dogmatics. – St. Louis, MO: Concordia, 1934. – P. 159-160. Also see a more detailed treatment of the deity of the Messiah in chapter 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mueller, p. 159-160. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Bloesch D. G. God the Almighty. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1995. – P. 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Мышленик, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bloesch, p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Jukes points out other examples of using the plural number in relation to God: עֹשָׂי, “(God) my Makers” (Иов 35:10); עֹשָׂיו “his Makers” (Ps 149:2); קְדֹשִׁים “the Holy Ones” (Prov 9:10); עֹשַׂיִךְ “your Makers” (Isa 54:5) (see Jukes A. The Names of God in Holy Scripture. – Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1967. – P. 15). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Erickson M. J. Christian Theology. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1983. – V. 1 – P. 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Мышленик, p. 7; Reasoning from the Scriptures. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1989. – P. 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Heidt W. G. Angelology of the Old Testament. – Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1949. – P. 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Ibid., p. 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Erickson, Christian Theology, v. 1, p. 328-329; Иларион, p. 41. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Мышленик, p. 7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Noted in Heidt, p. 21-22. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Also see exampels in Exodus 19:24; 23:25; Isaiah 6:12 (see Heidt, p. 73, yet Heidt feels that this is merely a literary device). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The issue of the Angel of the Lord’s identity is discussed in more detail in chapter 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Bray G. L. The Doctrine of God. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 1993. – P. 141. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Also see: Lk 1:35; Jn 1:33-34; 14:16, 26; 16:13-15; 20:21-22; 2 Cor 2:21-22; Acts 2:33, 38; Gal 4:6; Eph 2:20-22; 3:14-19; 1 Thes 1:3-5; 2 Thes 2:13-14; Tit 3:4-6; Heb 9:14; 1 Jn 4:2, 13-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Documents - 61: XVI c.; 918: XVI c.; 2318: XVIII c.; 88: XIV c. (in the margin); 221: X c. (in the margin); 429: XVI c. (in the margin); 636: XVI c. (in the margin). [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Metzger B. M. A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament. – 2nd ed.–London; New York: United Bible Societies, 1994. – P. 648. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. McGrath, Theology, p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. The Jehovah Witnesses pay special attention to this aspect of Christ’s work. See: Make Sure of All Things, Hold Fast to What is Fine. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible & Tract Society, 1965. – P. 485-486; Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 410-411; Jesus Christ. Our Questions Answered // The Watchtower. 2012. April 1. P. 4-7; A Conversation with a Neighbor. Is Jesus God? // The Watchtower. 2012. April 1. P. 20-22; The Greatest Man Who Ever Lived. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1991. – P. 11-12. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Ботнари Е. Monogenes: The Only Begotten Son // Студенческий реферат. – Киев: Евангельская теологическая семинария, 2004. – P. 4. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Aland В., Aland К., Karavidopoulos J., Martini C. M., Metzger B. M. Nestle-Aland: NTG Apparatus Criticus. – 28th ed. – Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2012. – P. 726. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid., p. 7, 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Burgess S. M. The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1984. – P. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Some Western theologian embraced a single procession, such as Pope Leo I (see Burgess S. M. The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation Traditions. – Peabody, MS: Hendrickson, 1997. – P. 51). [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 176. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Burgess, The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions, p. 96. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. In 867, Photios I, Patriarch of Constantinople, condemned the use of the *Filioque*. Nonetheless, at least one Eastern Father, namely Cyril of Jerusalem, acknowledged a double procession (Burgess, The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions, p. 96). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Schaff P., Schaff D. S. History of the Christian Church. – New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1910. – V. 4. – P. 476. John of Damascus and Gregory of Nyssa felt that, although the Spirit proceeds from the Father, He does so through the Son (see Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 157). [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. McGrath, Theology, p. 269. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Gregory of Nyssa so taught (see *The Great Catechism*, 3-5; Burgess, The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions, p. 146). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Иларион, p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Mueller, p. 148. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Berkhof L. The History of Christian Doctrine. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1937. – P . 91; Иларион, p. 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. McRoberts K. D. The Holy Trinity // Horton C. Systematic Theology. – Rev. Ed. – Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House, 2007. – P. 171. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Quotation from G. L. Prestige in Meyendorff J. Byzantine Theology. – New York: Fordham University, 1974. – P. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. See Lane T. A Сoncise Нistory of Christian Тhought. – Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006. – P. 30-31. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Use of the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* with these meanings traces back to Plato (see Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 38). Conventionally, they were considered synonyms (see Лосский В. Н. Очерк мистического богословия восточной церкви и Догматическое богословие. – М.: Центр СЭИ, 1991. – P. 42). [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Berkhof, p. 89-90. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. John of Damascus, *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, 3.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. Bray agrees, “God is not an individual person, but three persons in an individual substance” (Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 238), [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. Лосский, p. 218. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)
53. McGrath, Theology, p. 257. [↑](#footnote-ref-53)
54. Pseudo-Dionysius. On the Divine Names // The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite / Trans. John Parker. – London: James Parker and Co., 1897. [↑](#footnote-ref-54)
55. John Calvin describes the Trinity is a similar fashion (see Horton M. S. Traditional Reformed Response // Beilby J. K., Eddy P. R., Enderlein, S. E. Justification: Five Views. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2011. – Kindle edition, 2700-2702). [↑](#footnote-ref-55)
56. Лосский, p. 64-65. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-56)
57. Ibid., p. 47. (сf. p. 218). Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-57)
58. Ibid., p. 220. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-58)
59. Ibid., p. 47. Author’s translation. [↑](#footnote-ref-59)
60. *Orations*, 31.14. [↑](#footnote-ref-60)
61. *An Exact Exposition of Orthodox Faith*, 1.8. [↑](#footnote-ref-61)
62. Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 154, 164. [↑](#footnote-ref-62)
63. See also other such New Testament references, listed in the next chapter. [↑](#footnote-ref-63)
64. Зайцев Е. Учение В. Лосского о Теозисе. – М.: Библейско-богословский институт св. апостола Андрея, 2007. – P. 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-64)
65. Mantzaridis G. I. The Deification of Man: Saint Gregory Palamas and the Orthodox Tradition. – Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984. – P. 113. [↑](#footnote-ref-65)
66. The doctrine of theosis is discussed in detain in the fourth volume of this series. [↑](#footnote-ref-66)
67. Mantzaridis, p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-67)
68. McGrath, Theology, p. 258. [↑](#footnote-ref-68)
69. Ibid., p. 249. [↑](#footnote-ref-69)
70. Tertullian, *Against* *Praxeas*, 25. [↑](#footnote-ref-70)
71. Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-71)
72. Ibid., p. 38, 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-72)
73. Ibid., p. 17, 30. [↑](#footnote-ref-73)
74. Ibid., p. 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-74)
75. Anselm’s understanding of the Trinity also reflects the double procession view: the Father is “God, from whom God exists,” the Son is “God, from whom God exists,” and “God from God,” and the Spirit is only “God from God” (Burgess, The Holy Spirit: Medieval Roman Catholic and Reformation, p. 33). [↑](#footnote-ref-75)
76. Ibid., p. 167. [↑](#footnote-ref-76)
77. Ibid., p. 333. [↑](#footnote-ref-77)
78. Ibid., p. 78-79. Augustine employed this conception in defense of the double procession of the Spirit. If God is love and the Spirit is that love, then He must proceed from both the Father and the Son (Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 171-173). [↑](#footnote-ref-78)
79. Ibid., p. 183. [↑](#footnote-ref-79)
80. Bloesch, p. 179. [↑](#footnote-ref-80)
81. Ibid., p. 185. [↑](#footnote-ref-81)
82. Meyendorf, p. 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-82)
83. Bray G. L. Trinity // Ferguson S. B., Wright D. F., Packer J. I. New Dictionary of Theology. – Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1988. – P. 693. [↑](#footnote-ref-83)
84. McGrath, Theology, p. 255-256. [↑](#footnote-ref-84)
85. Bloesch, p. 173ff. [↑](#footnote-ref-85)
86. Justin Martyr, *1 Apology*, 13. [↑](#footnote-ref-86)
87. Burgess, The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions, p. 28. Other Church Fathers with tendencies toward the subordination view include Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Eusebius, and Novation. [↑](#footnote-ref-87)
88. Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 146 [↑](#footnote-ref-88)
89. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-89)
90. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-90)
91. Ibid., p. 328. [↑](#footnote-ref-91)
92. According to Bray, one of the leading modern Catholic scholars, Karl Rahner, also held to a type of functional modalism, teaching that the Members of the Trinity are “functions” of the one God (see Bray, Doctrine of God, p. 187). [↑](#footnote-ref-92)
93. McGrath, p. 254. [↑](#footnote-ref-93)
94. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oneness\_Pentecostalism [↑](#footnote-ref-94)
95. Mueller, p. 151. [↑](#footnote-ref-95)
96. Objections taken from Let God Be True, – 2nd ed. – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 1952. – P. 102; Is the Trinity a Bible Teaching? // The Watchtower. 2012. March 1. P. 23; What Does the Bible Really Teach? – Brooklyn, NY: Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society, 2005. – P. 220-224; Reasoning from the Scriptures, p. 405-426. Also noted in McKinney G. D. The Theology of the Jehovah’s Witnesses. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962. – P. 54-57, and Martin W. R., Klann N. H. Jehovah of the Watch Tower. – Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1953. – P. 31, 45. [↑](#footnote-ref-96)
97. Theophilus of Antioch was the first to coin the term “Trinity” (see Burgess, The Holy Spirit: Ancient Christian Traditions, p. 32). [↑](#footnote-ref-97)
98. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures*, 16.24. [↑](#footnote-ref-98)