

# Trinity 101

## *Father, Son, Holy Spirit*

JAMES L. PAPANDREA, PHD

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First Edition

*To my brother, Dr. Rick F. Papandrea*  
*Speed Racer to my Racer X*

**There are different forms of service but the same Lord.**

*1 CORINTHIANS 12:5*

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# Introduction

When I first began studying theology, I did it because I wanted answers to all the deepest questions. However, what one finds when one studies theology is this: Looking into the mysteries of God just reveals deeper mysteries. In my own spiritual life I had to come to a point where I was ready to embrace the mystery. God is a bottomless well, and the understanding of God as Trinity is both the heart of the mystery and the very definition of Christianity (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 234, hereafter abbreviated CCC).

So we approach this task with a lot of humility. This does not mean the task should not be undertaken. Trying to understand the nature of God is not an exercise in futility—it is a worthy exercise—but it is one that should begin and end with the admission that the foolishness of God is wiser than human wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:25). In the tradition of Saint Augustine (*faith leads to understanding*) and Saint Anselm (*faith seeking understanding*), we start with what we believe, based on what has been revealed to us in sacred Scripture, and then we try to understand it—not to be master over it, but in a very practical sense to be able to explain our faith to others (1 Peter 3:15).

Another way of saying this is that we admit we could never fully understand the Trinity, because the Trinity is God. If this were not so, believing would not require faith. What we're trying to do here is understand the *doctrine* of the Trinity, or the way that God as Trinity has been revealed to humanity, and understood and explained throughout the history of the Church. My hope is that this book will be part of that process of understanding.

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# The Trinity in Scripture

## *What Do We Mean When We Say: “GOD?”*

**B**efore we begin, we should clarify something. We say “God” often—many times without giving it much thought—and although we may assume that everyone knows what the word means, we are not always precise or consistent in our use of it. In fact, we actually use the word in several different ways. As Christians, we also say that Jesus Christ is God, but what does that really mean?

Whenever we say “God,” we mean one of three things. First, “God” can refer to the Supreme Being in a general sense, and for Christians that means the Trinity. Second, “God” can be used more specifically to mean God the Father, the first person of the Trinity. Third, we may use “God” to mean that which is divine, or divinity itself. When we use it in this way, the word can be as much an adjective as a noun. Technically speaking, Jesus Christ is God, but only if we mean it in the third sense. Jesus is not the Trinity and Jesus is not the first person of the Trinity, the Father. But we do believe that Christ is divine. Most Christians are familiar with the beginning of the Gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (John 1:1). This passage could be paraphrased as follows, since this is what it means: “In the beginning was the Son, and the Son was with the Father, and the Son was divine.”

As we will see, it is important to be clear that the Son is not the Father and the Son is not the Trinity. Likewise, the Father is not the Son, and the Father is not the Trinity. Therefore, I would advocate for a greater attention to precision of meaning when we as Christians use the term “God.” We should not assume that everyone automatically knows what we mean.

## THE TRINITY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Ultimately, the doctrine of the Trinity comes from Scripture. However it is not spelled out in the apostolic documents as clearly as we might like it to be. In fact, early Christians debated the interpretation of these Scriptures for centuries to come to the understanding of the Trinity that we have now. So when we look at passages that reveal God as Trinity, we do so with the realization that it is not enough just to quote certain Scripture texts. These passages require study that takes into account their biblical and historical context, and they require interpretation within the community of the faithful (2 Peter 1:20). Christian doctrine developed over time, meaning that the Church’s understanding increased with the ongoing process of question and debate (CCC 65–66). This is the process that took several centuries and many controversies to complete, and it resulted in the Creeds of the Church. Having acknowledged this, let’s look at some of the Old Testament passages that Christians have traditionally interpreted as pointing to the Trinity. I encourage you to look these up and read them in context.

**Genesis 1:1–2.** At the beginning of our Bible, we read the story of creation. We find that even before creation, the Spirit of God hovered over the void in anticipation of creating order out of chaos. The Hebrew word for Spirit can also be translated as “wind,” which is why some versions of the Bible describe a

“wind from God” (see also Exodus 14:21, 15:8, and John 3:8). The word can also be translated “breath” (for example, see Psalm 33:6, 104:29–30, and John 20:22). However, Christians have historically interpreted this as a reference to the Holy Spirit. It is important to notice here that the Holy Spirit is active in creation, so that it is as appropriate to call the Spirit Creator as it is to call God the Father Creator.

**Genesis 1:3–25.** Continuing on in the creation story, we read that God (the Father) created the universe by speaking everything into existence. In other words, God creates by his word. Although God does not actually need to speak out loud to create, the point is that creation is the result of the will of God. In Genesis, God’s will is externalized by his command, or his word. Christians have traditionally associated this creative speech of God with the title “Word of God,” as it is used of Jesus Christ. John began his gospel with the same words that begin the book of Genesis, “In the beginning...” and then he goes on to refer to Jesus Christ as the Word of God (John 1:1–2, 14). This is not a coincidence. Calling Christ the divine Word of God means that he is the means, or the *agent*, of creation through whom all things were created (John 1:3). This also means that, just like the Holy Spirit, the Word—or Son of God—was active in creation and may also be called Creator.

**Genesis 1:26.** Notice in this passage that God (the Father) seems to be speaking to someone. Who is the *us* in “Let us make...”? While there are various ways to interpret this, Christians have traditionally understood this passage as though the Father was speaking to the Son, and perhaps also the Spirit. Thus, already in the first chapter of the Bible, these verses have historically been interpreted as pointing to the preexistence of the Son (he existed before he became human, and he was there

at creation), the divinity of the Son and Spirit (as “co-Creator” with the Father), as well as the distinction between the Father, Son, and Spirit.

**Psalms 51:11–13.** In this psalm of confession traditionally attributed to David, the author begs to avoid what would apparently be a punishment for sin: that the Holy Spirit of God might be taken from him. This is one of the first times that the Spirit is called the “Holy Spirit,” although the word “holy” here was probably originally meant to be more of an adjective than a title. Nevertheless, this passage seems to be an anticipation of the indwelling of the Spirit as described in 1 Corinthians 6:19, though it also could be understood in terms of the anointing of the Holy Spirit on a king or the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in a prophet. The point is that there is a Holy Spirit who is not identical with God the Father, but who is described as the Holy Spirit of God.

**Isaiah 7:14.** This is one of many Old Testament passages that the apostles interpreted as a prophecy of the coming of Jesus. In the gospels we are told that *Immanuel* means, “God with us” (Matthew 1:23, see John 1:14). Therefore, the Church has always understood this passage to be about more than the miraculous birth of Christ. It is about the divinity of Christ, that he was the very presence of God on earth. Given this conviction, the Church would come to conclude that it is appropriate to worship him.

**Isaiah 9:5–6.** These verses may be more familiar to us from Handel’s *Messiah* than from the Bible, but that only highlights the fact that this passage is also considered by the Church to be a prophecy of the birth of Christ. Although the original author probably had an earthly prince in mind, it would be hard

to overlook the fact that the prophecy includes an affirmation that the Child to be born would be called “almighty God,” and even “eternal Father.” We should not press this so far that we think of the Father and the Son as identical (in the original context it only meant that the new king would be a father figure). However, this passage has traditionally been interpreted as pointing to the divinity of Christ (see John 10:30, where Jesus says, “The Father and I are one”).

**Isaiah 40:13.** Here the Holy Spirit is called “the Spirit of the Lord.” Although the original audience would not have interpreted this in a Trinitarian sense, the early Christians would have pointed to this verse as evidence of the divine personhood of the Spirit. In this passage, the Spirit of the Lord seems to be more than simply an extension of God or God’s attributes. In other cases, such as Zechariah 4:6, the concept of the Spirit of God may be more of a metaphor for the power of God. But even in that case, as an extension of God’s power, the Holy Spirit is coming to be described as distinct from God the Father.

**Isaiah 61:1.** In this passage, quoted by Jesus in Luke 4:16–21, the “Spirit of the Lord God” is the divine inspiration of the prophets. For other examples of the Holy Spirit as the inspiration of the prophets, see also Numbers 11:17, 25–29, 2 Samuel 23:2, Isaiah 11:2–3, Joel 3:1–2 (2:28–29), Zechariah 7:12 and 12:10. These passages have been interpreted by the Church as examples of the existence of the Holy Spirit as both divine and yet distinct from the Father.

**Isaiah 63:10–11, 14.** In verses ten and eleven, we see the Spirit called God’s “Holy Spirit,” as in Psalm 51. We can see from verse fourteen that the Holy Spirit is the same as the Spirit of the Lord.

**Isaiah 63:16.** God (the first person of the Trinity) is referred to by several names in the Old Testament. In fact, scholars often identify different Old Testament authors by the name(s) used for God. It is in Isaiah that God is first referred to as “Father,” specifically, “our Father.” To the descendants of Abraham, the fatherhood of God meant that he was their provider and protector. Notice that in this passage, the Father is also described as “Redeemer,” which reminds us that we should not assume that the Son of God is the only one who can be called Savior.

**Isaiah 64:7.** Here again, God is called, “our Father.” In this context the fatherhood of God refers to God as Creator, and also as the one who forgives the sins of his people. This implies that as Creator, God the Father is also the one who has the right to judge his creation. In the apocryphal book of Third Maccabees, God is the overseer of all things and is called “the first Father of all” (3 Maccabees 2:2), though this line is not in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament that was used by Jesus and the apostles).

**Daniel 7:13–14.** In Daniel’s famous vision, he sees “one like a son of man” approaching the “Ancient of Days” in the heavenly realm. Jesus himself made reference to this passage when he called himself “Son of Man,” so it should be no surprise that, from the beginning of the Church, Christian theologians have interpreted Daniel’s vision as a vision of the preincarnate Christ. The “Ancient of Days” was understood to be God the Father, and the “one like a son of man” was understood to be Christ the Son. In the third century, Saint Hippolytus wrote that Daniel called the Messiah, “one *like* a Son of Man,” because he was seeing a vision of Christ before the Incarnation, so before he became a human (Hippolytus, *Against Noetus* 4). The fact that the Father and Son were there together was taken

as proof of Christ's preexistence and was connected to John 1:1 and Philippians 2:6. Also, many interpreters would assume that the divinity of Christ is at least implied in this passage. At the same time, the fact that the Son can "approach" the Father implies that they are distinct—the Father and Son are not one and the same.

**The Angel of the Lord.** This is a phrase that occurs in over fifty Old Testament passages. It was understood by many early Christian theologians as a reference to the preincarnate Christ, the Word of God. In other words, before the human birth of Jesus, he existed eternally in his divine nature and occasionally made an appearance on earth. "Angel," then, was not interpreted as a reference to a created spiritual being, but it was understood according to the literal meaning of the Greek word, *angelos*—that is, a messenger. Therefore, the Word of God was the Father's messenger in the time before the earthly life of Jesus.

A similar and important passage is the visitation of the Lord to Abraham in Genesis chapter 18. There we read that, on one hand, it was the Lord who came to Abraham (verse 1), but on the other hand, Abraham saw "three men" (verse 2). Abraham bowed down to the three men in what seems to be an attitude of worship, and then one of the "three men" promised that he would return the following year when Abraham's wife, Sarah, will have a child. Later (verses 13–14, 22), this "man" is revealed to be the Lord, who again promised to return when Sarah has a child.

However, the Church fathers had read that no one can see God and live (Exodus 33:20–23, John 1:18, see also 1 Timothy 6:16). Yet there were times like these when people apparently saw the divine presence and lived to tell about it. On occasion, a person does seem to see God, who accepts worship and makes promises in the first person, thus ruling out the pos-

sibility that it was a mere (created) angel. So the early Church writers reasoned that it was actually God the Father whom no one could see, but God the Son could be seen. Therefore, when it was said that people saw God, they were not seeing God the Father, rather they were seeing a preIncarnation manifestation of God the Son. Genesis 18, then, was interpreted by the earliest Christians as another reference to the “Angel of the Lord,” the Word of God who visited Abraham accompanied by two regular angels (Genesis 19:1). Later, the “three men” were interpreted as a reference to the Trinity.

In addition to being understood as Old Testament affirmations of the Trinity, these passages are important for what they implied about the distinction between the Father and the Son. One difference between the Father and the Son is that of invisibility versus visibility. In other words, it was assumed that God the Father could never be visible, but God the Son could be visible (see John 1:14, “we saw his glory”). Certainly the Son was visible in his Incarnation, so the Church fathers reasoned that even before the Incarnation, when he came to earth as the Father’s messenger, he was able to be temporarily visible and tangible to humanity. There were various explanations for how this was possible, but the point is that even before his human life, the visibility and tangibility of the Son (or at least the possibility of it) is something that distinguished him from the Father.

However, the visibility of the Son is actually evidence of a deeper issue. Christian theologians have always assumed that God is over and above creation, such that God cannot be contained within creation. The theological term for this is *circumscribability*. God cannot be *circumscribed*, or surrounded by anything. However, the obvious fact that the person of Jesus Christ was localized within creation (he was only in one place at a time) might seem to argue against his divinity. To answer



this, the early Church fathers reasoned that circumscribability was a personal property of the Son, which distinguished him from the Father, even before the Incarnation. In other words, just as the Son might be visible and tangible, while the Father would not, the Son could also be circumscribed in time and space, while the Father would never be. This is a function of the Son's human nature, however it is not as simple as saying that only the human nature of the Son is circumscribed, since he could manifest himself within time and space even before his Incarnation. At the same time, it must be emphasized that this personal property of the Son does not diminish his divinity or the omnipresence of his divine nature in any way.

## THE TRINITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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There are various New Testament passages in which the apostles mention the Trinity or bless their readers in the name of the Trinity, all of which demonstrates that these apostles understood God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see for example, 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, 2 Corinthians 13:13, and 1 Peter 1:2). This also demonstrates that even in the earliest years of the Church, the apostles could assume that their readers knew what they meant by Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In fact, in the early days of the Church, the most pressing question was not about the Trinity in general but about the relationship of Jesus Christ to the God whom he called his Father. In other words, if Christ is divine, what does that mean? Is he identical to the Father? It would seem that cannot be the case, since he talks to the Father and prays to the Father. So what is their relationship, and in what way is Jesus to be thought of as included in the Divine? Questions like these required that the Church sort out its understanding of the person of Christ in order to try to understand the bigger picture of the Trinity.

Therefore, in the New Testament and the early Church, it

is not possible to make a clean distinction between christology and Trinitarian theology. Christology, or the study of the person of Christ, is an essential component of the Trinity, and the doctrine of the person of Christ is interdependent with the doctrine of the Trinity. I would argue that there is no real division between Trinitarian theology and christology, since it was the coming of Christ, his life and ministry and his death and resurrection that caused his followers to have to explain him and his relationship to the Father. Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity together are the Church's answer to Jesus' question, "Who do you say that I am?" (Matthew 16:15).

One final word of explanation is in order before we look at the Trinity in the New Testament. Labels such as "high" christology and "low" christology are to be avoided as misleading and counterproductive. For example, it is often taught that the Gospel of John represents a "high" christology because it is thought to emphasize the divinity of Jesus more than his humanity. Not only is this a misinterpretation of the fourth gospel, but if in fact it did emphasize Jesus' divinity over his humanity, then it would be presenting an unbalanced picture of Christ. In other words, a "high" christology that overemphasized Christ's divinity, or a "low" christology that overemphasized Christ's humanity would both be heresy, because each would deny or deemphasize one of Christ's two natures. Orthodox christology is neither "high" nor "low," and thus it is inaccurate to use these labels to describe the christology of the Scriptures. We must always keep in mind that the Scriptures define our doctrine for us. We are not to evaluate them.

## **What Jesus Said About the Trinity**

**Jesus as the Son of the Father.** In the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13–17, Mark 1:9–11, Luke 3:21–22), the early Christians saw a picture of the Trinity: The Father in the heavenly voice,

the Son in the waters of the river Jordan, and the Holy Spirit in the dove. This Holy Spirit is the “Spirit of the Lord” of the Old Testament. The same Spirit who inspired the prophets anoints Jesus (see Acts 10:38). After his baptism and anointing, the heavenly voice of the Father declares that Jesus is his beloved Son. In the transfiguration as well (Matthew 17:1–8, Mark 9:2–8, Luke 9:28–36), the voice of the Father declares that Jesus is his beloved Son, and that all should listen to him.

But what does it mean for God the Father to call Jesus his Son? And what can we glean from the words of Jesus as a clue to his own understanding of his sonship? In a way, we are all sons and daughters of God, and yet there is something unique about the way in which Jesus is the Son of God. This uniqueness will be explained below, but first it is important to see that in the gospels, the sonship of Jesus is described in two different ways. He is called both the Son of God and the Son of Man.

The title “Son of God” carries the cultural assumptions of the heir, the first-born son who exercises his father’s authority and stands to inherit all that belongs to the father (see Matthew 21:33–46, Mark 12:1–12, and Luke 20:9–19). Note that in the parable of the wicked tenants, the Son is called “beloved,” just as in the baptism and transfiguration of Jesus. Notice also that the question of Luke 10:25 is how one might *inherit* eternal life. Jesus, as the heir of God, is the one who controls the inheritance (see John 1:12). Furthermore, the concept of sonship also has an aspect of apprenticeship to it. As the Son of God, Jesus does the work of the Father.

Jesus rarely used the title Son of God for himself, though he did accept it when others used it of him (Matthew 4:1–11, 14:33, 16:16–17, Mark 3:11, 14:61–62, Luke 22:70). Part of the reason for his avoidance of the term must have been out of Jewish reluctance to say the divine name, as we see in Mark 14:61–62, where the high priest asked him if he was the Son of the

“Blessed One” (see also Luke 1:32, 35). Jesus did, however, refer to himself as the Son of the Father (Matthew 11:27/Luke 10:22, Matthew 24:36/Mark 13:32, Matthew 28:19), and his enemies assumed that he had called himself the Son of God (Matthew 27:43). In the Gospel of John, Jesus does use the phrase “Son of God” eight times: John 5:18–23, 25–27, 6:40, 8:36, 10:36–38 (see Matthew 27:43), 11:14, 14:3, 17:1.

There is also a sense in which avoidance of the term could be justified by the potential for misunderstanding in the Greco-Roman world. On the one hand, a son of a god might mean a hero of Greek mythology. On the other hand, the Romans were getting used to the idea of thinking of their emperors as divine. Since a dead emperor would be proclaimed a god by the senate, his (adopted) son and heir—the present emperor—might call himself the son of a god. In the early empire, precisely the time of the early Church, emperors increasingly demanded to be called by divine titles. Therefore, when it is used of Jesus, “Son of God” has a political overtone and a treasonous one at that. Jesus is the Son of God, over against the emperor who is proclaimed a son of a god.

Jesus’ preferred title for himself seems to have been “Son of Man.” He even used it as a roundabout way to refer to himself when he could have simply said, “me,” or “I” (see, for example, Matthew 16:13). When we first encounter the phrase “son of man” in the Old Testament, it simply means a human being. In fact, sometimes it was used to remind someone that he is *only* a human and call to mind his place in relation to God (Job 25:6). But eventually it came to mean the human that God cares for (Psalm 8:4, 144:3) and then a human who is chosen by God (Ezekiel 2:1–3). And thus the term comes to have a connotation that is something like a prophet or even an anointed one. By the time of Daniel, the Messiah is called, “one like a son of man,” which many took to mean that he is human,