

## FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT: THREE-IN-ONE

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The sense in which Father, Son, and Spirit are three  
and the senses in which they are one  
at the same time to the exclusion of all options

### Distinctness within the One Deity

The trinity question calls for analyzing activities between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Approaches based on words are less satisfactory because words can vary in their meanings. Many attempts to arrive at a scriptural understanding, however, rely on (unclear) words rather than on (clearer) relational behavior.

Words like *one* or *with* or *God* can have different applications. *One* can mean one individual (John) or one corporately (at the “group” level) as one committee comprised of several individuals. *One* can mean united in purpose, values, cooperative effort—so to speak as one or in harmony with. *With* (John 1:1) can mean alongside or intermingled together. *God* can mean a person or it can mean a kind of thing: deity (“*and the Word was deity/God*”).

In the trinity issue, *one* is a term that applies to an interpersonal oneness. Consequently, impersonal examples fall short of what involves Father, Son, and Holy Spirit working together. Three states of water, three parts of an egg, three functions/roles of one person (son, father, husband), *etc.*, are likewise inadequate for dealing with observed interpersonal behavior. Hence, Father, Son, Holy Spirit are three-in-one interpersonally at the same time, in the same enterprise, with the same nature, and in all matters where they operate together; but they have variant “rank,” variant complementary roles, and are the on(e)ly persons in the category of deity/Godness.

### Oneness Within the One Deity

The oneness of Father-Son-Spirit is greater than the threeness even as the one flesh of husband-wife is a greater truth than their distinctness. Father, Son, and Spirit are one in nature (deity vs. angels, humanity, animals, plants, or chemicals), purpose, values, corporate unity and common identity as in complementary roles within their total, common functioning. They are also the only deity there is (cp. Deuteronomy 6:4-5). They are one in the sense that husband-wife are one—minus, of course, the physical aspect of humanness.

John 14:16 offers the clearest example of interpersonal co-operation between Father, Son, Spirit within the one God. They operate in unity, and at the same time there is enough distinctness between Son and Father for the Son to pray to the Father, between the Father and Spirit for the Father to send the Spirit, and between the Son and the Spirit for the Spirit to be called another. Any conclusion about their relationship and distinctness must incorporate the features of this passage.

Saying the things above is not to claim understanding “the trinity.” It means only that the relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit is understandable to the point that revelation speaks. The three-in-oneness is not a mathematical absurdity, because they are not three in the same sense that they are one. They are not three before they are one or one before they are three. Likewise, it is not a mystical idea that we affirm but cannot comprehend at all. To say the least, there are boundaries on the lack of understandableness in the issue.

Contrast with Tritheism (a polytheism with three gods)

Efforts at explaining the trinity can be overly affected by concern to avoid the accusation that Christianity teaches a kind of polytheism. The difference between trinity and tritheism lies in the oneness of nature rather than in a situation where there may be levels of deity. There is no idea of sexuality or other kinds of feminine-masculine differences. Trinity differs also in that the polytheistic deities of old and today do not operate as one in all things and exhibit a “division of labor” in doing so. Father, Son, and Spirit are “co-eternal”; scripture does not picture them as one creating the others. They are holy God in that they are self-consistent and interpersonally moral (moral attributes). They are all-powerful, all-knowing, self-existent, and the like (natural attributes). There has never been a deity like our God.

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