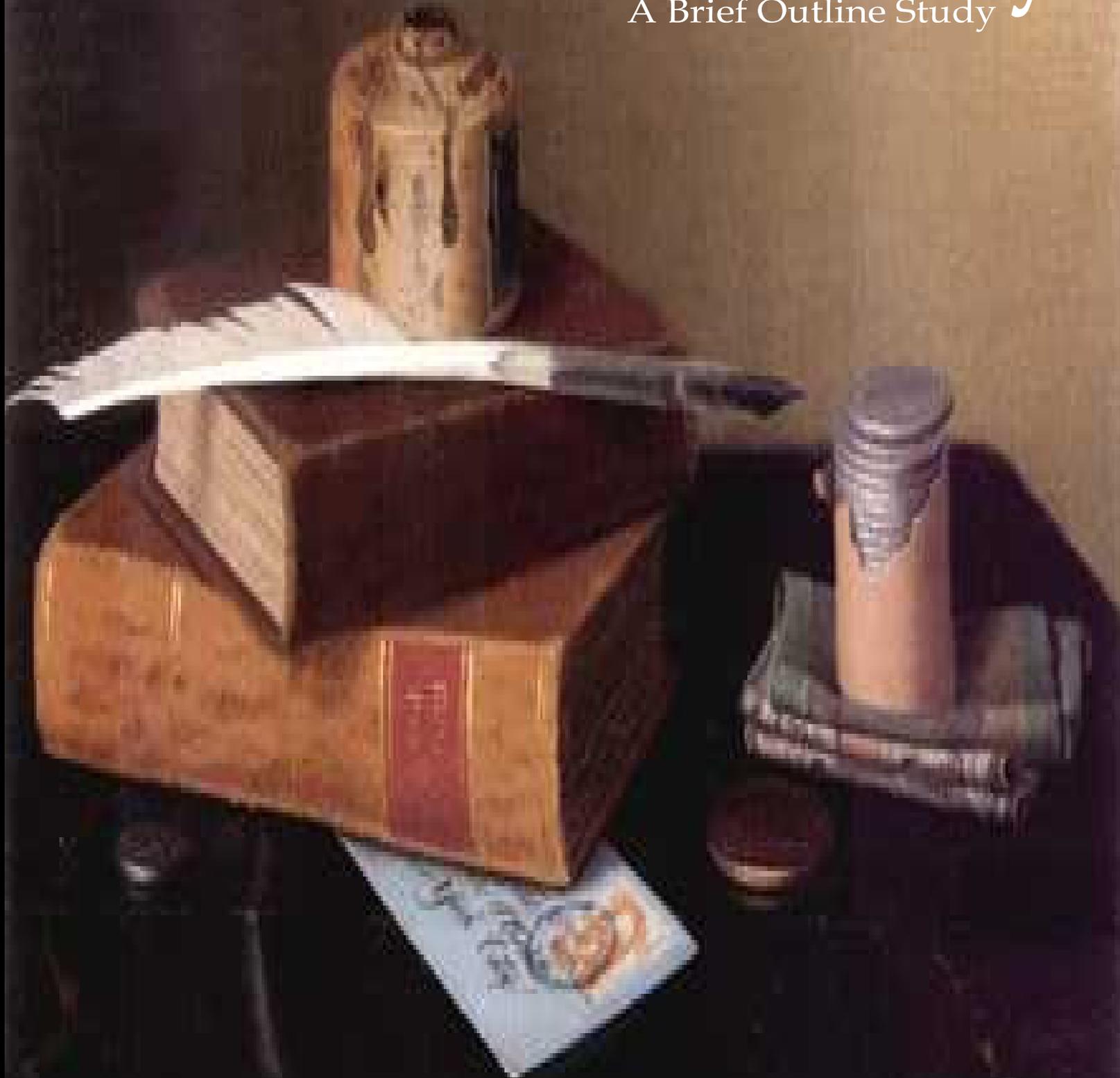


# The Trinity

A Brief Outline Study



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## What Do We Mean By Trinity?

Definition: "There is only one God; and in the unity of the Godhead there are three co-equal, co-eternal, and consubstantial persons; the same in essence, yet distinct in subsistence."

Whoa! What did that theologian say?

Let's see if we can make some sense from the above statement. *Co-equal and co-eternal* are not much of a problem. They simply mean that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are 100% equal and eternal.

However, *consubstantial* and *subsistence* may require some translation. The prefix *con* in *consubstantial* means the same as the prefix com which means having in common with. The word *substantial* is defined by Webster's through the phrases having substance and with regard to essential elements. The word *consubstantial*, then, means common essential substance or elements. In reference to the Trinity it means that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit share in common their essential substance.

The word *subsistence* is defined by Webster's as existence. If something subsists it exists. The phrase *distinct in subsistence* therefore, when applied to the Trinity, means the Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be distinguished from one another in their being.

While this may still leave us wondering *how* such a thing can be, it does tell us *what* the Trinity looks like. This tension will not be relieved through this study. In fact, we will learn to live with it. Better a thing be described than explained so well it loses its beauty.

Note: All references should be read in their contexts.

Note also: The references are but partial listings; and hardly to be considered exhaustive.

1st There is one God.

Deuteronomy 6:4

1 Corinthians 8:4

Isaiah 40:25

James 2:19

2nd the Father is God.

Eph.esians 4:6

John 6:27

3rd the Son, Jesus Christ, is God.

1. His claims: John 5:18; 8:58; 10:30; 14:6,9

2. His attributes: John 1:48; 14:6; Hebrews 1:12; 13:8

3. His works (that only God can do): Mark 2:1-12; Col 1:16,17

4. His names:
  - a. God: Heb. 1:8; Titus 2:13; John 1:1; 20:28,29; Romans 9:5
  - b. Lord (Greek kurios) for Hebrew Yahweh (personal name of God in the Old Testament):
    - Luke 1:71 compare Malachi 3:1
    - Romans 10:13 compare Joel 2:32
    - Phil 2:10,11 compare Is. 45:23; Romans 14:11
  - c. Son of God:
    - John 1:49 compare 1:45 and 1:51
    - Matthew 26:63

(Note on the meaning of "son of": Acts 4:36 has *Son of Consolation* which means The One Who Encourages. Mark 3:17 has *Sons of Thunder* which means Thunderous Men. See also J. Oliver Buswell, "A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion" [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1962], 1:105.)

4th the Holy Spirit is God.

1. He is called God: Acts 5:3,4.
2. He has the attributes of God.
  - a. omniscient: 1 Corinthians 2:10,11 (i.e. all knowing)
  - b. omnipresent: Psalm 139:7 (i.e. everywhere present)
3. He is a person.
  - a. traits of personality
    - i. intellect: 1 Corinthians 2:10,11
    - ii. emotion: Ephesians 4:30
    - iii. volition: 1 Corinthians 12:11
  - b. actions of personality: prayer; Romans 8:26
  - c. related to other persons
    - i. Father and Son: Matthew 28:19
    - ii. Lord Jesus: John 14:16
    - iii. Apostles and Elders: Acts 15:18

4. He does work only God can do.
  - a. creation: Psalm 104:30
  - b. regeneration: John 3:1-8
5. He is equated with Yahweh (God's personal name in the Old Testament).
  - a. Isaiah 6:8-10: compare with Acts 28:25-27
  - b. Jeremiah 31:31-34: compare with Hebrews 10:15-17

5th The three are distinguished from one another. They are distinct in their interrelationship with each other.

1. The Father gives all judgement to the Son: John 5:22
2. The Son prays to the Father for another Counselor, the Holy Spirit: John 14:16
3. The Holy Spirit glorifies the Son: John 16:14

6th The Old Testament evidence for the Trinity.

1. The use of plurals for a singular God: Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Is. 6:8
2. The Angel of Yahweh:
  - a. is God: Ex. 3; Judges 6 and 13
  - b. is distinguished from the Father when He speaks to the Father: Zech. 1:12
3. Some passages indicate a divine Messiah:
 

Psalm 2 and Is. 7:14; 9:6  
 Jer. 23:5,6  
 Psalm 45 compare Heb. 1:8,9

7th Conclusion

1. The Trinity cannot be defined...
  - a. ...modalistically: one God appearing at different times in various forms.
  - b. ...tritheistically: three Gods.
  - c. ...hierarchically: one almighty God with two created beings who have been granted or have attained divinity.

2. The Trinity, instead, is describable.
  - a. The Bible says there is one God.
  - b. The Bible says the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. They are co-equal and co-eternal.
  - c. Therefore, we must conclude that the Trinity involves three conscious personalities in one unity of being.
3. The Trinity is faithful to Scripture.
  - a. It is faithful to monotheism.
  - b. It is faithful to the biblical declarations concerning the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
  - c. It does not divide the essence of God.
  - d. It does not destroy the personality of the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit.
4. The Trinity stands above the complaint, "But God does not leave us without total understanding!"
  - a. The Trinity sticks to the facts:
    - i. it leaves nothing out
    - ii. it adds nothing to
  - b. The Trinity is reasonable:
    - i. Who says we must fully understand the mind of God? Not the Bible (see Deuteronomy 29:29). In fact, logic dictates that we cannot know all that God knows. We can only know what God reveals about himself. The notion that God must fit into a box that we completely understand is the unreasonable position.
    - ii. It meets every philosophical demand.
      - it accounts for the order of the universe, because in the beginning there was a thinking, personal, communicating, creative God
      - it accounts for the personality of humans, because intrinsic to man's creator is not only intellect, emotion, and will, but also communication (Father, Son and Holy Spirit converse)
    - iii. It stands among other doctrines which can be described, but not exhaustively explained.
      - The sovereignty of God and the responsibility of man

- The incarnation of Jesus Christ: fully God, fully man
- The inspiration of the Bible: the authorship of the Holy Spirit through the distinctive responsibilities of several men

## Two interpretive complaints by the Jehovah Witnesses

1st John 1:1

In John 1:1 we read, "*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*" There really can be no mistake as to what John has in mind (unless we read our theology into the text, as do the Jehovah's Witnesses). A few inches further along in his text John tells us that "*the Word became flesh and dwelt among us*" (vs. 14). Of course, we know that he is referring to Jesus of Nazareth—a man that John and his audience were deeply interested in, a man whom John refers to as *the Word of God*. But notice the distinctive features of the Word. He was in the beginning—he existed before the first century. He was with God—the verb *was* and the preposition *with* indicate a settled state. There is no motion linked with this phrase. The *Word* did not come to be with God. Neither did the *Word* move into a position with God. He simply was with God. And the third phrase of John 1:1 says that *the Word was God*. Just because the Jehovah Witnesses organization chooses to translate this as “the Word was a god” does nothing to detract from the real meaning.

Two factors make this clear. First the absence of the Greek article (the) does not imply that an indefinite English article (a) must be inserted. The absence of the Greek article does not imply an indefinite character as to the noun (i.e. God), but rather it serves to emphasize the quality of the noun. In this present case the noun is *theos* (God). The absence of the article by John probably means that he wished his reader to see that qualitatively the *Word* is deity. Deity to the Hebrew, which John was, meant God Almighty. There was no other. This qualitative stress upon a noun is often seen in a statement's predicate when that statement utilizes an equative ("to be") verb like the verb *is*. Another example of this construction is found in 1 John 4:8, where we find the phrase "*for God is love.*" Here the subject, *God*, has the article (as does *Word* in John 1:1c), while the secondary noun, *love*, does not. However, it would be absurd to think that John was saying, "*for God is a love.*" It is abundantly clear that, in this phrase from his first letter, John is laying stress on a quality of God. That is, a definite quality of God is that he is love. He epitomizes love. Likewise, in John 1:1, the *Word was God*—the *Word* epitomizes God.

The second factor that substantiates all major translations of John 1:1c as "*and the Word was God*" is the context. Verse two tells us that the *Word* is eternal. Verse three tells us that the *Word* is the Creator. And verse four tells us that the *Word* is the life—he intrinsically possesses life apart from an originator. These characteristics, in the Hebrew's thinking, belonged only to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—the One True God.

Hence, from this title, we learn that the person, Jesus Christ, is God.

2nd Colossians 1:15: What is the meaning of "*the firstborn over all creation?*"

The J.W.'s use this as a text to support the view that Christ was created by God (i.e. "the first of God's creation"). Can they do this with integrity? The answer, of course, is no. This is demonstrated

from two separate perspectives. The first involves the meaning of "firstborn" (*prototokos*). The second involves the context in which the word is found.

First, then, let's define the word. The Bible allows for two primary meanings: the first in sequence and the first in rank or preeminence. In the Greek translation of the Old Testament (known as the Septuagint), the translators used *prototokos* (the word in question from Col. 1:15) to render the Hebrew word meaning "firstborn." And, in the Old Testament, we can see the word used as both first in sequence and first in preeminence. The former is discerned when used for an oldest son (Ex. 6:14; 11:5). To the oldest son went certain privileges: receiving the father's blessing (Gen. 27:1-4); leadership among the siblings (Gen. 37:22); twice as much inheritance (Deut. 21:17); etc. However, the latter meaning can also be seen. For example, the nation Israel was considered God's firstborn (Ex. 4:22). In this sense, the meaning clearly refers to a preferential status. Among the states of earth, Israel was preeminent in God's plans. Also, Messianic prophecy referred to the coming Christ as the firstborn. In this instance, Psalm 89:27, the meaning is also that of preeminence. The context informs us that "his hand will be over the sea, and his right hand over the rivers" and he will be "the highest of the kings of the earth" (Psalm 89:25,27). It would be nonsense to think of either Israel as the very first nation on record or the Messiah as the very first king on record.

The New Testament also uses *prototokos* for both meanings. In Luke 2:7, Jesus is called the firstborn of Mary. Clearly, this is a reference to our Lord's birthorder among Mary's children (Mark 6:3; John 7:5). However, in Hebrews 1:6 the meaning of preeminence is easily discerned. The passage readily states that Jesus Christ is exalted above the angels. The meaning cannot imply "the first of God's creation" above the angels, because the passage explicitly teaches that Jesus Christ is God. In Hebrews 1:8 we read, "But to the Son He says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.'" And, in verse nine, we read, "...therefore God, your God, has anointed you." This is not language applied to a created being. Obviously, we have at least two options from which to choose when attempting to define the meaning of *prototokos* in Col. 1:15.

Second then, we come to where all diligent Bible students must always come—the context in which a word is embedded. For it is of far greater importance to understand the meaning of the entire passage than simply the technical definitions of individual words. So, consider the overall intent of the Apostle Paul in this letter to the Colossian believers: he was advocating for the preeminence of Christ Jesus over the angelic beings and legalistic systems to which the Colossian believers were being misdirected. In 2:15, Paul tells us that Christ "disarmed principalities and powers." This hierarchy of spiritual beings (cf. 2:18) were far and away subordinate to Jesus. Why? Paul made it abundantly clear when, in 2:9, he wrote, "For in him (Jesus Christ) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." If Paul desired the Colossian believers to steer clear of worshipping this pantheon of spiritual beings and, instead, to give themselves fully to Christ Jesus, surely he would never have used terminology that would add fuel to the fire of the very heresy he wanted to refute.

This brings us back to the immediate context of *prototokos*—chapter one and verses fifteen through twenty. Jesus is first referred to as "the image of the invisible God." Were the J.W.'s correct, the meaning of this phrase must be that God created someone who possessed his very image. This would include his character and his attributes. Anything less would never fully represent who and what God is (cf. Heb. 1:3). Are we to believe God created a clone? Ridiculous.

But notice also that verse sixteen says, "For by him (Jesus Christ) all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through him and for him." We need to ask ourselves

one simple question, "Who, and who alone, did the Apostle Paul—a Hebrew among Hebrews—know to be the Creator? Only God.

Notice also, that verse seventeen says of Jesus that "*He is before all things, and in him all things consist.*" Once again, who does the Bible declare as the eternal and creative sustainer of all creation (Gen. 1:1; Job 38:4-6; 31-33)? God alone.

And, then (though we've only barely commented on this spectacular passage), notice verse nineteen: "*For it pleased the Father that in him all the fullness should dwell.*" What is the meaning of this? The word "*fullness*" is key. It simply means "that of which a thing is full." It means the object in question is complete and lacking nothing. Obviously, in keeping with the tenor of the context, passage, and letter, Paul is stating that Jesus Christ—the very expression of all that God is and the creator and sustainer of all creation—is fully, completely, and wholly all that something created could never be. He is Almighty God!

Finally, let's remember the false teaching which Paul confronted, in this letter to the Colossians, taught that Jesus Christ was one among many spiritual entities to worship (1:16; 2:15,18). This wrong view of Christ considered our Lord Jesus as less than the Almighty Creator God (precisely what the J.W.'s and other Arian cults do). Would Paul turn the tables on himself by saying something about Jesus (i.e. he was "the first of God's creation") that would support the very view he was attempting to overcome? Absurd.

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