

# THE TRINITY

## WHAT THE EVANGELICAL CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH BELIEVES

Together the vast majority of Christians, past and present, the Evangelical Congregational Church affirms belief in the Triune God. The first Article of Faith states:

*There is but one true and living God, an eternal Being, a Spirit without body, indivisible, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness, the Creator and Preserver of all things, visible and invisible. In this Godhead there is a Trinity, of one substance and power, and co-eternal, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.*

This article teaches two important Christian truths: there is only one true God; and this one God exists as three "Persons," namely, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This statement also denies some false teachings about God that arose early in the history of the church. We do not believe in three separate Gods (tri-theism). Nor do we understand the Persons simply as three different roles God plays, or masks He wears, at different times (modalism). Rather we believe that the three Persons exist eternally in fellowship with one another and that they cooperate in the works of creation and redemption. The account of the baptism of Jesus clearly shows the three Persons present and active at the same time. The Spirit descended as a dove and the Father said, "*This is my beloved Son*" (Matthew 3:16-17).

Although the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible, the teaching has its root and foundation there. In a benediction upon the Corinthian Church, Paul prayed that "*the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God and the communion of the Holy Spirit*" might be with them (2 Corinthians 13:14). Earlier in this same epistle, the Apostle had taught that "*there are diversities of gifts of grace, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of services, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities but the same God, who is effecting all things in all*" (I Corinthians 12:4-6). Father, Son, and Spirit, then, are each present and active in the church with equal power to bless the people of God.

Because of the seemingly contradictory nature of belief in the Trinity, this doctrine has been - and still is - denied by some. The idea of Trinity has been ridiculed as a logical absurdity which says that  $1+1+1=1$ . In response to this kind of "reasoning," one Christian scholar points out, "If one stresses logic and notes that something can be three in one respect and one in a different respect, the problem of the Trinity vanishes so far as this supposedly logical contradiction is concerned. A corporation may consist of three officers and be one corporation." While this illustration (or any other, for that matter) does not exhaust the mystery of the Trinity, it does serve to show that the concept is neither foolish nor illogical.

To say that the doctrine of the Trinity does not violate the laws of thought, however, is not to say that it was, or could have been, discovered by unaided human reasoning. We base our belief in the triune nature of God on the teachings of the Bible in the same way that we do all the other Christian doctrines. Briefly stated, the Trinity is an inescapable conclusion from the scriptural teachings that there is only one God, that Jesus Christ is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.

Both Old and New Testaments insist that there is only one true God. "*Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me*" (Isaiah 46:9). This basic theological truth is taken for granted in the New Testament. James, for example, observes,

*"You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that - and shudder"* (James 2:19).

That the New Testament writers (who believed in the one God of the Old Testament!) recognized Jesus as God may be seen in many places. The Apostle John wrote, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and **the Word was God**"* (John 1:1). This Word is none other than Jesus Christ as John 1:14 makes clear: *"And the Word became flesh and lived for a while among us."* To this Paul adds, *"In Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form"* (Colossians 2:9).

Further compelling, though indirect, biblical proof that Jesus is God is seen in the fact that the New Testament writers give to Him many important titles, powers and prerogatives which the Old Testament ascribes to god. Both Jesus and God are *"The first and the last"* (Revelation 1:17; Isaiah 41:4). Both Jesus and God forgive sins (Luke 5:20; Jeremiah 31:34). Both Jesus and God speak eternal words (Matthew 24:35; Isaiah 40:8). The force of these parallels is enhanced by the fact that God said, *"My glory I will not give to another!"* (Isaiah 48:11). We are compelled to conclude, then, that Jesus of Nazareth is none other than Yahweh (Jehovah), the covenant God of the Old Testament, who has come to us in human form in order to suffer and die for our sins and to rise for our justification (Romans 4:25).

To complete the trinitarian picture, let us note that some things said of God in the Old Testament are also referred to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. The words of God (Isaiah 6:9) are the words of the Holy Spirit (Acts 28:25). To lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God (Acts 5:3-4). And believers are called the temple of God because the Holy Spirit dwells in them (1 Corinthians 3:16; Ephesians 2:22).

This indwelling Holy Spirit is not a mechanical force or impersonal influence. He is the third **Person** of the Holy Trinity, and He is referred to in the New Testament with words and phrases that are used of persons. The Holy Spirit speaks: *"Set apart for **me** Barnabas and Saul for the work to which **I** have called them"* (Acts 13:2). Jesus said of the Spirit, *"...**He** will guide you into all truth...**He** will bring glory to me..."* (John 16:13-14). We are not to *"grieve the Holy Spirit of God"* (Ephesians 4:30). He is the One who teaches us (John 14:26) and intercedes for us (Romans 8:26). A "force" could not be grieved by us or intercede for us.

In speaking of the Trinity, then, the Fathers of the church were not trying to invent a deep mystery or a bemusing puzzle. They were simply expressing a truth forced upon them by the Word of God. And this truth has very practical consequences for our faith and practice as Christians. When early Christians were accused of idolatry because they worshipped Jesus, they rejected the charge. Jesus is God and therefore worthy of our adoration. And, they reasoned, that God alone, no mere man or even an angel, could save us from our sin and give us the gift of eternal life. To deny the Trinity, the Fathers knew, would be to change the Christian faith at its very foundation.

We are compelled by Scripture, then, to affirm that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. However, we must be careful not to confuse the Persons of the Trinity so as to obscure their unique identities. As an ancient diagram of the trinitarian doctrine makes clear, the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit. Each is a distinct personal center of consciousness within the one God. And each plays a role in the drama of redemption.

Salvation has its source in the loving heart of the Father. As the best-known verse in the Bible says, *"God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son"* (John 3:16). But it was the Son, not the Father, who accomplished salvation through His death and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3). If we pray with understanding, then, we will not say, as some do, "Heavenly Father, thank You for dying on the cross for us!" Further, it is the Spirit who convicts men and women of sin and applies the blessings of salvation to those who believe (1 Thessalonians 1:5; 1 Corinthians 2:4).

This "division of labor" among the Persons of the Trinity must not be allowed to hide a deep underlying unity among them. It was through the eternal Spirit that Christ offered Himself to God (Hebrews 9:14). The Spirit may be called the Spirit of God (1 Corinthians 2:11) as well as the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:19). Through the presence of the Holy Spirit, both the Father and the Son

are present with the believer (John 14:23). To deny the Son is to deny the Father as well; to acknowledge the Son is to have the Father also (1 John 2:22, 23). Hence every true believer is in fellowship with the whole triune God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. One cannot have only a part of the Trinity!

This close cooperation among the Persons of the Trinity may be seen most clearly in the pentecostal outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the New Testament church (Acts 2) in fulfillment of Jesus' promise (Luke 3:15-16). It was the exalted Christ who poured out the Holy Spirit which He (Jesus), in turn, had received from the Father (Acts 2:33). In a real sense, then, Pentecost was not simply the coming of the Holy Spirit. It was Christ's (and the Father's) personal coming to the church, promised earlier to the disciples (John 14:23).

The Holy Spirit never operates independently of, nor adds to, the work of Christ. The Spirit witnesses to the things of Christ and applies them to our hearts. Whenever a penitent sinner receives Jesus as Savior, he or she is baptized by [literally 'in' or 'with'] the Holy Spirit, is "given the Spirit to drink" (1 Corinthians 12:13), and thus is indwelt by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Along with this "Holy Spirit baptism" comes one or more of the gifts (*charismata*) of the Spirit which He distributes to the church as He wills (1 Corinthians 12:11), the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), and the exhortation to be continually filled with the Spirit (Ephesians 5:18).

The evidence of the fullness of the Spirit is not speaking in tongues, working miracles, or possessing any one of the gifts mentioned in the New Testament. Christians do not all have the same gifts (Romans 12:6). And it is possible to have gifts of the Spirit and still be unspiritual. This was precisely the case in the Corinthian Church (1 Corinthians 3:3). Nevertheless, all Christians are exhorted to show forth the Christ-like character reflected in the fruit of the Spirit which is "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23). It is impossible for a Christian showing forth the fruit of the Spirit to be unspiritual.

A biblical balance regarding the nature and working of God will keep us from over-emphasizing one Person of the Trinity to the neglect of the others. The aim of the Spirit's work is that Christ may dwell in our hearts by faith, that we may grasp the love of Christ, and in this way be "*filled to the measure of the fullness of God*" (Ephesians 3:16-18).