

God's Nature: Trinity vs Oneness

Overview

Trinitarians believe in one God in three persons while Oneness teaches one God in one person.

Points of Agreement

Both Trinitarians and Oneness believers hold to the following:

1. One and only one God.
2. The Father is God, Jesus is God, and the Holy Spirit is God.
3. Jesus is the virgin born, only begotten Son of God.
4. Jesus is both God and human.
5. Jesus is the only man to conquer sin and death.
6. Jesus' death on the cross pays for our sin.
7. Jesus rose bodily from the dead.
8. Jesus is the head of creation and the head of the church.
9. God is not limited in time.
10. God knows the future with certainty and can foreordain a plan with certainty.
11. The Bible is the source of all spiritual truth and is inerrant.

Origins of Oneness

- I. Sabelius taught Oneness theology (Modalism) and was excommunicated in 220 AD.
- II. Modern Oneness teaching began in 1913 with R. T. McAlister in Los Angeles.
- III. The Assemblies of God excommunicated Oneness teachers c.1915.
- IV. Modern Oneness groups include the United Pentecostal Church International and many independent Pentecostal churches which generally refer to themselves as Apostolic.

What Oneness Teaches

A modern authoritative source for Oneness teaching is *The Oneness of God* by David K. Bernard.

- I. The Bible uses the term "Son of God" but never uses the term "God the Son." Son of God is the physical incarnation of the one God, or the way which God appeared to mankind. Son of God always refers to the humanity of Jesus and never the deity.
- II. The Father existed before the Son. The Son had a beginning point and will have an ending. "Son of God" is a temporary role that has a beginning and an end.
 - a. "Except as a foreordained plan in the mind of God, the Son did not have pre-existence before the conception in the womb of Mary. The Son of God pre-existed in thought but not in substance." (Bernard, 1.103)
 - b. "The Son of God had a beginning." (Bernard, 104)
 - c. "The Son was begotten on a specific day in time; there was a time when the Son did not exist; God prophesied about the Son's future existence ("will be"); and God brought the Son into the world sometime after the creation of the angels." (Bernard, 1.105)

- d. ““Son of God” refers to a specific role that God temporarily assumed for the purpose of redemption. When the reasons for the Sonship cease to exist, God (Jesus) will cease acting in His role as Son, and the Sonship will be submerged back into the greatness of God, who will return to His original role as Father, Creator, and Ruler of all.” (Bernard, 1.106)
 - e. “After Satan is cast into the lake of fire and all sin is judged at the last judgement (Revelation 20), there will be no further need for the Son to exercise the throne of power. Jesus Christ will cease acting in His Sonship role and will be God forever.” (Bernard, 1.107)
 - f. “The Sonship is temporary and not eternal; in the Bible we are told when the Sonship began and when the ministry of the Sonship will end.” (Bernard, 1.114)
- III. The Trinity is false.
- a. “The Son of God is not a separate person in the Godhead, but the physical expression of the one God.” (Bernard, 1.99)
 - b. “God used the name of Jesus as the culminated revelation of His nature . . . ” (Bernard, 1.112)
 - c. “Once again, we see that the Son is a visible manifestation of the Father in the flesh. . . In other words, the invisible God (Father) manifested Himself in the visible flesh as the Son so that men could behold God’s glory and could understand what God is truly like.” (1.115)
 - d. “We understand that the son is not distinct from the Father in personality, but is the mode by which the Father revealed Himself to man.” (Bernard, 1.115)
 - e. “The deity of Jesus is none other than the Father Himself.” (Bernard, 1.115)
 - f. “We know that the verses of Scripture that speak of creation by the Son cannot mean the Son existed substantially at creation as a person apart from the Father.” (Bernard, 1.117)
 - g. “God the Father so loved the world that He robed Himself in flesh and gave Himself as the Son of God to reconcile the world to Himself.” (Bernard, 1.122)
- IV. Jesus is mediator only as a man.
- a. “There are *not* two personalities in God; the duality is in Jesus as God and Jesus as man. It is not God who mediates between God and man; nor is it “God the Son” who does so. Rather it is the *man* Jesus who mediates; only a sinless man could approach a holy God on behalf of mankind.” (Bernard, 1.110)
- V. Baptism & Salvation
- a. Baptism should be only done with the exact words “In Jesus name” and not with a Trinitarian formula.
 - b. Baptism will always result in speaking in tongues, which is the evidence of the receiving of the Holy Spirit.
 - c. Unless a person is baptized “in Jesus name” and speaks in tongues, he is not saved.

Origins of the Trinity

- I. Many non-Trinitarians claim the Trinity was invented at the Council of Nicea in 325 AD. This is incorrect.
 - a. Theophilus of Antioch (c.169 – c.183) was the first to use the word Trinity. Scholar Philip Schaff says “The earliest use of this word ‘Trinity.’ It seems to have been used by this writer in his lost works, also; and, as a learned friends suggests, the use he makes of it is familiar. He does not lug it in as something novel: ‘types of the Trinity,’ he says,

illustrating an accepted word, not introducing a new one.” (Schaff, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2, 101)

- b. Athenagoras the Athenian (c. 177): “Father and Son being one”; The Son being in the Father and the Father in the Son, in oneness and power of spirit.”; Son was not brought into existence; “The Holy Spirit Himself”; “God the Father and God the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”; “The oneness of the Son with the Father”; “The communion of the Father with the Son”; “The unity of these three, the Spirit, the Son, the Father, and their distinction in unity” (A. Roberts, Ante-Nicene Fathers, 133-134; Schaff, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2, 133)
- c. Clement of Alexandria (c. 192): “I understand nothing else than the Holy Trinity to be meant; for the third is the Holy Spirit, and the Son is the second, by whom all things were made according to the will of the Father.” (Stromata, Book V, Chapter 14) (when trying to build a case that Plato plagiarized from the Hebrews)
- d. Clement of Alexandria (c. 192): “and put a ring on his hand’ Here is the mystery of the Trinity, which is the seal impressed on those who believe.” (Schaff, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 2, 583) (when commenting on Luke 15:22)
- e. Tertullian (220): “When a ray is projected from the sun it is a portion of the whole sun; but the sun will be in the ray because it is a ray of the sun; the substance is not separated but extended. ... This ray of God...glided down into a virgin, in her womb was fashioned as flesh” (Documents of the Christian Church, 34)
- f. Tertullian (220): “We define that there are two, the Father and the Son, and three with the Holy Spirit . . . [which] brings about unity in Trinity, interrelating the three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. . . They are of one substance and power, because there is one god from whom these degrees, forms, and kinds devolve in the name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.” (Prescription Against Heretics, 23)
- g. Dionysius, Bishop of Rome (259-268): “For the Divine Word must of necessity be united to the God of the Universe, and the Holy Spirit must have his habitation and abode in God; thus it is absolutely necessary that the Divine Triad be summed up and gathered into a unity, brought as it were to an apex, and by that Unity I mean the all sovereign God of the Universe. ... For thus both the Holy Triad and the holy preaching of the Monarchy will be preserved.” (Documents of the Christian Church, 35)
- h. Gregory the Great (Gregorius Thaumaturgus) (c.270): “There is one God, the Father of the living Word. . . the Father of the only-begotten Son. There is one LORD, one of one (only of the only), God of God, the image and likeness of the Godhead, the mighty Word. . . the power which produces all creation; the true *Son* of the true Father, Invisible of Invisible, and Incorruptible of Incorruptible, and Immortal of Immortal, and Everlasting of Everlasting. And there is one Holy Ghost, having his existence from God, and being manifested by the Son. . . God the Father, who is over all things and in all things, and God the Son, who is through all things: a perfect Trinity, not divided nor differing in glory and eternity and sovereignty. Neither, indeed, is there any thing created or subservient in the Trinity, nor introduced, as though not there before but coming in afterwards; nor indeed, has the Son ever been without the Father, nor the Spirit without the Son, but the Trinity is ever the same, unvarying and unchangeable.” (Schaff, Creeds of Christendom, Vol 2, p.24-25)
- i. Alexander of Alexandria (319) preached about “The Great Mystery of Trinity in Unity.” Arius attacked, claiming that Jesus was less than the true God, and of a different essence than the father. This contributed to the Council of Nicea in 325, which settled

the matter in favor of what was always taught, the Trinity. Arius was denounced a heretic and excommunicated from Christianity. (E. Cairns, 133, 134)

Ecumenical Councils

- I. Nicea (325 & 381 AD) The Jesus the Son has always existed
 - a. But as for those who say, There was when He was not, and, Before being born He was not, and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is subject to alteration or change – these the Catholic and apostolic Church anathematizes.
- II. Chalcedon (451 AD)
 - a. When God is believed to be both almighty and Father, the Son is clearly proved to be co-eternal with him, in no way different from the Father, since he was born God from God, almighty from the Almighty, co-eternal from the Eternal, not later in time, not lower in power, not unlike in glory, not distinct in being. The same eternal, only-begotten of the eternal begetter was born of the holy Spirit and the virgin Mary.

Biblical Basis for the Trinity

- I. One and only one God:
 - a. Isaiah 43:10: You *are* My witnesses,” says the LORD, “And My servant whom I have chosen, That you may know and believe Me, And understand that I *am* He. Before Me there was no God formed, Nor shall there be after Me.”
- II. The Father is God:
 - a. 1 Cor. 8:6: “There is one God, the Father . . .”
 - b. The phrase “God the Father” appears 80 times in the Bible.
- III. Jesus is God:
 - a. Jesus claimed to be YHWH (John 8:58, cf. Exodus 3:14)
 - b. Jesus accepted worship.
 - c. Jesus / YHWH said “I am the first and I am the last.” (Rev. 1:17, 22:13, 16; cf. Is. 44:6)
 - d. Jesus said He was equal with the Father (John 5:18; Phil. 2:6)
- IV. The Holy Spirit is God and is a Person:
 - a. Lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God (Acts 5:3-4)
 - b. “The Holy Spirit said, “Now separate unto Me Barnabas . . .”(Acts 13:2)
- V. The Father, the Son, & the Holy Spirit are all distinct persons:
 - a. The Father speaks to the Son (Heb. 1:8-9; Matt. 3:17)
 - b. The Son speaks to the Father (John 17)
 - c. The three appear together (Matt. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 13:14)

- d. Zech. 12:10 “They will look on Me whom they have pierced, and they will mourn for Him...” (cf.12:1)
 - e. “He was in the beginning with God.” (John 1:2)
 - f. We know Jesus was not made & did not have a beginning (John 1:3; Rev. 1:17)
 - g. “If anyone loves Me, he will keep my word; and My Father will love him, and We will come to him and make Our home with him.” (John 14:23)
- VI. Conclusion: The three persons are the one God.

Summary

1. The Trinity was taught in the Bible and by early church fathers. It was not a later invention.
2. Modalism (Sabelianism) was declared a heresy in the early church.
3. Analogies of the Trinity usually break down and should not be used.
4. Those who deny the Trinity almost always have some major false teaching about salvation.