

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Three Persons

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1



Many Christians, without knowing it, hold a false view of the Trinity simply due to their inability to articulate the difference between believing in one *Being* of God and three *persons* sharing that one Being. As a result, even orthodox Christian believers slip into an ancient heresy known by many names: modalism, Sabellianism, Patripassionism. Today this same error is called Oneness or the “Jesus Only” position. Whatever its name might be, it is a denial of the Trinity based

upon a denial of the distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It accepts the truth that there is only one true God, and that the Father, Son, and Spirit are fully God, but it denies that the Bible differentiates between the persons. Instead, advocates of this position either believe that the Father is the Son, and the Son is the Spirit, and the Spirit is the Father (the old actor on the stage example, wearing different masks to “play” different parts, but always being the same person), or they make the Son merely the “human nature” of Christ (hence denying His eternal nature). Jesus then becomes two “persons,” the Father and the Son, the Father being the deity, the Son the human nature.

Most other groups who deny the Trinity do so thinking that orthodox Christian believers actually embrace some form of modalism. That is, many times Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses will attack the Trinity on grounds that are really only relevant to the Oneness or modalistic position. They will point to the baptism of Jesus and say, “Well, was Jesus a ventriloquist or something?” The Oneness position is, in fact, liable to all sorts of refutation on the basis of Scripture, so it is easy to see why many who wish to deny the Trinity *prefer* to attack this perversion of it rather than the real thing. Christians who love the Trinity must be very quick to correct those who think that orthodox believers embrace a form of modalism—one *what*, three *whos*. That is the issue.

Scripture leaves no room for confusing the Father, Son, and Spirit. A brief survey of some of the more blatant ways in which this is confirmed will suffice for our purposes here. But do not think the brevity of the review indicates the issue is unimportant. As John taught,

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Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:23)

Such a passage not only clearly differentiates between the Father and the Son, but it warns us how important God considers the truth about His nature.

FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT

2

The scriptural truth that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Spirit, is rather easily demonstrated. We begin with the fact that the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father—actions incomprehensible outside of recognizing that the Father is a separate divine person from the Son:

“The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand” (John 3:35).

“For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, so that you will marvel” (John 5:20).

Just as the Father loves the Son, so the Son loves His disciples. The disciples are separate persons from the Son; hence, the Father is a separate person from the Son as well:

“Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love” (John 15:9).

“I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world” (John 17:23–24).

Certainly the best known example of the existence of three persons is the baptism of Jesus recorded in Matthew 3:16–17:

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”

Here the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is being baptized (and is again described as being the object of the Father’s love, paralleling the passages just cited from John), and

Lion and Lamb Apologetics

the Spirit is descending as a dove. Jesus is not speaking to himself but is spoken to by the Father. There is no confusing of the persons at the baptism of the Lord Jesus.

The transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17:1–9 again demonstrates the separate personhood of the Father and the Son:

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!” (Matthew 17:5).

The Son’s true preexistent glory is unveiled for an instant in the presence of the Father in the cloud. Communication again takes place, marked with the familiar love of the Father for the Son. Both the deity and the separate personhood of the Son are clearly presented in this passage. The Father spoke to the Son at another time, recorded in John 12:28:

“Father, glorify Your name.” There came then a voice out of heaven: “I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again” (John 12:28).

Again, the distinction of the person of the Father and of the Son is clearly maintained. This is a conversation, not a monologue.

Some of the most obvious passages relevant to the Father and the Son are found in the prayers of Jesus Christ. These are not mock prayers—Jesus is not speaking to himself (nor, as the Oneness writer would put it, is Jesus’ humanity speaking to His deity)—He is clearly communicating with another person, that being the person of the Father. Transcendent heights are reached in the lengthiest prayer we have, that of John 17. No one can miss the fact of the communication of one person (the Son) with another (the Father) presented in this prayer. Note just a few examples of how the Son refers to the Father as a separate person:

Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:1–3).

The usage of personal pronouns and direct address puts the very language squarely on the side of maintaining the separate personhood of Father and Son. This is not to say that their unity is something that is a mere unity of purpose; indeed, given the background of the Old Testament, the very statements of the Son regarding His relationship with the Father are among the strongest assertions of His deity in the Bible.

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Striking is the example of Matthew 27:46, where Jesus, quoting from Psalm 22:1, cries out, “My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?” That the Father is the immediate person addressed is clear from Luke’s account, where the next statement from Jesus in his narrative is “Father, into your hands I commit My spirit” (Luke 23:46).¹ That this is the Son addressing the Father is crystal clear, and the ensuing personhood of both is inarguable.



Jesus’ words in Matthew 11:27 almost seem to be more at home in the gospel of John than in Matthew:

“All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*” (Matthew 11:27).

Here the reciprocal relationship between the Father and Son is put forth with exactness, while at the same time dictating the absolute deity of both. Only God has the authority to “hand over all things,” and no mere creature could ever be the recipient of the control of “all things” either. Jesus “reveals” the Father to those He wills to do so. Obviously, two divine persons are in view here.

It is just as clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is never identified as the Father by the apostle Paul but is shown to be another person besides the Father. A large class of examples of this would be the greetings in the epistles of Paul. In Romans 1:7 we read, “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” The same greeting is found in 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; and Philippians 1:2.

A COUPLE OF MISUSED PASSAGES

There are only a few passages that can be appealed to in the attempt to confuse the persons of the Father and the Son. Most are found in the gospel of John where the full deity of Christ is so strongly emphasized. Yet that Gospel is tremendously clear in its

¹ The words of Jesus at Matthew 27:46 have come in for many kinds of interpretation. Unfortunately, many of the theories have compromised the Bible’s teachings on the nature of the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father was never separated from or abandoned the Son. This truth is clear from many sources. Jesus uses the second person when speaking to the Father — “why have *You* forsaken Me?” rather than “why did *He* forsake Me?” as if the Father is no longer present. Immediately on the heels of this statement Jesus speaks to the Father (“Father, into your hands ...”), showing no sense of separation. Whatever else Jesus was saying, He was not saying that, at the very time of His ultimate obedience to the Father, the Father abandoned Him. Rather, it seems much more logical to see this as a quotation of Psalm 22 that is meant to call to mind all of that Psalm, which would include the victory of v. 19ff, as well as verse 24, which states, “For He has not despised nor abhorred the affliction of the afflicted; neither has He hidden His face from him; but when he cried to Him for help, He heard.”

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

witness to the existence of three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. One of the most often cited passages is from Jesus' words in John 14:

Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works" (John 14:9–10).

5

Some insist that when Jesus says, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father," this is the same as saying, "I am the Father." But this ignores the very words that follow, where the Lord distinguishes himself from the Father by saying the Father abides in Him and does His (the Father's) works through Him. The truth that Jesus teaches here, however, does support the full deity of Christ, for no mere creature could ever say, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." Jesus' words here do not make Him the Father, but they do tell us that the unity that exists between Father and Son is far more than a mere unity of purpose or intention. The Son reveals the Father, or to use the words of John himself, "He has explained² Him" (John 1:18).

The single most popular passage cited in defense of modalism, however, is one that is often cited in defense of the deity of Christ:

"I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

In this context, the assertion would be that the Father and the Son are one person. Yet this is not what the passage says at all. In fact, the simple citation of the passage, without due regard to its context and meaning, neither proves the modalistic viewpoint *nor* the deity of Christ! Its witness to the truth about Christ comes from the context, which is most often ignored.

Literally, the passage reads, "I and the Father, *we* are one." The verb translated "are" is *plural* in the Greek. Jesus is not saying, "I am the Father." The distinction between the Son and the Father remains even in the verb He uses. And in context, He is making specific reference to the oneness He shares with the Father in the redemption of His sheep:

"And I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand" (John 10:28–29).

² The Greek here is simply beautiful, as noted in chapter 4 on the prologue of John, footnote 25.

Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

This is the context of Jesus' statement, "I and the Father are one." They are one in giving eternal life, they are one in protecting the sheep, they are one in the covenant of redemption. All this must be said simply to be honest with the passage. And once we see what Jesus is speaking about, we can understand how this passage does, in fact, teach the deity of Christ, for no creature could claim this kind of oneness in redemption with the Father. Eternal life is divine life, and Jesus gives it to His own. God's people are in the Son's hand and are likewise in the Father's hand (cf. Colossians 3:3), and hence are safe and secure in their almighty grip. The Father has given a people to the Son and will not suffer any of them to be lost (cf. John 6:37–39). Here is the oneness that exists between the Father and the Son—a oneness in redemption. Yet since redemption is a divine act, here we have the testimony to the deity of Christ, for no apostle, no prophet, can be said to be "one" with the Father in saving believers in the way announced here. No mere creature can have this kind of perfect unity of purpose and action. No, Jesus Christ must be perfect deity to be able to say of himself in reference to redemption, "I and the Father are one."

JESUS CHRIST: ONE PERSON WITH TWO NATURES

If Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, we are tempted to begin asking all sorts of questions concerning just how the "God-man" could exist. Thankfully, the Scriptures safeguard this unique and special act of the Incarnation and do not bow to our inordinate desire to know things God has not chosen to reveal. Instead, we are only given certain guidelines, certain truths that help us to avoid wandering off into error. We can say that the early church was correct in coming to the conclusion (at the Council of Chalcedon in a.d. 451) that Jesus Christ is one person with two natures, divine and human. He is not two persons, nor are His natures somehow mixed together so that He is not *truly* divine or *truly* man. He is both, concurrently, because He has both natures.

As we noted above, the prayers of Christ are very important in recognizing the separate person of the Son from the Father. Jesus was not "talking to himself" in His prayers, but was talking to the Father. In the same way, the Scriptures do give us at least some indication of the unipersonality of the Son while at the same time revealing to us His two natures. I briefly note one passage that is often referred to at this point, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

... *the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Corinthians 2:8)

This passage represents a group of Scriptures that instructs us to view Jesus as one person with two natures. How so? Because of the phrase "crucified the Lord of glory." Obviously the "Lord of glory" has reference to the divine nature of Christ, yet Jesus was crucified as a man. Crucifixion is only meaningful with reference to his human nature (you cannot

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crucify the divine nature). When Paul speaks of the crucifixion of the Lord of glory, he is speaking of Christ as one person with two natures. The one action of crucifixion is predicated of one *person* though that *person* had two natures, divine and human.

Just as it is with the Trinity, so it is with the one act of revelation, wherein the Trinity is the most clearly revealed, the Incarnation of Christ: both present to us *unique* truths about God that defy our creaturely categorization. Just as we cannot present any one analogy that “grasps” the Trinity (due to the absolutely unique way in which God exists), so, too, the Incarnation defies our attempts to wrap our limited minds around all it means. God only became incarnate once in the Son; therefore, there is nothing else in the created order to which we can compare either the Incarnation or the resultant God-Man, Jesus Christ. Instead of fretting over questions the Triune God has not chosen to answer in His revelation in Scripture, we should stand amazed at the *motivation* that brought the eternal Son into human flesh: His tremendous love for us!³

³ White, J. R. (1998). *The Forgotten Trinity* (pp. 153–161). Bethany House Publishers.