

# What Is the Trinity?

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**R. C. SPROUL**



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## Chapter One

# Monotheism

**T**he concept of the Trinity has emerged as a touchstone of truth, a non-negotiable article of Christian orthodoxy. However, it has been a source of controversy throughout church history, and there remains much confusion about it to this day, with many people misunderstanding it in very serious ways.

Some people think that the doctrine of the Trinity means that Christians believe in three gods. This is the idea of tritheism, which the church has categorically rejected throughout

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its history. Others see the Trinity as the church's retreat into contradiction. For instance, I once had a conversation with a man who had a PhD in philosophy, and he objected to Christianity on the grounds that the doctrine of the Trinity represented a manifest contradiction—the idea that one can also be three—at the heart of the Christian faith. Apparently this professor of philosophy was not familiar with the law of non-contradiction. That law states, “A cannot be A and non-A at the same time and in the same relationship.” When we confess our faith in the Trinity, we affirm that God is one in essence and three in person. Thus, God is one in A and three in B. If we said that He is one in essence and three in essence, that would be a contradiction. If we said He is one in person and three in person, that also would be a contradiction. But as mysterious as the Trinity is, perhaps even above and beyond our capacity to understand it in its fullness, the historic formula is not a contradiction.

Before we can talk about the Trinity, we have to talk about unity, because the word *Trinity* means “tri-unity.” Behind the concept of unity is the biblical affirmation of monotheism. The prefix *mono* means “one or single,” while the root word *theism* has to do with God. So, *monotheism* conveys the idea that there is only one God.

### The Evolution of Religions

The issue of whether the Bible is uniformly monotheistic came into question in the fields of religion and philosophy during the nineteenth century. One of the most dominant philosophers of the nineteenth century was Friedrich Hegel. He developed a complex and speculative philosophy of history that had at its core a concept of historical development or evolution. In the nineteenth century, thinkers were preoccupied with the concept of evolution, but not simply with respect to biology. *Evolution* became almost a buzzword in the academic world and in the scientific community, and it was applied not only to the development of living things, but also to political institutions. For instance, so-called social Darwinism understood human history as the progress of civilizations.

Hegel's followers also applied these evolutionary ideas to the development of religious concepts. They worked with this assumption: All spheres of creation, including religion, follow the pattern of evolution we see in the biological realm, which is evolution from the simple to the complex. In the case of religion, this means that all developed religions evolved from the simple form of animism. The term *animism* denotes the idea that there are living

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souls, spirits, or personalities in what we would normally understand to be inanimate or non-living objects, such as rocks, trees, totem poles, statues, and so on.

The idea that primitive religion was animistic seemed to be confirmed by scholars who examined primitive cultures that had survived to the present. Scholars who went to the remote corners of the world and studied the religions of these cultures found that they contained strong elements of animism. So, the assumption was accepted that all religions begin with animism and progressively evolve.

Some scholars believed that animism could be found in the earliest pages of the Old Testament. They often cited the account of the fall, for Adam and Eve were tempted by a serpent that assumed personal characteristics (Gen. 3). He could reason, speak, and act with volition. Critics also referred to the experience of Balaam, whose donkey was enabled to speak (Num. 22). They said this showed that the biblical writers believed there was a spirit in the donkey, just like there was a spirit in the serpent. When I was in seminary, I heard a professor say that animism was being practiced when Abraham met the angels by the oaks of Mamre (Gen. 18). The professor said that Abraham was really conversing with the gods in the trees. However, there

is not a shred of evidence in the text that Abraham was engaged in any kind of animism.

Those who hold to an evolutionary view of religion say that the next step in the process is polytheism: many gods. Polytheism was common in the cultures of antiquity. The Greek religion, the Roman religion, the Norse religion, and many others had a god or a goddess for almost every human function: a god of fertility, a god of wisdom, a god of beauty, a god of war, and so on. We're all familiar with this idea from our studies of the mythologies of the ancient world. Simply put, people believed that many gods existed to serve various functions of human life.

After polytheism, the next stage of religious development is called henotheism, which is a sort of hybrid between polytheism and monotheism, a transitional stage, as it were. Henotheism is belief in one god (the prefix *hen* comes from a Greek word for "one," a different word from *mono*), but the idea is that there is one god for each people or nation, and each one reigns over a particular geographical area. For example, henotheism would hold that there was a god for the Jewish people (Yahweh), a god for the Philistines (Dagon), a god for the Canaanites (Baal), and so on. However, this view does not posit that there was only one god ultimately.

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Henotheistic peoples recognized that other nations had their own gods, and they often saw battles between nations as battles between the gods of the peoples. Some scholars find this idea in the Old Testament because many of the conflicts recorded there are cast as the God of Israel going up against Dagon, Baal, or another pagan god, but that does not mean Israel was henotheistic.

### The Bible: Monotheistic from the Outset

Assuming this evolutionary framework, the nineteenth-century critics challenged the idea that the Bible is consistently monotheistic. There was an ongoing debate as to when monotheism began in Israel. The more conservative of these critics said there were hints of it at the time of Abraham. Others said that monotheism did not begin until the time of Moses. Some even rejected the idea that Moses was a monotheist, saying that monotheism did not begin until the time of the prophets, such as Isaiah around the eighth century BC. A few were even more skeptical, arguing that monotheism did not begin until after the Israelite exile in Babylon, making it a rather recent development in Jewish religion. So, orthodox scholarship has

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# Do Christians worship three gods?

The Bible teaches that God is one in substance and three in person—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Although the Trinity is clearly taught in the Bible, it has been attacked throughout church history, and many Christians today have not studied this foundational doctrine.

In this booklet, Dr. R.C. Sproul carefully explains the Trinity and clarifies common misconceptions. While the Trinity is mysterious, it is not contradictory, and it is essential to understanding the nature of God.

The Crucial Questions booklet series by Dr. R.C. Sproul offers succinct answers to important questions often asked by Christians and thoughtful inquirers.

**Dr. R.C. Sproul** was founder of Ligonier Ministries, founding pastor of Saint Andrew's Chapel in Sanford, Fla., and first president of Reformation Bible College. He was author of more than one hundred books, including *The Holiness of God*.



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