

Bible Basics: Essential Doctrines of the Bible

Part 1

Theology: The Study of God

(also available on-line at ichthys.com)

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We start with God, from whom are all things.

For all things are from Him and through Him and for Him. Romans 11:36

"I am the Alpha and the Omega," says the Lord who is God, "He who is and was and is coming, the Almighty." Revelation 1:8

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I. The Essence of God

To speak of the essence of God is to speak about who God really is. By essence we mean "being". The word essence is derived from the Latin verb "to be" and is in turn a translation of the Greek word *ousia*, which also means "being". More than having being or existence, God *is*

being. He makes this clear to all when He proclaims His name Jehovah (or Jahweh) to Moses and explains its meaning:¹

Then God said to Moses, “*I shall be who I am*. This is what you will tell the sons of Israel: ‘*I am* sent me to you.’” And God also said to Moses, “Thus you will say to the sons of Israel: ‘the Lord [the “*is*”], the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob sent me to you.’ This is My Name forever, and this is how you are to think about me for all generations.” Exodus 3:14-15

The being or essence of God is intrinsically sublime and resplendent. This inherent brilliance is often referred to in scripture as **light** and **glory**. **Light** emphasizes the splendor of who He *is* as unapproachable and immaculate (Jas.1:17; cf. Dan.2:22):

[God] who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable **light**, whom no man has ever seen, nor can see. 1st Timothy 6:16a

God is **light**, and in Him there is no darkness. 1st John 1:5b

Glory emphasizes the splendor of who He *is* shining visibly forth to mankind (Ex.33:18-23; 1Kng.8:11; Lk.2:9 Acts 7:55; Rom.3.23; 2Pet.1:17; Rev.21:23), most prominently displayed through the **glorious** revelation of His Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (Matt.24:30; Jn.1:14):

God, from antiquity having communicated to our fathers in the prophets at many times and in many ways, has in these last days communicated to us in a Son, [the One] whom He has appointed heir of all things, [the One] through whom He created the universe.

He is the shining forth of [the Father’s] **glory**, the precise image of His **essence**, the One who sustains the universe by His mighty Word ... Hebrews 1:1-3a

¹ Jehovah and Jahweh are the two most well-known English vocalizations of what is often called the “tetragrammaton”, i.e. the four consonant name for the Lord explained in these verses. In Hebrew, hvhy (*yhvh*) is traditionally vocalized as ‘*adonai*, though it occurs in the Old Testament without vowels. The divine name “Lord”, explained in these verses as based on “I am/shall be”, can potentially be derived from either the Hebrew verb “to be” or the verb “to become” (the two verbs being very close in the Hebrew). Likewise, the form hvhy is a unique form which appears to be a cross between an imperfect (indicating repeated action irrespective of time as in “I shall be/I am”) and an infinitive absolute (summing up the meaning of a verb at one throw: i.e., the very essence of “being/becoming”). Thus it is clear enough from the Hebrew context and verbal forms that “the Name” is a declaration that the Lord is the very definition of being and existence without regard to time or phenomena. Q.E.D.

As described in His Word, the Bible, His being is best considered in terms of His *nature* (i.e. the composition of His essence) and His *character* (i.e. the traits of His essence). God is *infinite* in *nature* and *perfect* in *character*.²

A. Infinity: God is infinite in His *nature*, unlimited and unbounded in every positive way:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Deuteronomy 6:4

When firmly grasped, God's infinity – infinity in every way and according to any conceivable true standard – is a clarifying concept, *illuminating His abilities*. God's infinite nature will always be more than the highest, the best and the purest that the human mind can comprehend. Being One, all things come from Him and through Him (1Cor.8:6; Heb.2:10), and without Him nothing could exist (Jn.1:3; Col.1:16-17; Heb.1:2-3). Thus this oneness implies infinity – since He is the One all encompassing God. Oneness is at once all comprehending and yet incomprehensible. Everything else can be counted, except for Him who is "one", the one unique and infinite One, to whom there is no comparison in the finite world He has created.

1. God is **Spiritual**:³

God is spirit, and those who worship Him must do so in [His] Spirit and in [His] truth.
John 4:24

God's being transcends the physical universe. He is not limited or bounded by material issues or concerns. God is not subject to matter in any way. God is not made of matter -- God created matter and employs it however He desires (Gen.1:1; 14:19 & 22; Deut.10:14; Job 38:4-11; Ps.102:25; Is.45:18; Jn.1:3; Col.1:16-17; Heb.1:3).

2. God is **Eternal**:

Before the mountains were born, or you gave birth to the earth and world,
from everlasting to everlasting, you are God. Psalm 90:2

God's being transcends time. He is not limited or bounded by temporal issues or concerns. God is not subject to time in any way. God is not constrained by time - God created time and employs it however He desires (Ps.90:4; 93:2; 102:24-27; Mic.5:2; Jn.8:58; 17:5; Heb.13:8; Rev.4:8-11).

² This infinity of His nature and perfection of His character is unchangeable or "immutable" (Mal.3:6; Heb.13:8; Jas.1:17).

³ God's spirituality is also evident from His creation of our spirits (Gen.2:7; Num.16:22; Eccl.11:5; Heb.12:9), and angelic spirits (Ps.104:4; Is.40:26; Heb.1:7 & 14).

3. God is **Immeasurable**:

Shall God really dwell on earth? Behold, the heavens -- even the entire universe -- cannot contain You! How much less this temple I have built. 1st Kings 8:27

God's being transcends space. He is not limited or bounded by spatial issues or concerns. God is not subject to space in any way. God is not confined by space - God created space and employs it however He desires (2Chron.2:5-6; Job 11:7-9; 36:26; 37:23; Ps.86:10; Jer.23:24; Jn.6:21; Acts 17:24; Eph.1:23b).

4. God is **Unique**:

“With whom will you compare Me that I should be equal [to him]?” says the Holy One. Isaiah 40:25

Uniqueness comes from God's infinite nature. No one else in the universe can reasonably be compared to Him. He is absolutely unique within His own creation, and therefore the one Person to whom all honor is due. Uniqueness thus speaks to God's *natural authority* and *ability* to order the universe however He chooses. From the standpoint of His *transcendence of* the physical universe, He is unique by virtue of His spirituality, eternity and immeasurability. From the standpoint of His *supremacy within* the physical universe, He is unique by virtue of His omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence (Deut.4:39; 6:4; 32:39; Is.43:10-11; 45:5, 6, 14, 21, 22; Jas.2:19). Only God is able to create morally accountable creatures and a world in which they may exercise their free-will.

5. God is **Omnipotent**:

Behold, I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Does any miracle lie beyond my power? Jeremiah 32:27

God is all-powerful, irrespective of matter. He can effect anything He desires in the material realm, and nothing can transpire apart from His will. Therefore there is no deed, nor was there ever, nor will there ever be which God is unable to do, small or great. As the Almighty One (Rev.1:8; 4:8), His ability to accomplish any event he desires within His creation now and forever is comprehensive and absolute (Gen.18:14; Job 5:9; 26:6-14; 38:4-38; 42:2; Ps.8:1-9; 62:11 [in Hebrew: see KJV]; Prov.21:30; Is.40:26; Jer.27:5; Lk.1:37; Jn.1:3; Rom.1:20; Eph.1:19; Col.1:17; Heb.1:3).

6. God is **Omniscient**:

I am God -- there exists no other One;
[I am] God -- and nothing like Me exists.
Since the [very] beginning, I have been making known the end;
Since [eternity] past, things that have not yet been done. Isaiah 46:9b-10

God is all-knowing, irrespective of time. He can effect anything He desires in the temporal realm. Therefore God knows, always has known and always will know everything, the end from the beginning. As the Everlasting One (Ps.90:2 &4), His knowledge of every event that ever has or will or even could occur within His creation is comprehensive and absolute (1Sam.2:3; Ps.139:1-4 & 12; 147:5; Is.42:9; Matt.10:29-30; 11:21; Jn.1:1-2; 1Cor.2:7-10; Heb.4:13; 1Jn.3:20).

7. God is **Omnipresent**:

Where shall I go from your Spirit?
Or where shall I flee from before you?
If I should ascend to heaven, you are there.
If I should make my bed in Sheol, there you are.
If I should wing my way to where the sun rises in the east, or take up residence beyond
the furthest reaches of the western sea,
Even there you would lead me by the hand, you would hold me fast with your [strong]
right hand. Psalm 139:7-10

God is ever-present, irrespective of space. He can effect anything He desires in the spatial realm (Job 26:7). Therefore God has the ability, has always had and always will have, to be anywhere and everywhere, local and universal. As the Ever-Present One (Acts 17:27-28), His ability to be present at any or every point within His creation whenever He desires is comprehensive and absolute (Job 22:12; Is.66:1-2; Jer.23:23-24; Prov.15:3).

B. Perfection: God is perfect in His *character*, irreproachable and blameless in every possible way.

So be perfect, as your Father in Heaven is perfect. Matthew 5:48

When firmly grasped, God's perfection – perfection in every way and according to any conceivable true standard – is a clarifying concept, *illuminating His motives*. God's perfect character will never be less than the highest, the best and the purest that the human mind can comprehend.

1. God is **Good** (Ex.18:9 [KJV]; 33:19; 2Chron.6:41; Ps.23:6; 25:8; 27:13; 31:19; 33:5 [KJV]; 119:68; 145:7a; Matt.19:17; Mark 10:18; Lk.18:19; Rom.2:4; 11:22; Tit.3:4-5 [KJV]):

The Lord is good to everyone.
His kindness extends to everything He has made.
Psalm 145:9

God's character is good (Hebrew *tobh*: *bvu*); it is the *antithesis* of evil. So how does goodness respond to sinful man? In His goodness, God always has our best interests at heart. Therefore

His desire for us to be free from evil and devoted to good is genuine. Even though we are sinful and by nature unworthy of His blessing, in His goodness God has nevertheless found a *gracious* way to redeem us from sin without compromising His character, namely, by giving us the gift of His Son, Jesus Christ.

2. God is **Holy** (Ex.3:5; Lev.11:44-45; 21:8; Ps.22:3; 30:4; 99:9; Is.6:3; 43:15; 55:5b-9; 57:15; Acts 3:14; Rev.4:8):

But just as He who has called you is holy, you too should be entirely holy in your behavior. For the scripture says:

Be holy, for I am holy. 1st Peter 1:15-16

God's character is holy (Hebrew *qadhosh*: wvdq); it is completely *separate* from evil. So how does holiness respond to sinful man? In His holiness, God can never compromise His perfect standards for any reason. Therefore His commitment to condemning evil and rewarding good is inviolable. But even though we are sinful and by nature deserving of His judgment, in His holiness God has nevertheless found a *merciful* way to justify us in spite of our sin without violating His character, namely, by judging His Son, Jesus Christ in our place.

3. God is **Faithful and True** (Deut.32:4; Josh.21:45; 2Sam.7:28; 1Kng.8:56; Ps.33:4; 36:5; 89:1; 89:33-34; 111:7-8; 119:89-90 & 160; 143:1; 146:6; Is.11:5b; Matt.24:35; Jn.1:14; 7:28; 14:6; 17:3; Rom.3:3-4; 1Cor.1:9; 10:13; 2Cor.1:18; 1Thes.5:23-24; 2Thes.3:3; 2Tim.2:13; Heb.6:18; 10:23; 11:11; 13:5-6; 1Pet.4:19; Rev.3:7 & 14; 15:3; 16:7):

O Lord, thou art my God.

I will exalt thee, I will praise thy name.

For thou hast done wonderful things.

Thy counsels of old are faithfulness and truth. Isaiah 25:1 [KJV]

God's character is faithful and true (Hebrew: '*omen*, '*emeth*:]mva, tma); it is *actively opposed* to evil. So how do truth and faithfulness respond to sinful man? In His faithfulness and truth, God is entirely reliable and trustworthy in all that He promises to us and does for us. Therefore His veracity and dependability in offering us a way through Jesus Christ to escape the evil of death and embrace the good of eternal life are beyond reproach. So even though we are sinful and by nature objects of His wrath, in His faithfulness and truth God has nevertheless found a way to make *peace* between Himself and us and to remove the enmity between Himself and us, caused by our sins, without corrupting His character, namely, by reconciling us to Himself through the death of His Son, Jesus Christ.

4. God is **Sovereign** (Job 25:2; Ps.93:1-2; Is.40:21-23; 45:21-24; 46:10b-11; 64:8; Jer.10:10; 18:5-10; Dan.4:34-36; 7:13-14; Matt.28:18; Rom.9:20-21; 1Cor.15:24-28; Eph.1:20-21; Phil.2:9-10; 1Tim.6:15; Rev.4:11):

But the Lord shall be seated as king forever:
He sets up His throne for judgment,
to judge the world in righteousness,
to render justice to its peoples.
Psalm 9:7-8

Sovereignty comes from God's perfect character. No one else has a legitimate right to rule over the universe. He is the absolute sovereign within His own creation, and therefore the one Person to whom all honor is due. Sovereignty thus speaks to God's *moral authority* and *right* to order the universe however He chooses. From the standpoint of His *transcendence of* the moral universe, He is sovereign by virtue of His goodness, holiness and truth (essential qualities independent of His creation). From the standpoint of His *supremacy within* the moral universe, He is sovereign by virtue of His love, righteousness and life (qualities applying to His creation which correspond to goodness, holiness and truth). Only God is qualified to be the ultimate judge of the morally accountable creatures He has created, and thus to hold them responsible for their actions.⁴ As de facto ruler of the universe (through His perfect nature) and de jure ruler of the universe (through His perfect character), God possesses the sovereign authority

1) to demonstrate *love* to His sinful creatures out of His own *goodness* – not ignoring their sins, as evil suggests He should, but *paying* for them Himself by the death on the cross of His Son, Jesus Christ, in their place (redemption). We call the result of this act of His sovereignty **grace** (Hebrew *chen*:]x; Greek *charis*: χαρις).

2) to administer *justice* to His sinful creatures out of His *holiness* – not abandoning them to their sins, as evil suggests He must, but *forgiving* them Himself on the basis of the death on the cross of His Son, Jesus Christ, in their place (justification). We call the result of this act of His sovereignty **mercy** (Hebrew *chesed*: dcx; Greek *eleos*: ελεος).

3) to give *life* to His sinful creatures out of His *truth and faithfulness* – not allowing them to die in their sins, as evil suggests He will, but *reconciling* them to Himself through the death on the cross of His Son, Jesus Christ, in their place (reconciliation). We call the result of this act of His sovereignty **peace** (Hebrew *shalom*: ,vlw; Greek *eirene*: ειρηνη).

5. God is **Love** (Deut.10:14-15; Is.63:9; Jer.31:3; Jn.3:16; 15:13; Rom.5:6-8; 8:38-39; Eph.2:5-9; 3:19; Tit.3:4-7; 1Jn.3:16; 4:10; 4:16-19).

Whoever does not have love, does not know God, for God **is** love.
1st John 4:8

⁴ Since the beginning of human history, of course, God has in this life delegated some of this authority to human agencies in order to prevent lawlessness from eradicating mankind altogether (Gen.3:16b; Ps.82:6-7; Jn.10:34ff.; Rom.13:1-7; 1Pet.2:13ff.).

Having love for His creatures, is a natural consequence of God's goodness. Out of the intrinsic goodness of His character, God loves us with a perfect love, desiring to help us in our sinful state. However, He does not overlook His holiness and justice in the process and forgive our sin without consequence (as evil suggests He should). Therefore God had to find a way to *reach out to us in love* without compromising His character, and did so through the gift and sacrifice of His only Son on our behalf. *Grace* is the biblical name for God's policy of lovingly redeeming us from our sins through Jesus Christ. We accept and receive God's gracious offer of love and redemption by accepting and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

6. God is **Just** (Deut.32:4; Ps.7:9; 11:7; 33:5; 45:7; 89:14; 111:7-8; 119:142; 145:7b; Is.30:18; 42:1-4; 61:8; Jn.7:18 [not NIV]; Rom.3:4, 21-24; 8:1-4; 11:22; 2Cor.5:21; 1Pet.2:23-24; Rev.16:5).

Demanding justice for His creatures is a natural consequence of God's holiness. Out of the intrinsic holiness of His character, God must deal with us in perfect justice, righteously condemning us in our sinful state. However, He does not overlook His goodness and love in the process and abandon us to our sins (as evil suggests He will). For God found a way to *treat us as righteous* without compromising His character, and did so through the gift and sacrifice of His only Son on our behalf. *Mercy* is the biblical name for God's policy of justly forgiving us on the basis of the death of Jesus Christ. We accept and receive God's merciful offer of justification by accepting and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

7. God is **Life** (Deut.30:20b; 1Sam.2:6; Job 10:12; 33:4; Ps.16:8-11; 36:9; Jer.10:10; Jn.1:4; 3:16; 5:26; 6:57; 11:25; 17:3; Act.3:15; 1Thes.1:9; 1Jn.1:1-2; 5:20b; Rev.1:18)

I am the way: the truth and the life. John 14:6

Saving the lives of His creatures is a natural consequence of God's truth and faithfulness. Out of the intrinsic veracity and trustworthiness of His character, God honors His gracious and merciful promise to restore us to Himself and thereby to eternal life, delivering us from the condemnation of death accruing to us in our sinful state. In doing so, however, He has not failed to resolve the competing demands of His goodness and love on the one hand, with those of His holiness and justice on the other (as evil suggests He must). For God has found a way in accordance with His character to *eliminate the wall of sin and consequent wrath which separates us from Him*, and has done so through the gift and sacrifice of His only Son on our behalf (He died that we might have life). *Peace* is the biblical name for God's life-giving policy of reconciling us to Himself on the basis of the work of Jesus Christ. We accept and receive God's offer of life, peace and reconciliation by accepting and receiving the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

Summary:

God's goodness overflows with love, providing grace for sinful Man:

though evil says a loving God can't condemn,
He did condemn His Son that we might live,
redeeming us in love with the blood of Christ.

God's holiness overflows in justice, offering mercy to sinful Man:

though evil says a just God can't forgive,
He did forgive us, by condemning His own Son,
making us righteous through the blood of Christ.

God's faithfulness and truth overflow in life, producing peace with God for sinful Man:

though evil says that a God of integrity can't restore us,
He did make peace between us through His Son,
reconciling us to Himself and granting us eternal life on the basis of the blood of Christ.

Overall Summary of the Essence of God:

Infinite nature:

(independent)	(applied)
<i>spirituality</i>	<i>omnipotence</i>
<i>eternity</i>	<i>omniscience</i>
<i>immeasurability</i>	<i>omnipresence</i>

the One *unique* God

Perfect character:

(independent)	(applied)
<i>goodness</i>	<i>love</i>
<i>holiness</i>	<i>justice</i>
<i>truth</i>	<i>life</i>

the One *sovereign* God

II. The Persons of God: The Trinity

A. Definition of the Trinity: God is One in Essence, Three in Person

Holy, Holy, Holy,
the Lord, God, the Almighty
He who was, and He who is, and He who is coming. Revelation 4:8

No specific term for the triune nature of God occurs in the Bible. The inspired writers of the New Testament clearly felt that the existence of one God in three distinct persons, the doctrine which we now call "the Trinity", was a relatively straight-forward concept and accessible enough (even with a cursory reading of the scripture) from passages such as the one quoted above.⁵ The Apostolic Fathers, the generation that followed the men who actually penned the New Testament,

⁵ On the Trinity as revealed in the Old Testament, see Part II C. below.

also felt that merely quoting scriptures was an entirely adequate way of discussing the relationship between Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Not until the late second and early third centuries did the term “Trinity” itself come into general use as a way of defending (against a variety of heresies which sought to deny various aspects of the unique triune nature of God) what earlier generations of Christians had taken completely for granted based upon their common-sense approach to reading the Bible: that God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit are all God, and that at the same time they are – in what we may call a “personal” way – also distinct from each other. God is one. God is also three. And there is no contradiction between these statements.

The simplest, best, and most traditional definition of the Trinity is that God is one *in essence*, and three *in person*. To put the doctrine in complete terms, the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God; yet at the same time the Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father or the Son.

We can better understand what the Trinity *is* by first considering what it *is not* in terms of the definition given above (i.e., “one in essence; three in person”):

1. God is *one* in essence, but that does **not** mean that only one person of the Trinity is deity: God is *three* in person, and all three persons of the Trinity (the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit) are divine. Heresies of the past which have challenged the divinity of members of the Trinity include adoptionism (asserting that Christ is the Son of God only in the sense of adoption), the Ebionite heresy (teaching that Christ had only a human nature empowered by God’s Spirit), and Unitarianism (which asserts the uni-personality of God, denying the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit). But the Bible teaches that all three members of the Trinity are deity (Is.63:9-14; Matt. 3:16-17; 28:19; Jn.14:16-17; 1Cor.12:4-6; 2Cor.13:14; Eph.4:4-6; 1Pet.1:1-2; Rev.1:4-6.):

a) the Father is God (Matt.6:9; 1Cor.8:6; Eph.3:14-15):

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord who is God, “He who is and was and is coming, the Almighty.”
Revelation 1:8

b) the Son is God (Jn.5:18; 10:30; 10:33; Rom.9:5; 1Cor.8:6; Col.2:9; Heb.1:3):

The Word existed in the beginning: the Word was both present with the [Father] God [before creation] and the Word was God [in His own right]. This same One was present with the [Father] God in the beginning.⁶ John 1:1-2

⁶ In verse one of John 1:1-2, the clause “the Word was God” *cannot* legitimately be translated “the Word was a God”. First, earlier in the verse, the apostle John had used the definite article with the Greek word *theos* (θεος) to refer to the Father according to customary usage (“the [*sc.* Father] God”), and so to use the identical combination again to refer to the Word would be potentially confusing, making it seem as if “the Word” was really identical to “the [*sc.*

c) the Holy Spirit is God (Gen.1:2; Ps.139:7; Acts 5:3-4; 1Cor.12:11; and compare Heb.3:7-11 with Ps.95:7-11 where the LORD is speaking):

Now the Lord *is* the Spirit, and where the Lord's Spirit is, there is freedom.
2nd Corinthians 3:17

2. God is *one* in essence, but that does **not** mean that the Trinity is only one person (merely displaying three modes or aspects of Himself): God is *three* in person, and all three members of the Trinity (the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit) are distinct persons rather than manifestations of a single, multifaceted person. Heresies of the past which have challenged the distinct personalities of members of the Trinity include modalism (the idea that Christ and the Spirit are mere “modes” of the Father’s personality), and docetism (the notion that Christ only seemed real and was in reality merely a phantom of sorts representing the Father’s plan). But the Bible teaches that all three members of the Trinity are distinct persons:

a) the Father is a unique person in His own right (for He is distinct from the Son):

I was looking during my vision of that night, and behold – with the clouds of heaven one like a Son of Man was coming up, and He approached the Ancient of Days [i.e, the Father] and they brought Him before Him. Daniel 7:13

b) the Son is a unique person in His own right (for He is distinct from the Father):

Behold, I have arrived – in the scroll of Your book it is written about Me – to do Your will, O My God. Hebrews 10:7 [Psalm 40:7-8]

c) the Holy Spirit is a unique person in His own right (for He acts as a distinct person):

And the Spirit helps us in our weakness in a similar way. For we do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us also with anguished supplications which words cannot express. Romans 8:26

3. God is *three* in person, but that does **not** mean that there is any inferiority or disparity of status, activity or substance between the members of the Trinity (as would inevitably be the case in any

Father] God”, one of the very points that John is disproving here. Secondly, Greek does not possess an indefinite article (“a/an”), but it does have an indefinite pronoun, *tis* (τις), meaning “a certain one” – the very word that a Greek reader would expect here *if* the point was that Christ was somehow a god, but not really “God”. So John only had three ways to write this: 1) the Word was “*the* God” (but this would mean that there was no real distinction between the Father and Christ); 2) the Word was “*a certain* god” (but this would mean that Christ was a lesser sort of divinity, not God on the level of the Father); or 3) the Word was “God” – what John actually did write, thus fully and unambiguously attributing deity to the Word as distinct from the Father.

human association): God is *one* in essence and all three members of the Trinity (the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit) are coequal, coeternal and con-substantial partners in one and the same essence. Heresies of the past which have challenged the coequality of members of the Trinity include subordinationism (which alternatively asserts that either Christ or the Spirit is by nature inferior to the Father) and Arianism (which teaches a Christ not entirely equal in divinity to the Father). But the Bible teaches that all three members of the Trinity are coequal partakers of the same essence:

a) they all possess a full and equal share of the *status* of deity (as seen from the equal rank accorded to each in the formula for profession of faith at baptism):

Then Jesus came over and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me, so go and make all nations my followers by baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and by teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. Matthew 28:19-20a

b) they all possess a full and equal share of the *eternal function* of deity (as seen from their joint participation in creation):

Then God said, “Let *Us* make man in *Our* image, according to *Our* pattern.
Genesis 1:26

c) they all possess a full and equal share of the *substance* of deity (as seen from the attribution of goodness to all three members in the apostolic benediction of 2nd Corinthians, where grace, the policy of the goodness of God, love, the natural consequence [or emanation] of the goodness of God, and fellowship, the ultimate result of the goodness of God are attributed to the Son, Father and Holy Spirit respectively):

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of (the [Father]) God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. 2nd Corinthians 13:14

4. God is *three* in person, but that does *not* mean that the Trinity is composed of three (or more) different “gods”: God is *one* in essence, and all three members of the Trinity (the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit) are the sole, joint partakers of that same essence rather than three similar beings of similar essence. All so-called Christian sects which elevate saints and angels to the status of divinity essentially belong to this heretical category (after the manner of pagan pantheons, which also possess numerous “deities” of lesser and greater rank). But the Bible teaches that all three members of the Trinity alone share the same unique essence:

a) the Father is revealed to be uniquely God:

You were shown these things so as to know that the Lord, He is God, and there is no other besides Him. Deuteronomy 4:35

b) the Son and the Father are revealed to be uniquely God:

I and the Father are one.⁷ John 10:30

c) the Holy Spirit and the Son and the Father are revealed to be uniquely God:

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another comforter to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth whom the world cannot receive, for it neither sees Him, nor knows Him. But you know Him, for He abides with you, and will be in you. John 14:16-17

B. The Trinity in the Bible

1. Introduction: The definition of the Trinity which best does justice to the biblical statements on the subject is the one given above, namely, that *God is **one** in essence and **three** in person*. We get an even clearer picture of what the Bible has to say about the Trinity when we combine this traditional definition with the four corollaries discussed and documented immediately above:

- a) All three members of the Trinity are divine persons.
- b) All three members of the Trinity are unique persons.
- c) All three members of the Trinity have coequal and coeternal essence.
- d) All three members of the Trinity share the same divine essence.

As can be seen from the numerous heresies (discussed above) that have sprung up to challenge orthodox statements about the Trinity, the doctrine can be a difficult one to state in a proper, biblical way. This is especially true the further any definition of the Trinity moves away from actual statements contained in the Bible (which, as we mentioned above, were felt to be sufficient by the Apostles and Apostolic Fathers). It should be noted here that even the terms “essence” and “person” were felt by some theologians of the early church to be controversial. We may talk of Man’s essence (we are all cut from the same spiritual cloth), and Man’s personality (we are all unique individuals), but the essence of God is different from the essence of Man (for one thing, all members of the Trinity share *the same* divine essence), and the idea of personality in the Trinity is different from that of human persons (to take but one example, the absolute unity of agreement and purpose of the Trinity throughout all eternity is not only quantitatively but also qualitatively beyond human experience).

⁷ The Greek for “one” here (*hen*) is neuter, not masculine (i.e., not “one person”, but “one [thing = essence]”. That even His hostile audience understood this to be a claim to divinity is clear from v.33: “We are not going to stone you for a good deed, but on account of blasphemy, for though you are but a man, you are making yourself God.”

The lesson here is that rationalistic speculation, always dangerous when expounding the Bible, is even more to be avoided in the case of the Trinity, a doctrine that was only fully revealed with the arrival of the New Testament. What God *has* chosen to reveal about this doctrine, He has revealed carefully and gradually. The subject of the Trinity in the Old Testament is covered below (C.), but it may be said here that a large part of the reason for this guarded revelation of the doctrine (beyond our human limitations in comprehending it) may be the all too obvious fact (see the discussion above) that *wrong* ideas about the nature of the Trinity have historically posed such a dire threat to the entire basis of our Christian faith. Just a little leaven in the loaf and Satan can make the Trinity to be an association of “gods” (and so no different from paganism) or one “god” with three hats (thus completely eliminated the importance and efficacy of Christ’s incarnation and sacrifice).

In His loving wisdom, God has told us what we most need to know without giving us either information that could be misinterpreted, or less than accurate illustrations that might do more harm than good.

2. Illustrating the Trinity: As we have just stated, attempting to illustrate such a carefully protected doctrine as the Trinity has the potential of doing more harm than good. The fundamental problem with illustrations of the type considered below is that they all necessarily contain potentially dangerous and untrue points of comparison, which, if too much stress be placed upon them, run the real risk of leading to heretical conclusions, a danger that far outweighs any good they may do in attempting to shed some light on the subject. The number one objection to such illustrations is that God is divine, and since nothing and no one else is, *any* illustration will need to be imperfect and inaccurate (a fact which may well explain why no such illustrations occur in the Bible: Is.40:18). And there is more. Historically, Satan’s attacks on the doctrine of the Trinity – a teaching crucial to the integrity of our Christian faith – have focused on the three-fold sovereign *personality* of God and/or His *deity* in three persons. But this reality of divine, triune personality is precisely the point that all illustrations of the Trinity miss (of necessity, since there *is* nothing “like” the Trinity).

a) An illustration from the early church: the Trinity “triangle”: This oldest of the Trinity illustrations is also in many ways the best, because the non-doctrinal point of comparison (i.e., the triangle) merely serves to organize visually the meaning imparted by the words: all three members of the Trinity are God (“one in essence”), yet they are distinct from each other (“three in person”):



b) The illustration of the family of Man: Like the Trinity, mankind has multiple members, all possessed of similar, spiritual essences. But the Trinity *share* a unique, divine essence, and their triune unanimity of purpose is unlike anything in the realm of humanity.

c) The illustration of the human mind: Like the Trinity, the mind can be said to be at once one thing, yet at the same time several things (intellect, emotion, conscience etc.) and can dialogue with itself, and even be at cross-purposes with itself. But the Trinity is composed of distinct, divine personalities to which the inner-workings of our psyches make a poor comparison.

d) Illustrations from the world of nature: There are many things in the natural world that consist of distinct, multiple parts that at the same time constitute one complete whole. For example, distinguishable branches, roots and trunk are all part of one and the same tree, and eggs have three distinct parts (yolk, white and shell) without any of which three you would no longer have an egg. None of the illustrations of this sort really help to explain the unique personalities of the Trinity or their shared divine essence.

e) Illustrations from the physical realm: This category of illustration contains some of the more interesting examples that have been used to explain the Trinity, though all suffer from the same objections that were lodged against the former category:

1. Light is one yet distinct: (1Jn.1:5)

Radio is heard
Visible light is seen
Infra-red is felt

2. The universe is one yet distinct:

Time
Space
Matter

3. Time is one yet distinct:

past
present
future

4. Space is one yet distinct:

length
breadth
height

5. Matter is one yet distinct:

Energy
Matter
Phenomena

The most that can be said for the best of these illustrations is that to the extent that they remind us of the awesome wisdom and power of God in creating these complex, wonderful things (often taken for granted), they may also help us to realize that the Maker is likely to be even more complex and wonderful, and so accept what we know to be true about the Trinity (“one in essence, three in person”), even if it seems too complex and wonderful to fully grasp. As we have said, however, care must be taken to see that none of these illustrations is taken too far, lest by attempting to understand “beyond what is written” we be led instead to dangerous and extra-biblical rationalizations based on these loose analogies. For the Trinity is often a good “litmus test” for our Christian faith. To accept it, one must accept not only the existence of God, but the distinctiveness and divinity of Jesus Christ, the true touch-stone principle that divides believers from unbelievers (1Jn.2:22-23). By distorting our understanding of the Trinity, the devil ultimately seeks to destroy our faith in Jesus Christ, the real focal point and rationale for satanic attacks that seek to confuse the issue of “one in essence, three in person”.

3. Roles of the Trinity in the Plan of God: A more valuable approach than the use of non-biblical illustrations to understand the nature of the Trinity is the examination of the function of the Trinity as described in the Bible. The scriptures have much to say about how God works in human history, and, specific to our topic, what roles the individual members of the Trinity play in that work, otherwise known as the “plan of God”.

a) Introduction: God has not been operating in human history on an ad hoc or reactive basis, but has been “working everything together for good” (Rom.8:28) since the moment of creation. The Plan of God will be discussed as a topic in its own right in part 2B of this series (*Eschatology*), but it will be helpful at this point to consider the unique roles played by the individual members of the Trinity in executing that plan in time, for by so doing, we shall gain *biblical* insight into the true nature of the Trinity.

b) The Names of the Trinity: Much can be understood about the Trinity through a consideration of the names by which they are revealed. Collectively, the Trinity refer to themselves as God. In the Old Testament, the Hebrew word for God, '*Elohim* (translated in the New Testament by the common Greek word for God, *theos*), is technically a plural of a word originally meaning "mighty one"; collectively then, the Trinity share this appellation, pluralized to express additional majesty. Individually considered, however, members of the Trinity in the Old Testament are referred to most commonly by the Hebrew word *Yahweh* (translated in the New Testament by the common Greek word for Lord, *kyrios*), a word that, as we have seen, calls special attention to the Lord's timeless and dynamic being (see section I, note 1 above). These two names, God and Lord, emphasize respectively the unity of the Trinity in its three-fold persons (*Elohim* is plural and refers to the Trinity collectively), and the joint divine-essence of all three individual members (*Yahweh* is singular but can be used to refer to any of the Trinity's members individually).

With the fuller revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament following the revelation and advent of Jesus Christ (see Part II C. below for the Trinity in the Old Testament), the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit give us an even clearer understanding of the roles of the Trinity (and therefore of the Trinity itself).

1) the Father (the 1st Person of the Trinity):

- *Origin*: The term for and idea of the Fatherhood of God, a designation well known from the New Testament, is also found in the Old Testament from the Pentateuch onward. The word Father is first used for God in Deuteronomy 32:6: "Is He not your Father? The One who bought you? He is the One who made you and established you." Later in verse 18 of the same chapter, God is referred to as "the Rock who fathered you". The concept of the fatherhood of God can also be seen at Exodus 4:22, where Israel is referred to as God's "firstborn son".
- *Significance*: The use of the name "Father" is clearly intended to be taken as an analogy from human experience. Like the father who sired us, He is our creator. Like a father, He is our authority figure, our trainer, disciplinarian, and teacher (Heb.12:5-11). And, not to be underestimated, He is the One who cares for us and loves us deeply, who protects us, keeps us safe, and wants only what is truly best for us (regardless of what we *see* as best). Being human, our earthly fathers had strengths and weaknesses, and despite their best intentions had to act on the basis of imperfect information about what was best for us. But our heavenly Father represents the perfect ideal of fatherhood. He acts toward us always in perfect love, and all He does for us is without question for our ultimate good, for whether He disciplines us or blesses us, He does so in perfect knowledge of who we are, and of all that is in our hearts.
- *Person*: The Father is often referred to as the 1st person of the Trinity (i.e., the authoritative "I" person), because He speaks to us as "I", directly manifesting His

authoritative will as our God, creator and ruler of the universe (e.g., Ex.3:14-15; Is.46:9-10).

2) the Son (the 2nd Person of the Trinity):

- *Origin:* Along with the holy angels (Job 38:7 [not NIV]), we believers are all “sons” of God (Rom.8:14; Gal.3:26; 4:5; cf. Jn.1:12; 1Jn.3:1-2). This widespread franchise of sonship is based upon the paternal position of the Father relative to all His obedient creatures, but there is only one “*the* Son of God (our Lord, Jesus Christ)”. Though Christ’s incarnation was, in a veiled fashion, prophesied and foreshadowed by ritual and sacrifice, it remained in Old Testament times very much a mystery until the time of His actual first advent. Now it stands clearly revealed that *the* archetypical Son of God is our Lord Jesus Christ, and that the Old Testament parallels are types that look forward to this revelation: e.g., Adam is the son of God (Lk.3:38) - Christ is *the* preeminent “last Adam” (1Cor.15:45; and cf. the “Son of Man [i.e., ‘adam]” of Dan.7:13-14 as well as New Testament usage); Israel is the servant of God (Is.42:18ff.) - Christ is *the* suffering Servant who takes away the sins of the world (Is.42:1; 52:13 - 53:12); Israel is God’s son - Christ is *the* Son (Hos.11:1 fulfilled at Matt.2:15); finally, though Solomon was David’s direct descendant, Christ is his ultimate descendant, the Messiah, *the* Son of David who is also the Son of God (Ps.2:7-12; 110:1).
- *Significance:* Building on the idea of fatherhood as discussed above, sonship denotes the idea of a special and unbreakable relationship with the Father, one of dutiful subordination to the Father’s will, but also one of special privilege, inheritance and shared authority. A son (especially a king’s son) is often more accessible than a father. The role of mediator between the king and His offending subjects can only be played by someone who is on a par with both the Father-king and creature-subjects: only a Son (incarnate) can be sent on such a mission of reconciliation (cf. Matt.21:33-40)
- *Person:* The Son is often referred to as the 2nd person (i.e., the accessible “you” person), because He is **accessible** to us, having appeared in the flesh to forge a relationship with us on the Father’s behalf (e.g., Jn.15:14-15), and having gained access to the Father for us (Jn.14:6; Eph.2:18; 3:12).

3) the Holy Spirit (the 3rd Person of the Trinity):

- *Origin:* From the first chapter of the Old Testament (Gen.1:2), to the closing chapter of the New Testament (Rev.22:17), the word “spirit” is used to refer to God the Holy Spirit. The Hebrew and Greek words for “spirit”, *ruach* and *pneuma* respectively, have the core meaning of “wind” or “breeze”, and, again, there are important points to be garnered from the name analogy.

- *Significance:* The wind is a potent, invisible force. Though we perceive it and experience its effects, we can neither see where it has come from or where it is going to (Jn.3:8). It can have everything from a gentle, warming influence to a powerful, chilling effect. “Wind” is thus an aptly descriptive analogy for the Holy Spirit’s role in the plan of God: His invisible yet powerful support of good (Zech.4:6; 1Cor.12:3) and restraint of evil (Gen.6:3; 1Cor.12:3; 2Thes.2:5-8) in the furtherance of the plan of God must not be underestimated.
- *Person:* The Holy Spirit is often referred to as the 3rd person of the Trinity (i.e., the unseen “he” person), because unlike the Father, He does not speak directly to us, and unlike the Son, He has not been made manifest to us; instead, like the wind, He is *unseen* by us, but, like the wind, that does not mean that we do not experience His power in a very personal and dynamic way (Jn.14:16-17; Gal.5:22-26).

n.b.: As should be clear from the discussion above, the names Father, Son, and Spirit are thus representative of the Trinity’s individual roles in the plan of God for mankind, and have been given to help us understand the relationships and functions of the three divine personalities in that plan. The names themselves must not be pushed beyond the clearly intended analogies to our human frame of reference as outlined above. This is no small caveat, for it is largely on the basis of the title “Son” that heresies of the past have sought to deny the full and equal divinity of Christ (e.g., casting Him as subordinate *in essence* to the Father as hyper-Arianism does). The case of the Spirit shows how wrong-headed such analyses based solely on these titles are, for the Spirit is not at all “inanimate” or “impersonal” even though “wind” is a fitting description of His invisible yet powerful role in our Christian lives. He acts in a very personal way towards us and towards the other members of the Trinity (Jn.3:5; 14:16-17; 14:26; 15:26; 16:8-15; Acts 5:3, 5:9; 13:2; 16:6-10; Rom.8:26; 1Cor.2:10; Rev.2:7), and as our Comforter-Encourager (Jn.14:16; 16:7). The relationship of leadership (Rom.8:4; Gal.5:16 & 18), encouragement (cf. Jn.14:16; 16:7; 2Cor.1:3-7) and empowerment (Lk.24:49; Rom.15:13) we receive from the Holy Spirit are some of the most “personal” and “animating” relationships we shall ever experience this side of heaven.

c) Trinity Roles as Seen from Specific New Testament Scriptures:

1) Matthew 3:16-17:

Now once **Jesus** had been baptized, He immediately came up out of the water, and, behold!, the heavens opened for Him, and He saw the **Spirit** of God coming down like a dove and lighting upon Him. And, behold!, a **voice** from heaven was saying, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.

Comment: The baptism of Christ had a much different symbolism from any other baptism John ever undertook. John had (rightly) understood the normal meaning of his unique baptism to be a visible act of repentance and a symbolic washing away of sins. This explains why he was

reluctant to baptize the sinless Messiah (Matt.3:14). But in the case of Christ, the symbolism is different: His entrance into the water represents His willingness to submerge Himself into our sins (therefore to die for them); whereas His coming up out of the water represents His resurrection. In this, the role of the Trinity in Christ's victory over death at the cross in death and resurrection is symbolized: the Son who undertook the *mission* to save us from our sins comes back to life (in His humanity); the Holy Spirit *quickens* Him (1Pet.3:18); and the Father who sent the Son *pronounces* His work and sacrifice satisfactory, efficacious and well-pleasing.

2) John 14:16:

And *I* will ask the **Father** and He will give you another **Comforter**, that He may be with you forever.

Comment: This verse shows the Father in a position of *authority*, the Son *interceding* on behalf of believers, and the Holy Spirit being sent *to help* us.

3) 1st Corinthians 12:4-6:

There are different gifts, but the same **Spirit**; and there are different ministries, but the same **Lord**; and there are different results, but the same **God** who brings about all results in all cases.

Comment: Here we see clearly the respective roles of the Trinity in supporting our Christian ministry in life. The Holy Spirit gives us our particular spiritual gift(s) (cf. 1Cor.12:11); specific ministries are said to be assigned by our Lord Jesus Christ; and the Father is said to oversee and empower the results of those ministries: God gives us the gift (the Holy Spirit: He *empowers* us); God gives us the ministry (the Lord Jesus Christ: we share in His *mission*); God gives us the results (the Father: all effects are part of His *plan*).

4) 2nd Corinthians 13:14:

May the grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, and the love of **God**, and the fellowship of the **Holy Spirit** be with you all.

Comment: The Trinity is seen here from the standpoint of salvation, before, during and after: The love of the Father *sends* the Son to die for sinful mankind (cf. Jn.3:16); The Son's *sacrifice* reconciles us with the Father by satisfying the requirements of the Father's righteousness, and thus providing grace, that is, salvation free to us since He paid; The Spirit *unites* in fellowship with God all who accept this offer of grace (based on Christ's death) originating in God's love.

5) Ephesians 3:14-17:

For this reason I bow my knees to the **Father**, from whom His entire family in heaven and on earth has received its name, that He may grant you according to the riches of His glory to be powerfully strengthened in your inner person through His **Spirit**, so that, rooted and grounded in love, **Christ** may dwell in your hearts through faith.

Comment: In this apostolic prayer of Paul, we see the Father as the *authority* to whom Paul prays; he prays for us to be *strengthened* by the Holy Spirit; the object of his prayer is that we may grow to be *more like* our Savior, Jesus Christ, and improve our relationship with Him in every way.

6) Ephesians 4:4-6:

There is one body and One **Spirit** – just as when you were called it was in one hope that you were called. There is One **Lord** [Jesus Christ], one faith, one baptism. There is One **God and Father** of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Comment: In this précis of the “unity of the faith” (Eph.4:3), Paul reminds us of some of the most important common factors of our Christian faith. In doing so, certain aspects of individual Trinity roles are emphasized: the Holy Spirit’s role in bringing us into the body of Christ through His baptizing of us into Christ, and our concomitant *hope* of resurrection in Christ; the Lord Jesus Christ’s role as our object of *faith* and the Spirit baptism by which we enter into union with Him through that *faith*; the Father’s role as the unifying God of *love*, who knits His family of believers together in every way.

7) 1Peter 1:1-2:

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who, though outcasts dispersed throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, were yet selected in the foreknowledge of **God the Father**, by means of the **Holy Spirit’s** consecration, for the obedience in and sprinkling of the blood of **Jesus Christ**.

Comment: Peter tells us that we believers are elected to eternal life according to the Father's *plan* of salvation, the Holy Spirit’s *implementation* of salvation for us when we believe, and the Son’s *work* of salvation, in which and in whom we put our faith.

8) Revelation 1:4-6:

Grace to you and peace from the **One who is and was and is coming**, and from the seven **Spirits** which are before His throne, and from **Jesus Christ**, the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead and the ruler of the kings of the earth.

Comment: In John's salutation from the Trinity, the Father's eternity and imminent taking of *possession of the devil's world*, the Spirit's *supervision of the devil's world* (see Rev.5:6; Is.11:2), and the Son's *victory and conquest over the devil's world* are emphasized.

d) Trinity Roles Explained: When we are face to face with God, we shall "know even as we are known" (1Cor.13:12). Until that time, our *understanding* of God in three persons is essentially dependent upon the way the Bible reveals the Trinity in the process of carrying out God's plan for human history. Below, the different roles taken by the Trinity in several aspects of administering that plan are considered:

1) The Plan of God: authorized by the *Will* of the Father (Eph.1:11; Rev.4:11), executed by the *Word*, the Son (Heb.1:2-3; Jn.1:1-3), administered through the *Wisdom* and power of the Spirit (Is.11:2; Zech.4:6).

2) Creation of the World: directed by the Father (Gen.1:1; 1:3; Rev.4:11), carried out by the Son (1Cor.8:6; Col.1:16; Heb.1:2), empowered by the Spirit (Ps.33:6b; Prov.8:27-31).

3) Revelation of the Word: the Father *expresses* the Word (Is.55:11; also Is.40:8; 45:23), Christ *is* the Word (Jn.1:1-3; Heb.1:3), the Holy Spirit *reveals* the Word (1Cor.2:10-16).

4) Christ's 1st Advent: Christ is sent by the Father (Heb.10:7), conceived (Matt.1:20), led (Matt.4:1), and empowered (Jn.3:34) by the Spirit as He carries out His ministry of self-sacrifice for our salvation.

5) The Victory of Salvation (Matt.12:20; Jn.16:33; 1Cor.15:54-57; Col.2:15; Rev.5:5): the Father sends the Son on the mission (Jn.3:16), the Son accomplishes the mission (Jn.19:30; Heb.10:7), the Holy Spirit supports the mission (Matt.3:16; Jn.3:34).

6) Reconciliation of the Believer: though estranged from the Father (Eph.4:18; Col.1:21; 1Jn.1:3 & 6), we are restored to fellowship with Him through the mediation of the Son by means of His sacrifice on the cross (Eph.2:12-13; Col.1:22; Heb.2:14-15), with the Spirit acting as the agent of our renewed fellowship (2Cor.13:14; Phil.2:1).

7) Regeneration of the Believer: the Father holds the key to eternal life (Jn.5:19-26; Rom.5:10-11), the Son purchased access to eternal life by His death for all who believe in Him (Acts 3:15; 20:28; 2Pet.1:18), the Spirit quickens or regenerates believers (Jn.3:5-8).

8) Walk of the Believer: the Father sets the standard of holiness (2Cor.7:1; 1Thes.4:3; Heb.12:14; 1Pet.1:16), the Son is the model (Matt.16:24; 1Cor.11:1; 1Thes.1:6), the Spirit provides the power to live as God would have us live (Rom.8:4; Gal.5:16).

9) Virtues of the Believer: the Father gives us the example of *love* (Jn.3:16; 1Jn.4:7-12) by sending His Son, who is the object our *faith* (Jn.14:6; Act 16:31), so that we look forward to our resurrection with a *hope* empowered by the Holy Spirit (Rom.15:13).

10) Spiritual Gifts of the Believer: given by the Spirit, with specific ministries assigned by the Son and specific effects decreed by the Father (1Cor.12:4-6).

11) Prayers of the Believer: offered to the Father (Matt.6:6), in the name of the Son (Jn.15:16; 16:23), accomplished in the power of the Spirit (Eph.6:18).

N.B.: These examples above are given to help explain and expound the Trinity as the Bible reveals the doctrine, but the “division of labor” suggested by them is not to be taken as strict in all cases. In most of these (and other) joint actions of the Trinity, there is overlap and further subdivision of responsibilities which is often only hinted at in scripture. To take the last case, for example, prayer in scripture is almost always addressed to the Father, but Jesus does say (in Jn.14:14), that if we ask *Him* anything in His name He will do it. A major controversy in the history of the church – one that split the east from the west – had to do with the “procession of the Spirit” and the question of whether the Father only (Jn.14:26) or the Father *and* the Son had sent Him (Jn.15:26). In some sense, both are right (the issue turns on the Father’s *role* as possessing original authority and the Son’s *role* receiving delegated authority - note the stress on role). Therefore, in our appreciation of the Trinity, we should be careful to restrict ourselves to learning what such scriptures actually teach us, and not build dispositive doctrinal principles solely on deductions stemming from them. For one thing is crystal clear from everything we may glean from scripture: the members of the Trinity are undeniably “one” in their unity and purpose.

C. The Trinity in the Old Testament

1. Introduction: The Trinity is not only present in the verses of the Old Testament, but portrayed clearly enough to see (with the benefit of New Testament revelation). When God says “let *us* make Man in *our* image (Gen.1:26), when the angels of God praise Him with their three-fold “holy, holy, holy” (Is.6:3), when Aaron’s sons are told to “put My name” on the Israelites with a triple blessing (Num.6:24-26), the clear intent is to reflect (if not to convey) the triune nature of God. Moreover, some Old Testament scriptures cast the Trinity in even sharper relief, such as king David’s last words which in quick succession refer to God as “the Spirit of the Lord”, “the God of Israel”, and “the Rock of Israel” (2Sam.23:2-3; see 1Cor.10:4 for the image of Christ as Israel’s Rock). There are many other passages commonly cited to demonstrate the reality of the Trinity in the Old Testament, a reality shimmering just beneath the veil (e.g., Is.48:15-17; 63:9-10), but perhaps the best example is the one used by our Lord to demonstrate that His divinity was indeed prophesied by scripture (cf. Zech.2:7-13):

As the Pharisees were gathering together, Jesus put a question to them, saying “What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They answered Him, “David’s son.”

Then He said to them, “Well then, how can David, speaking in the Spirit, call Him Lord? For he says,

The Lord said to My Lord,
“Sit down at my right hand,
until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” [Psalm 110:1]

So if David calls Him Lord, how is He his Son?” And no one was able to answer Him a word, nor did anyone dare to question Him any longer from that day forward.

Matthew 22:41-46

We are not to assume that David, when he penned this prophecy under divine inspiration, saw the coming Christ as clearly as he wished to. Indeed, we have it from Christ that “many prophets and righteous men desired to see” what was being revealed to Jesus’ generation face to face, namely, the unveiling of the Messiah (Matt.13:17; Lk.10:24; cf. Jn.8:56; 1Pet.1:10-12). The revelation of Jesus Christ to the world during His 1st Advent, in addition to explaining passages such as Ps.110:1 above (Christ is David’s Son in His humanity, but David’s Lord in His deity), is also, not coincidentally, the basis for explaining many other Old Testament passages that are only fully understood by means of our likewise now more complete understanding of the Trinity.

In the Old Testament, the three Persons stand *in front* of us like three mighty mountains, one after the other, all partially visible, but not readily distinguishable from each other. Only with the revelation provided by the incarnation of Jesus Christ and the New Testament do we see the Old Testament picture of the Trinity from a *sidelong* perspective, so that *now* the three mountains become visible in their own right when viewed from this new vantage point.⁸

But the question still remains: exactly *why did* God decide to veil the triune nature of His essence in Old Testament times, choosing instead to foreshadow it in the manner discussed above?

Idolatry, a major problem in ancient times and one of Israel’s most serious stumbling blocks, is often adduced as the reason for this veiling in pre-Christian times of our present knowledge of the Trinity. Certainly it is true that the threat of idolatry to the faith and practice of Old Testament believers was a very real one. We need only to consider that the first two of the “ten commandments” deal with this subject (Ex.20:1-6), and that Balaam’s counsel of idolatrous seduction was more destructive to Israel than any curse could ever have been (Num.25). The argument suggests that there was, therefore, a need to emphasize the *oneness* of God in the face of this very real polytheistic threat, thus obviating any possible twisting of a proper

⁸ This illustration of the Trinity in the Old Testament is commonly called “prophetic foreshortening”. For more on this phenomenon, see part 1 of Coming Tribulation, section IV.1.a, “Prophetic Foreshortening”.

understanding of the Trinity. This explanation possesses much of value, but it does not entirely resolve the matter, however.⁹

The full answer lies in the person of Jesus Christ. Before the fact, before we see with our own eyes Christ come in the flesh, His humility, His suffering, His sacrifice for us, can we really appreciate in full the Trinity and what God has chosen to do for us in Christ's incarnation and death on the cross? Without the *accomplished reality* of the incarnation of Jesus, how could we ever but dimly conceive the glory of it? And without the accomplished fact of His incarnation, how could we possibly understand and appreciate the triune nature of God? For it is only through Christ – after He has come into the world in person – that we begin to see God with the clarity of vision it has now been given us to possess (Jn.1:18; 14:9). Just as the temple veil that symbolically separated us from the presence of God was split in two by Christ's sacrifice on our behalf (Matt.27:51), so the veil that in the Old Testament partially obscured the person of Christ from our view has been lifted by His actual advent in the flesh -- to die on our behalf. So that now, through our faith in Jesus Christ, we see God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit more clearly than we ever could before:

For God who said, "Let light shine forth from the darkness!", is He who has shone forth [His light] into our hearts to illuminate our knowledge of God's glory *in the person of Jesus Christ*.

2nd Corinthians 4:6

For until this very day, the same veil remains [upon their unbelieving hearts] when the Old Testament is read, and it is not removed [when they hear these scriptures], because it is [only] done away with *in Christ*.

2nd Corinthians 3:14

- * We see the Son more clearly after He comes into the world (Jn.1:14).
- * The Son can only reveal the Father more clearly after He comes into the world (Jn.1:18).
- * The Spirit cannot be sent to indwell believers until after the Son has been glorified (Jn.7:39).

⁹ Pagan pantheons (not to mention pagan religions) are different from God and the true worship of Him in every way, and this would have been obvious to true believers, revelation of the Trinity notwithstanding. To state but two obvious points of departure, pagan pantheons are never even close to being "one" in purpose as the Trinity is (Jn.10:30; cf. 1Cor.3:8), nor are their individual members so integral to the existence of the whole.

Therefore:

* the Trinity can only be clearly explained and understood after the 1st Advent of Christ, a task undertaken by the New Testament.

* while in the Old Testament, before the 1st Advent, the members of the Trinity are, understandably, not as clearly distinguished as they are in the New Testament.

2. The Messiah Pre-figured in the Old Testament: Contrary to much conventional wisdom about the Old Testament, Jesus Christ and His sacrifice on our behalf is depicted everywhere in the Old Testament. Furthermore, we know from New Testament scripture that the necessity for the mission and suffering of the Messiah was understood clearly enough by Old Testament believers (as Christ explains on the road to Emmaus: Lk.24:27; see also 1Pet.1:10-12 and Heb.11:26). In fact, there are in the Old Testament a large variety of “types” employed to pre-figure the incarnation, death and suffering of the Son of God on our behalf. The subject of typology will be covered in more extensive detail in part 4A of this series (Christology), but two major categories of the Old Testament’s portrayal of the suffering of Christ should be mentioned now:

a) Blood Sacrifice: From the coats of skin that God provides for Adam and Eve to indicate that One will die in their place (Gen.3:21), to Abel’s sacrifice, superior to Cain’s because it depicts the Substitute’s death (Gen.4:4), to the Noahic covenant demanding respect for blood that represents the death of Another in our place (Gen.9:4), to the whole elaborate series of sacrifices commanded by the Mosaic law, all of which portray redemption through Another’s blood (cf. Heb.9:22ff.), God made extensive use of the “teaching aid” of blood sacrifice in order that it might be crystal clear to all Old Testament believers that forgiveness of their sins was no light matter: it was something that only God could do *for* them, and it involved a steep and bloody price that God would somehow have to pay Himself on behalf of those who trusted in Him.

b) Prophecy: The substitutionary suffering and death of Christ on our behalf is predicted and prophesied throughout the Old Testament, for example:

- Genesis 3:15: He will crush your head, and you, [serpent], will strike His heel.
- Numbers 21:9: So Moses made a bronze serpent and put it on a staff. And it came to pass that whoever was bitten by a serpent then looked at the bronze serpent would live.
- Psalm 22:1: My God, My God, why did You forsake Me?
- Isaiah 53:3: He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with suffering.

3. Appearances of Christ in the Old Testament: In terms of their presentation of the Trinity, the main difference between the Old and New Testaments is that in the New Testament, Christ is clearly visible and distinct from the Father, while in the Old Testament, the Father and Son are often difficult to distinguish.¹⁰ Despite the discussion immediately above, there is a common misconception - even in many Christian circles - that the fact that the exact details about Christ's incarnation were shielded in the Old Testament means that the *visible* person in the Old Testament is primarily God the Father. This is not entirely accurate, for the Father has always appeared to the world *through* the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and this fact was just as true in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament; only the *manner* of the Father's representation of Himself through His Son changed: in the New Testament, an *incarnate* Jesus Christ becomes visible to the world (only His true glory is shielded), while in the Old Testament, Christ also represents the Father – but not in *incarnate* form. Additionally, in the New Testament, when our Lord says “I and the Father are one” (Jn.10:30), or otherwise speaks the Father's words (Jn.8:28; 14:24), the distinction between the Father and the Son (along with this unity) it is perfectly clear and obvious. However, in the Old Testament, when God appears, it is consistently the Son who appears, but as the representative of the Father, speaking the Father's words, so that the distinction between the two was not, at the time, completely understood or appreciated (Jn.8:26 & 28):

So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say. John 12:50 [NIV]

a) Definition of Theophany and Christophany: The words “Theophany” and “Christophany” mean, respectively, “an appearance of God” and “an appearance of Christ”, the second part of each being derived from the Greek root *phan*, “appear” (from which we get the word “phenomenon”). In this section it will be argued that in biblical terms, at any rate, the only category of event we really need to be concerned with here is Christophany, for, in my view, all cases of Theophany in the Old Testament are really Christophanies.

It needs to be made clear right at the outset that by Christophany we are definitely not referring to the literal, physical appearance of our Lord Jesus Christ in His true humanity -- ever since His deity assumed true humanity at the incarnation, Christ has not again appeared in temporary, Christophanic form. The position that all Old Testament appearances of God are, in reality, appearances of Christ, also allows for the possibility of other sorts of manifestations of the Father

¹⁰ The Spirit is also more clearly distinguished in the New Testament, especially after He has been sent, but the issue in the case of the Spirit is really more one of degree (i.e., He is more perspicuous in the New Testament) than one of kind. We do see the Spirit distinctly in the Old Testament (e.g., Gen.1:2; 6:3; Is.63:10; Zech.4:6), though not with the same degree of clarity or frequency as we do in the New Testament, especially after He has been sent as the believer's Comforter (Jn.14:16). The Spirit may act more in a “behind the scenes” manner in the Old Testament than in the New, but it is not a matter of His being difficult to distinguish from the other two members of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit will be considered separately in part 5 of this series, Pneumatology.

other than an ostensibly corporeal appearance here on earth, such as a dream or vision (Daniel's vision of the "Ancient of Days" being the prime example: Dan.7:13-14).¹¹

b) Invisibility of the Father: Until we get to heaven, we will not see the Father. We know that the Father is not invisible to the angels, for they "constantly see the face of My Father in heaven" (Matt.18:10). But He is our *heavenly* Father (Matt.6:9, 26, et passim), and as long as the earthly conflict between His would-be usurper, Satan, and His designated regent, Christ, still rages, in heaven He remains for His majesty's sake, speaking and working His will through His Servant. Until the final and ultimate victory, and only after the complete purging of the universe will the Father come to the new earth to make His abode with us forever (Rev.21:1-3).¹² Until that time, the Father, though acting and speaking through His representative, His Son Jesus Christ, remains invisible to human eye.

"But", He said, "you cannot see My face. For a man may not see My face and live."
Exodus 33:20

Surely, You are a God who hides Himself. Isaiah 45:15

No one has ever seen God. God the only Son – the One who has always been at the
Father's side – He has made Him known. John 1:18

Not that anyone has seen the Father except He [the Son] who has always been with the
Father; He has seen the Father. John 6:46

He [the Father] who alone possesses immortality, dwelling in *unapproachable* light,
whom no man has ever seen, nor can see. 1st Timothy 6:16

No one has ever seen God. 1st John 4:12

¹¹ Daniel saw the Father in this vision as well as His Son. Note the unique title used for the Father, "Ancient of Days", a name which in Hebrew construct usage can be taken to imply "more ancient than [the origin] of days", and so may refer to the Father's antecedence to the restoration of the heavens and the earth in Gen.1:2ff., a posture that fits hand-in-glove with His delegation to the "Son of Man" of the task of reclaiming the earth from the beast in Daniel 7. Both of the two most prominent recorded visions of the Father, Daniel 7 and Revelation 4-5, deal with the commissioning of the Son to take His place as the new ruler of the world.

¹² For more on these matters, until Part 2B of this series, Eschatology, becomes available, please see the series: The Satanic Rebellion: Background to the Tribulation and Coming Tribulation: A History of the Apocalypse.

c) Inaccessibility of the Father apart from Christ: If mankind were able to see God the Father in all His glory without perishing in the process, it is at least safe to say that the issue of human free-will would be seriously compromised from that point forward. Confronted with the magnitude and majesty of God, not only would it be impossible to deny His existence, but it is also likely that even against their will most men would find themselves obliged to follow Him and His will out of sheer terror (rather than from a truly free choice).¹³ Along with the principle of preserving mankind's free-will, the issue of *access* to the Father also helps to explain why the Father remains unseen to us in this present life.

Although, as discussed earlier in this study, the Father is omnipresent in His creation, for purposes of visibility to His creatures, he is invariably described in the scriptures as residing in heaven (e.g., Matt.6:9, 26). Obviously, as long as we live in these physical bodies, we cannot go to heaven to "seek God" (Deut.30:12-13; Rom.10:6). The Father, by virtue of the fact that His throne room is in heaven (Rev.4:2; Heb.4:16), is inaccessible to us. This "physical" distance which separates us from the Father is indicative of the *spiritual* distance between God and mankind. As the person of the Trinity representing the authority and holiness of the Godhead, the righteous Father keeps Himself completely separate from human sin; it is in no small part because of mankind's sinfulness that face to face fellowship with the Father is impossible. In fact, for sinful human beings to be confronted by God brings immediate realization that we are worthy of death by our very nature (Gen.32:30):

"Woe is me! I am done for! For I am a man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips. For my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." Isaiah 6:5

Though we cannot go to heaven to plead our case with the Father, Christ Jesus is the one who has come down from heaven on our account (Jn.3:13). Through faith in Him and His death for us, we now have *access* to the Father in His name. By His blood (that is, His death on the cross on our behalf), Christ has broken down the barrier of hostility between the Father and those who believe in His Son. Jesus Christ has made peace between us, and, as a result, we now have been granted entrance into the throne room of heaven and the presence of the Father. This means that on the basis of the acceptability of Christ's sacrifice and our acceptance of Him, our prayers and petitions are heard by the Father now, and we ourselves shall enter into the heavenly holy of holies in His good time:

So now that we have been justified by faith, let us take hold of the peace [we have] with God [the Father] through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have also obtained our *access* into this grace in which we stand. Romans 5:1-2a

¹³ The hardening of Pharaoh's heart by God in Exodus chapter 14 is similar: confronted with the mighty wonders and miracles of God, no human could have resisted His awesome will without special dispensation from God to allow him to do so; how much more would this be the case if we actually saw Him with our own eyes? See the series [Exodus 14: Hardening Pharaoh's Heart](#).

For through Him [Jesus Christ] we both [Jews and gentiles] have *access* to the Father by one Spirit. Ephesians 2:18

Being in Him [Jesus Christ] and having confidence through our faith in Him we possess this *access* [to the Father] and freedom to speak [to Him]. Ephesians 3:12

So let us *approach* with confident free speech to the throne of grace [of the Father] that we might receive [His] mercy and gain [His] favor for timely help. Hebrews 4:16

For Christ died once for us on account of our sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might *bring* us to God. 1st Peter 3:18

The fact that through faith in the Son we now have full *access* to the Father (sonship, fellowship, acceptance of prayer, and eternal life with Him), shows that before the Son came and died for us, such access was at least *limited*. The Father's splitting of the temple's veil at the conclusion of our Lord's sacrifice on our behalf is a dramatic indication that through His death the barrier that had previously separated us from the Father (that is, our sins) has now been removed (Lk.23:45). Now we have access to the Father in prayer, though we still cannot enter into His presence in heaven as long as we remain in these earthly bodies. Before the cross, the Father was even more inaccessible to sinful mankind. It would be surprising, therefore, if the instances of Theophany in the Old Testament are actual appearances of the Father. It is much more likely (based upon this principle of greater access *after* the cross, less beforehand) that just as the Father made Himself known through His Son in the New Testament (Heb.1:1-2), so also in the Old Testament His appearances were mediated by this same Son, that is to say, by Christophany.

d) Dignity of the Father: The fact that the angelic rebellion led by Satan precedes the creation of man (Job 38:7; Is.14:12-15; Ezek.28:12-19) explains much about the Father's modus operandi of working through the One who will ultimately replace Satan as ruler of this world, His Son Jesus Christ (Lk.10:18; Jn.12:31; 16:11; 1Cor.15:24-25; Col.2:15; Rev.11:15).¹⁴ As the Trinity's figure of authority and majesty, the Father chooses a representative to wage the struggle against Satan, even He who by His sacrifice will redeem sinful mankind and replace our adversary, the Morning Star replacing Lucifer (compare Is.14:12 with Rev.22:16). So it should not be surprising that throughout the Old Testament too, the Son is the One representing the Father, speaking His words whenever He appears (in Christophany), for He is the anointed One, the Messiah, the One sent into the world by the Father (Matt.10:40; 21:37; Lk.9:48; 10:16; Jn.12:44; 13:20). This principle of the Son *representing* the Father as His agent in the plan of salvation can also be seen from Christ's ...

1) Message: Christ is the Word (Jn.1:1-3). This means that He is the embodiment of the message and truth of the Father, and speaks the Father's words truly and precisely at all times

¹⁴ The details of Satan's rebellion, its origin, course and resolution, are covered in the series The Satanic Rebellion: Background to the Tribulation.

(Deut.18:18; Jn.8:55; 14:10; 14:24). Christ is the Father's ultimate message (Heb.1:1), the messenger of the Father's new covenant in His blood (Is.42:6; Jer.31:31ff.; Mal.3:1; Matt.26:28; 1Cor.11:25).¹⁵

2) Mediation: Christ is the Mediator between God the Father and sinful mankind (Gal.3:19-20; 1Tim.2:5), the One who reconciles us to the Father by His blood (Rom.5:10-11; 2Cor.5:18-21; Eph.2:14-16; Col.1:20-22).

3) Mission: Christ is the One anointed and sent by the Father to offer Himself as a sacrifice for our sins (Heb.9:11-14). He is thus the ultimate high priest who makes atonement to the Father on our behalf (Heb.5:5-10).

4) Monarchy: In recognition of His victory at the cross, the Father has "appointed Him Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36), that is "the Lord anointed (to rule the world)". This passage signals not only Christ's replacement of Satan as ruler of the world, but His acceptance of the regency of the world as the Father's representative (explaining many Old Testament passages referring to the Father's impending return being applied to the Son in the New Testament):

a) the Son's ascension into heaven (Ps.110:1 with Matt.22:44);

b) the Son's ascension to the throne on earth (Ps.45:6-7 with Heb.1:8-9);

c) the Son's primacy from creation to eternity (Ps.97:7b with Heb.1:6).

All the above examples of Christ's role of *representing* the Father in God's plan of salvation support the position that all Old Testament Theophany is truly Christophany, the Son appearing, representing, and speaking for the Father before His incarnation.

e) The Visibility, Accessibility and Humility of the Son: While we cannot initially see the Father, we can see the Son and the Father through the Son (Jn.14:9). While we could not initially approach the Father, through the Son we have gained access to Him (Jn.14:6). And while our sinfulness kept us separated from the perfect holiness of the Father, the work of the Son has rendered us holy and has reconciled us to the Father (Col.1:22). As the visible, accessible member of the Trinity who was willing to humble Himself and associate with us to die for us (Phil.2:5-11), Christ has always been our point of contact with the Godhead, whether in Old Testament Christophany, or after His appearance in true humanity following His incarnation.

¹⁵ This is not to say that the Father never speaks for Himself. When He does so, it is from heaven. Three important instances show Him validating His Son's ministry: a) at its beginning with the baptism of Christ (Matt.3:17; Mk.1:11; Lk.3:22); b) at its foreshadowed conclusion at the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt.17:5; Mk.9:7; Lk.9:35); c) in response to Christ's prayer prior to His crucifixion (Jn.12:28).

f) Cases of Christophany in the Old Testament:

1) Introduction: We have been in the process of demonstrating that the appearances of God to believers in the Old Testament (Theophanies), are really pre-incarnate appearances of the Father's representative, our Lord Jesus Christ, acting for the Father and speaking in His stead. In the majority (though not all) of these cases, the Old Testament identifies such appearances as "**the** Angel of the Lord". Sometimes when God appears, however, as in His interrogation of Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen.3:8ff), there is no mention of "angels". Yet it seems clear from a number of passages discussed below, where the "Angel" is variously described as the Lord and "**the** Angel of the Lord", that all such appearances are an essentially similar phenomenon: God appearing to Man in a recognizable form.

The word "angel" is potentially confusing here on account of all the centuries of non-scriptural misinformation we have suffered through. "Angel" is a borrowing of the Greek *aggelos*, meaning "messenger", and is itself a translation of the Hebrew *malach* bearing the same meaning. It is important to note that neither word inherently signifies heavenly creatures; both were originally applied to human messengers. Messengers from God would, of necessity, have to be supernatural, and on many occasions these are "angels" in the traditional English sense of the word, that is, that heavenly race of creatures who serve and minister to God (Gabriel, for example: Dan.8:16; 9:21; Lk.1:21-26).

But **the** Angel of the Lord is an entirely different story, for scripture uses this phrase to designate an "appearance" of God Himself, taking on messenger form to deliver a message personally. As we have seen above, it is best to take these appearances of **the** Angel (messenger-servant) of the Lord to be appearances of **the** Messenger and Minister of the Father, Jesus Christ our Lord. For example, when we read of Isaiah's vision of the Lord (Is.6), it is understandable to assume at first that Isaiah's vision was of the Father, but John 12:41 tells us that Isaiah was beholding *Christ's* glory, and we understand (with our New Testament perspective) that this was a vision of our Lord in His capacity of King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the glorified ruler of the earth who has accepted the mantle of rulership from the Father (as He will return to reign until "He has placed all enemies under His feet" 1Cor.15:25). The appearance of the Lord to Moses in giving the Mosaic Law presents a case similar to the vision of Isaiah. At first glance, we may assume that Moses is actually viewing the Father (or His likeness: i.e., a Theophany). But the New Testament is quite explicit in stating that the law was given "through angels" (Greek: *di' angelon*: Gal.3:19-20; Heb.2:2; Acts 7:38 & 53). Since we know that these "angelic appearances" are represented in the Old Testament as appearances of God (e.g, Ex.34:5ff.), it must be the case that the New Testament passages which ascribe the giving of the Law to "angels" are in fact indicating that the Father spoke the Law to Moses through appearances of **the** Angel of the Lord, a manifestation of our pre-incarnate Lord, Jesus Christ (i.e., a Christophany).

2) The Angel of the Exodus: The case of the Angel of the Exodus demonstrates both the divinity of the Angel of the Lord and His identification as a pre-incarnate manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

a. The Angel first appears to Moses in the burning bush (Ex.3:2ff.). It is the Angel of the Lord who appeared to Moses in the fiery flames (v.2), but shortly thereafter the Angel represents Himself as God the Father, saying “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob (v.6), and “I shall be who I am” (v.14), and is further identified as “the Lord” (in v.7). The symbolism of the fire and the bush is important: the bush calls attention to Christ, the Messiah, as the Branch (Is.4:2; 11:1; 53:2; Jer.23:5; 33:15; Zech.3:8; 6:12), while the fire represents the fiery judgment of the cross that does not consume Him (cf., for example, the burnt offerings of Lev.1 which represent Christ’s work on the cross). This first appearance of the Angel of the Lord to Moses, then, is a Christophany, an appearance of the pre-incarnate Christ representing and speaking for the Father.

b. The Angel is called “of God” at Exodus 14:19 as He appears in the column of cloud and fire. Previously, at Exodus 13:21, Jehovah Himself is said to have been the one going ahead of the Israelites in the column of cloud and fire. Once again, the Lord and the Angel are identified as one and the same, and by appearing from within the fire of the column (which would later stand over the place of the ark in the tabernacle where the blood representing Christ’s sacrifice would be sprinkled on the day of atonement: Num.9:15 with Lev.16), we again have a picture of Christ’s saving work, enduring judgment on our behalf.

c. At Exodus 23:20-23 as part of the giving of the Law to Moses on Sinai, the Angel of the Lord (identified as such as we saw above from New Testament passages such as Gal.3:19-20; Heb.2:2; Acts 7:38 & 53) proclaims that He is going to “send” the Angel before the Israelites to lead and guard them (as Christ is sent by the Father). Moses is also told that they are to obey the Angel “because My Name is in Him” (v.21), a similar description to that of the returning Son of Man in Revelation 19:11-16.

d. Despite the fact that no one has ever seen the Father while on this earth (see above), we are told that the elders saw the God of Israel (in company with Moses and Aaron: Ex.24:9-11), and we know that Moses entered the cloud of glory and spoke with the Lord on Sinai (Ex.24:16-18) and petitioned the Lord to “show me Your glory” (a request He granted: Ex.33:18ff.). We also find in Numbers 12:8 that Moses saw “the form of the Lord” and from Deuteronomy we know that unlike any other servant of the Lord, Moses spoke with Him “face to face” (Deut.34:10). This then surely is once again the Angel of the Lord, not the actual presence of the Father, but the appearance of the One who is sent by Him, speaks for Him, and who has undertaken to fulfill His plan of salvation in this world, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, appearing in pre-incarnate Christophany.

e. Finally, the last appearance of the Angel in respect to the Exodus is at Judges 2:1-5. Here the Angel claims to be the One who “led you up from the land of Egypt” and reminds the Israelites that He will never break “**My** covenant with you”. Only the Father Himself could make such a claim - or Someone representing Him, that is, His Servant, our Lord Jesus Christ who would fulfill that covenant and minister a new one for us all in His blood.

3) The Angel of the Lord Elsewhere: Other appearances of God in the Old Testament are likewise best taken as Christophanies, whether or not the actual term “the Angel of the Lord” is employed:

a. The supernatural “Man” who wrestles with Jacob (Gen.32:22-32) elicits this response from Jacob: “I have seen God face to face, yet my life was spared”. Hosea 12:3-4 confirms that this was the Angel *and* God.

b. The “Man” who appeared to Abraham along with His two companions in Genesis 18 is later said to be “the Lord” (v.22).

c. The “Man” who appeared to Joshua (Josh.5:13-15) claims to be the “commander of the Lord’s host”. Joshua then not only worships Him (a thing forbidden where mere angels are involved: Rev.19:10; 22:9), but is also told to remove his sandal because he is standing on ground that is holy (i.e., sanctified by the presence of God: cf. Ex.3:5ff.).

d. Along with Moses and Aaron, the elders of Israel see “the God of Israel” on Mt. Sinai (Ex.24:9-11). Despite the fact that no one has ever seen the Father, nor can see Him and live, they not only see the God of Israel, but have a symbolic meal of fellowship with Him, an event that clearly foreshadows communion based on the blood of our Lord Jesus Christ, the coming “King of Israel” (Jn.1:49).

e. The Angel of the Lord who appears to Gideon (Judg.6:11-23) is also said to be the Lord (vv.16-17). The Angel also identifies Himself with the sacrifice (by touching it with His staff) which then goes up in flames, representing the fiery judgment of God (that Christ was to undergo on our behalf).

f. The Angel of the Lord’s appearance to the parents of Samson is similar to His appearance to Gideon (Judg.13:2-23). The Angel is described as such throughout the passage, but Manoah and his wife, though realizing that an angel has appeared to them, do not realize this is in fact *the* Angel of the Lord until His fiery departure (v.21), at which point Manoah exclaims “We have seen God” (v.22). The symbolism of self-sacrifice by the Angel is even more distinctly drawn in this passage, for He “ascended in the flame” of the burnt sacrifice (v.20), the very picture of Christ being judged on our behalf, teaching Old Testament believers to look forward to God’s future forgiveness of sins through a sacrifice that He would provide.

g. We have already discussed Isaiah’s vision of Israel’s King (Is.6:1ff.), which turns out to be a vision of Jesus Christ as Israel’s appointed ruler in the line of David (Jn.12:41).

h. Similarly, Ezekiel’s vision of God (Ezek.1:25-28) is strikingly similar to the description of the glorified Christ found in Revelation (Rev.1:12-16; cf. the elders of Israel on Mt. Sinai: Ex.24:9-11).

i. Zechariah's vision of the Angel of the Lord (Zech.1:7-17) is instructive because the Angel, clearly divine as seen from the examples above, is presented as distinct from the Lord of Hosts, that is, the Father, so that this is undoubtedly a Christophany.

j. Finally, it has often been pointed out that after the birth of Christ, though angels do make many more appearances in the Bible, *the* Angel of the Lord no longer appears in the scriptures.

g) Conclusion: The Lord Jesus Christ has always been and will always be the Person with whom we have to do, and in whom we must believe in order to have an eternal relationship with the Father. It is only Christ who has "made the Father known" (Jn.1:18), and only through Him do we come to possess "the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ" (2Cor.4:6). In the Old Testament, we hear the Father appearing through the (pre-incarnate) Son; in the New Testament, we see and hear the (incarnate) Son speaking the Father's words.

So the Trinity has always been present in God's revelation of Himself to those who believe and follow Him. As Christians, whenever we say the word "God" we should keep in mind that for us, this means the Trinity - the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.