

# The Person and Work of God the Holy Spirit

## A Study

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### Part 1 The Person of God the Holy Spirit

#### Lesson 1 - The Third Person of the Trinity

**John 14:16&17**

**16** "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever;

**17** *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

The historic Apostles' Creed ends with this Statement:

*"I believe in the Holy Ghost, the holy catholic church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen"*

This creed (a short summary of what the Bible teaches) was initially developed by the Church (not by the Apostles) during the early years of Christianity to use as a tool to combat against the ancient heresy called "Gnosticism". It eventually was used at Baptism. It was memorized by the one who was to be baptized and recited before immersion as the "public affirmation of faith".

The Gnostics wrongly believed and taught that the most important Christian doctrines were reserved for only a select few. This was not an attempt by them to understand what the Bible says about God's election or predestination, but was a horrible perversion of the Christian Gospel to restrict it only to those "who knew" (Greek: *gnosis*). The "orthodox" belief (as opposed to the *unorthodox* belief) of the Christian church was that the fullness of the gospel was to be preached to the entire human race in obedience to what Jesus said before He ascended into Heaven.

This is where the term, "catholic" or universal/worldwide came into being. This term was originally designed to simply distinguish the true church from the false one, the genuine believers from the tares, the faithful followers from the pretenders, and the genuinely regenerate souls from those who were deceived. It was used in a similar way that we use descriptive terms today like, "Bible-believing Christian", "true Christian", "Spirit-filled believer", or "evangelical Christian", etc. Because there are so many people today who are *physically* in the *visible* church but who have not been truly born again by the Spirit of God, we still see the need to distinguish between those who simply sit on the pew from those who are truly saved. That is what the Word, "catholic" originally meant. It was an attempt to make a difference between those who have been indwelt by God the Holy Spirit and were thus in the family of God and those who simply attended the Church service but who were still lost and unsaved.

The Gnostics considered that what fallen man needed was not forgiveness, but *spiritual enlightenment*. So, human ignorance- not sin- was the problem to the Gnostics. Some of them, believing the physical body to be a snare and delusion led lives of great asceticism. Others, believing the body to be quite separate from the soul, held that it did not matter what the body did since it was completely foul anyway, and its actions had no effect on the soul at all. These groups generally descended into unspeakable sexual, financial, and emotional perversions because any and all restraint and stigma against such behavior had been removed.

Either way, the notion of “forgiveness” as the Bible teaches it was alien to them and was completely rejected by them. The chief goal of the Gnostics was to become free forever from the taint of physical matter and the shackles of the fleshly body and to return to the heavenly realm as pure spirit. Thus they totally rejected any idea of any resurrection of the body.

The last section of the Apostle’s Creed was used to combat the heresy of the Gnostics by giving a summary of what the Bible said about:

- ✓ God the Holy Spirit
- ✓ The Church
- ✓ The Resurrection

The early church spent nearly the first 300 years refining their teaching on the nature of God, the nature of Jesus Christ, and the Trinity. It seems that immediately after the initial assault against grace by both the Legalists (The Judaizers of **The Acts 15**) and the Antinomians (the lawless ones), the attacks against Christian orthodoxy for the next three centuries was almost exclusively in these areas.

But God was faithful to raise up men who could carefully and accurately articulate what the Bible actually said and did not say. So that we would have a firm foundation for what we believe and a means by which we may defend the faith against heresies.

One of the “fathers” of the early church was a man named Tertullian (AD 160- 225) who almost single handedly hammered out what we know today as “The Doctrine of the Trinity”. Tertullian’s effort was also used to defend the orthodox Christian faith against the wave of heresies that were attacking the one true faith with all sorts of spurious teachings. Tertullian took every single verse and passage in the Bible that pertained to God and from that developed the understanding that we have today,

*“God is one in Essence and is eternally manifested in three Persons of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit”*

Another early Church father, John Chrysostom (AD 347- 407) was known as "the greatest preacher in the early church". John's homilies (sermons) have been one of his greatest lasting legacies. Chrysostom's sermons were vast, including many hundreds of exegetical homilies on both the New Testament (especially the works of the Apostle Paul) and the Old Testament (particularly on **Genesis**). Among his verse by verse works are sixty-seven homilies on **Genesis**, fifty-nine on **The Psalms**, ninety on **The Gospel of Matthew**, eighty-eight on **The Gospel of John**, and fifty-five on **The Acts of the Apostles**.

John created great havoc with heretics and pagans and almost always included some reference to the danger of false teaching in every sermon. One of his more famous sayings had to do with the nature of Christ when he said,

*“Christ was fully God and fully Man in the same body at the same time without conflict or contradiction”*

These were all human efforts to try to understand the unlimited God, who has revealed Himself in both creation and more specifically in Scripture and who became flesh and dwelt among us. The Trinity means that although the Scriptures declare very clearly that God is “one”, they also clearly and repeatedly give us the understanding of three distinct “persons” of God in the Father, in Jesus Christ, and in the Holy Spirit.

So, because we do *not* believe in three gods, and because we absolutely do believe everything that the Bible says about the one true and living God, the Christian church had to develop a way to put these seemingly contradictory truths together. The result was The Doctrine of the Trinity. And after over 1,800 years of its existence and analysis of what it says, attacks against it, and defense against those attacks, this short summary statement about the God of the Bible simply cannot be improved.

In other words, the single God who created all things and who has revealed Himself to man is Triune. He is Trinity. And this means that there are three “persons” within the Godhead. And these “persons” are understood as having “personalities” in the sense that they are distinct characters.

The differences or the distinctions among the three persons of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) are *real* differences but not *essential* differences. In other words, there is only one “essence” to the Godhead- not three- (God is one) while at the same time the three persons carry out distinctive roles with the framework of God’s plan.

Another way of trying to grasp this is to think about our own experience as human beings. Each “person” that we meet is a separate “being”. One person means one being and vice versa. But in the Biblical Godhead, there is one being with three persons. And even though this is clumsy and presents difficulty for us to understand, we must maintain this distinction so that we will not deny any portion of the Holy Scriptures or descend into polytheism- which denies God’s “Oneness”.

To fully understand God is impossible, but we should try to understand what God has graciously chosen to reveal about Himself in the pages of Holy Scripture. Trying to comprehend two words may help:

- Existence
- Subsistence

## **Existence**

If you were asked the question, “*Does God exist?*” you would probably answer, “*Why of course*”. But actually you would be wrong. God does *not* exist. God is.

## **Exodus 3:14**

**God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM”; and He said, “Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, ‘I AM has sent me to you.’”**

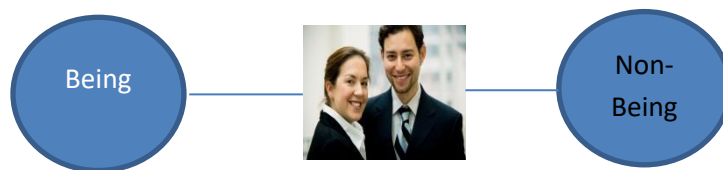
You see, the Word “exist” comes from the Latin word, *existare* which means “to stand out of”. So, the Word “exist” literally means “to stand out”. So the obvious question here is, “Of what or from what does an existing being stand out?”

The concept of existence has its roots in ancient philosophy where the philosophers were very concerned with the question of “being”. We are concerned about that too, which is why we make a distinction between God and ourselves. We call God the “Supreme Being” and ourselves as “human beings”.

But that distinction is misleading in that it doesn’t go far enough. Both of those words use the term, “being” so we look to the qualifiers to find the differences- “Supreme” as opposed to “human”.

But in reality, the difference between God and us is in the term “being” itself. A human being is actually a “creature” who has been made or created by the Creator. But God is God and was never made by anyone- not even Himself. God always was and always will be. We have life because God breathed into Adam’s nostrils and Adam became a living creature. So, we have life because God chose to give us life, but God has life in Himself eternally. We need God in order to live. So, we are utterly dependent on God while God is self-existent and doesn’t need anything to live. God is entirely self-sustained and has the power to “be” in and of Himself.

So, when the philosophers talked about “existence”, they were saying that for something to exist it must “stand out of *being*”. But what does that mean? Try to picture two circles that do not overlap labeled “being” and “non-being” with a man and woman between them.



This is the picture of humanity. We *participate* in “being” but at the same time we are only one step away from “non-being” or annihilation. The only way we can continue is to maintain our connection with the circle labeled “being” because that circle represents what the apostle Paul said in **The Acts 17:28a**:

**for in Him (God) we live and move and exist (have our being) ...**

... so even though we *participate* in that Being and are *sustained* by that Being- we are always just one step removed from non-being. This is what the philosophers had in mind when they talked about “standing out of being” or existence. So in reality- we humans are in a condition where we are “becoming” rather than “being” because we always undergo change. We grow and learn and adapt and are transformed. What we are today, we were not yesterday, and will not be tomorrow. So, this is what defines “existence”:

- ✓ Change
- ✓ Growth
- ✓ Generations
- ✓ Decay

- ✓ Aging
- ✓ Learning

But God never experiences anything like that. God is always constant. God never learns anything because He is omniscient and already knows everything. He never changes because He is immutable and has no deficiencies about which He must improve. God simply is and what He is is always fullness.

### **Hebrews 13:8**

**Jesus Christ *is* the same yesterday and today and forever.**

So, when it is said that God does not exist that doesn't mean that there is no God. Rather, it means that God is not a created being or a creature. The God who is revealed in Scripture is not bound by space and time, He is not subject to change, generation, or decay. He is always and eternally what He is. He is **"I AM"**.

### **Subsistence**

So, when discussing the persons of the Godhead, the Word "existence" is not adequate. So, we need another word and another term to describe the indescribable, and that word is "subsistence". What is the difference between "existence" and "subsistence"?

The prefix "sub" means "under or below". So, subsistence is normally used in connection with a something that is under or below something else. For example, a "subsistent" living or a diet that is "subsistent" means "living *under* the poverty line" and "eating foods that are *below* nutritional standards" respectively.

This same concept flows into the understanding of the Trinity. Each of the three Persons of the Trinity is *subsistent* or *under* or *below* the single essence of the one true living God. Each person of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *subsist* within the being of God.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.