

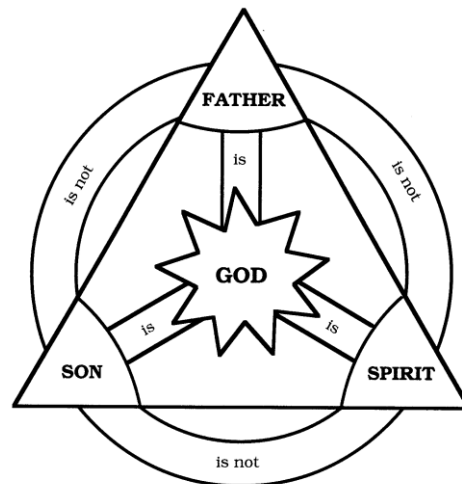
The Work of the Trinity in Salvation

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In Christian theology, the Bible reveals there is one God who exists as three distinct Persons within the Trinity (Gen 1:26; 11:6-7; Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14; 1 Pet 1:2): God the Father (Gal 1:1; Eph 6:23; Phil 2:11), God the Son (John 1:1, 14, 18; 8:58; 20:28; Col 2:9; Heb 1:8), and God the Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor 2:11-12; 2 Cor 13:14). God is three in Person, but one in essence, sharing the same attributes. The use of the Hebrew numeral *echad* (אֶחָד) reveals, in some contexts, the idea of a complex one, which supports the doctrine of the Trinity (Deut 6:4; cf., Gen 2:24; Ezra 3:1; Ezek 37:17). All three are co-equal, co-infinite, co-eternal, and worthy of all praise and service. According to John Walvoord:

In contrast to the polytheism of the heathen world with its many gods and idols, the Christian faith centers in one God. This God, however, is revealed to be a Trinity, including the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. As such, we distinguish the Father from the Son and both of them from the Holy Spirit...All students of scriptural truth labor to understand the doctrine of the Trinity, but it eludes them because it is beyond anything that they experience in this life...Accordingly, the best procedure is to accept the Bible as true and accept the fact that there is one God who exists in three persons and leave the explanation of this to the life after this.¹

The following ancient illustration of the Trinity by Paul Enns is helpful.



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¹ John F. Walvoord, *What We Believe* (Grand Rapids, Mi; Discovery House Publishers, 1990), 38-39.

² Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 200.

The three Persons of the God-head are one in essence (Deut 6:4; Isa 43:10; 44:6; 45:5-6), and share the same divine attributes. The attributes of God consist of intrinsic characteristics that are equally representative of the God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. God's attributes are revealed in Scripture, which means they are objective and can be learned by God's people. Furthermore, the attributes of God explain His actions. And we cannot separate or elevate one attribute above another. The Bible reveals God is: **Living**, which means "He is the living God and the everlasting King" (Jer 10:10), He "has life in Himself" (John 5:26; cf. Psa 42:2; 84:2; Matt 16:16; John 1:4) and is the ultimate source of life. Paul states, "for in Him we live and move and exist" (Acts 17:28). This attribute takes priority, for if God is not living, none of the other attributes are possible. **Self-existent** (aseity), which means His existence depends on nothing outside of Himself (Ex 3:14). Moses said, "from everlasting to everlasting, You are God" (Psa 90:2). There is no prior cause that brought God into existence, He will never cease to be, and He depends on nothing outside of Himself. **Holy** (Lev 11:44; Psa 99:9; Isa 45:5-19), which means God is morally perfect and separate from all that is sinful. **Spirit** (John 4:24; 2 Cor 3:17), which means the nature of God's being is spirit, not material. **Sovereign** (Psa 115:3; Isa 46:9-11; Dan 4:35; Acts 17:24-28), which means God acts freely as He pleases, always as He pleases, and only as He pleases. **Immutable** (Psa 102:26-27; Mal 3:6), which means God's essential nature does not change. **Eternal** (Deut 33:27; 1 Tim 1:17), which means God has always existed, does exist, and forever will exist. **Infinite** (1 Ki 8:27; Jer 23:24), which means God exists in space and beyond space. **Omniscient** (Psa 139:1-4; Matt 6:31-33), which means God knows all things and is infinite in knowledge. **Omnipresent** (Psa 139:7-10; Jer 23:24), which means He is equally and fully everywhere present. **Omnipotent** (Job 42:2; Isa 40:28), which means God is all-powerful and able to accomplish all He desires. **Righteous** (Psa 11:7; 119:137), which refers to His intrinsic moral perfection, from which He commands all things in heaven and earth, and declares as good that which conforms to His righteousness and as evil that which deviates. **Just** (Psa 9:7-8; 19:9), which refers to the outworking of His righteousness in which He justifies or condemns, blesses or curses, that which does or does not conform to His righteous character. **True** (Jer 10:10; John 17:3), which means He is genuine, in contrast to false idols. This means He is truthful (2 Sam 7:28; John 17:17). His knowledge and declarations define reality and help us make sense of what is. **Love** (Jer 31:3; 1 John 4:7-8), which means He is committed to us, desires our best, and acts for our benefit. **Good** (Psa 100:5; 145:9; Nah 1:7; Jam 1:17), which means all He does is good, and that He is the ultimate source of all that is good. **Faithful** (Deut 7:9; Lam 3:21-23), which means He is reliable in all He says and does, always keeping His Word. **Merciful** (Psa 86:15; Tit 3:5), which means He is kind toward us and does not judge us as we deserve. **Gracious** (Psa 111:4; 116:5), which means He treats us better than we

deserve.

All three Persons of the Godhead are involved in providing salvation. Our salvation is said to be planned and initiated by God the Father, agreed upon and executed by God the Son, and imparted to each person by God the Holy Spirit. According to Lewis Chafer:

[It] is essential to recognize that the “salvation [which] is of Jehovah” includes the three Persons of the Godhead as actively engaged in the realization of this stupendous undertaking...In every aspect of saving grace the three Persons are concurring. Even when hanging on the cross, the Son was not alone in His vast achievement. It was God who was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself; the Father was offering His Lamb; and that sacrifice was offered through the eternal Spirit (Heb 9:14).³

Robert Lightner states:

Evangelical Christians, in harmony with the historic orthodox Christian faith, worship God who is one in three and three in one, one in essence and three in person. The entire Godhead—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is involved in the salvation of the sinner. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, died for sinners. He is the Savior! It is customary in evangelical circles to put such emphasis on the second person’s part in our salvation that the roles of the Father and the Spirit are often slighted...Even though it is not always expressed in the same way, evangelicals agree that man’s salvation is the product of the Holy Trinity.⁴

Warren Wiersbe adds:

You will note that all three Persons in the Godhead are involved in our salvation (see also 1 Peter 1:3). As far as God the Father is concerned, you were saved when He chose you in Christ in eternity past. But that alone did not save you. As far as God the Son is concerned, you were saved when He died for you on the cross. As far as God the Spirit is concerned, you were saved when you yielded to His conviction and received Christ as your Savior. What began in eternity past was fulfilled in time present, and will continue for

³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1993), 207.

⁴ Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology: A Historical, Biblical, and Contemporary Survey and Review* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1995), 190–191.

all eternity!⁵

In what follows, special attention will be given to the specific members of the Trinity and their work in salvation.

God the Father

God the Father is seen as the initiator, planner, and orchestrator of the salvation of mankind, and this because He is loving, merciful, and kind, and “desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4), and is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (2 Pet 3:9). Salvation is necessary because of the problem of sin in the human race. All mankind is utterly helpless to bring about a remedy by human effort (Rom 3:10, 23; 5:6-10; Gal 2:16, 21; 3:21-22). Everyone is said to be “darkened in their understanding, excluded from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them, because of the hardness of their heart” (Eph 4:18), and “dead” in their “trespasses and sins” (Eph 2:1; cf., Col 2:13). This refers to spiritual death, which means separation from God. We are trapped in sin and stand guilty before a holy and righteous God and are completely unable to save ourselves. Wiersbe observes:

The unbeliever is not sick; he is dead! He does not need resuscitation; he needs resurrection. All lost sinners are dead, and the only difference between one sinner and another is the state of decay. The lost derelict on skid row may be more decayed outwardly than the unsaved society leader, but both are dead in sin—and one corpse cannot be more dead than another! This means that our world is one vast graveyard, filled with people who are dead while they live (1 Tim 5:6).⁶

If God had not made a way for us to be saved, we would be forever lost. Lightner states:

God is the only one who could solve the problem which man’s sin presented to Him. After man’s fall God the Father began in time the plan of salvation which He devised before time began. This divine plan centered in his divine Son: “He gave His only begotten Son” because He “so loved the world” (John 3:16). “Hereby perceive we the love of God, because He laid down His life for us” (1 John 3:16). “In this was manifested the love of God toward us,

⁵ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 11.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

because that God sent His only-begotten Son into the world that we might live through Him” (1 John 4:9).⁷

But God intervened. He broke into time and space and displayed His mercy, love, and grace upon mankind. The apostle Paul wrote:

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, ⁵ even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), ⁶ and raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, ⁷ so that in the ages to come He might show the surpassing riches of His grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. ⁸ For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; ⁹ not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. (Eph 2:4-9)

The Father’s actions are based on His love for all mankind. He loves because of who He is and not because of the beauty or worth of the object. Scripture reveals that “God is Love” (1 John 4:8), which means love is part of His nature. God loves because it is His nature to love.

The Father’s eternal plan for salvation

God the Father’s soteriological work is traced back to what He planned before time began. He was motivated to provide for our salvation before we existed. According to Lightner, “We are often led to believe that our salvation began when we made our decision to trust Christ as Savior. The fact is, God was at work on our behalf long before that time.”⁸ Paul wrote that God the Father “chose us in Him before the foundation of the world, that we would be holy and blameless before Him” (Eph 1:4). That the Father elected us to salvation is straightforward in this passage, and the doctrine of election will be addressed later in this work. For now, this passage is noted because it speaks of the Father’s salvation-work “before the foundation of the world.” According to Lightner:

God the Father’s work in salvation centers primarily in what he did before time began. With infinite love and compassion he acted on our behalf even before we were born. Paul told the Ephesian Christians that they had been chosen in Christ by the Father before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:4).

⁷ Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology: A Historical, Biblical, and Contemporary Survey and Review* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1995), 189–190.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 192.

To the Roman Christians the same apostle wrote about the Father's foreknowledge, predestination, and call of them before time (Rom 8:29–30). Peter, writing to saints scattered throughout Asia Minor, described them as “elect” of God the Father (1 Pet 1:2). While evangelicals differ on how these and other such passages are to be understood, they all agree that God the Father initiated the plan of salvation in eternity past.⁹

God's election starts with His sovereign choice, but also includes the individual choices of those who trust in Christ as Savior. Both are true. Though there is tension at this point—and this because of limited information and limited human capacity to comprehend—both God's sovereignty and human volition must be acknowledged at the same time. Lightner states, “God the Father is sovereign. He must be to be God. Human responsibility is just as biblical as divine sovereignty. Jesus stressed both. Jesus said no one can come to him unless drawn by the Father but he also said none who come to him would be cast out (John 6:37).”¹⁰ And Paul Enns states, “While there is human responsibility in salvation, there is first a divine side to salvation in which God sovereignly acts to secure the sinner's salvation.”¹¹ The Christian must be content to live with this tension and not try to force a solution one way or another.

The salvation of mankind, with all its details, was fully comprehended and planned by God the Father from eternity past. It's not as though God was surprised by the fall of Lucifer and mankind. He is eternal, and His plan is eternal. Lightner states, “We must never view salvation as an afterthought or as the only possible way out of a hopeless dilemma on the part of God. The plan of salvation is as eternal as God is. God was not shocked when Satan and then man fell. He is eternal, and his plan is from eternity past to eternity future.”¹²

God the Father commissioned God the Son

God the Father commissioned God the Son to provide our salvation. God the Son agreed to the Father's mission, came into the world, added humanity to Himself, and executed the Father's plan perfectly. Though Jesus said and did many things during His time on earth, of which many books have been written, His primary mission was to save sinners. Jesus said, “the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10), and “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Jesus lived a sinless life and

⁹ Ibid., 191.

¹⁰ Ibid., 191.

¹¹ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1989), 328.

¹² Robert P. Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, 192.

then sacrificed Himself on the cross as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Through His death, burial, and resurrection, salvation is offered to all who believe in Him as Savior. Bruce Ware notes, “In eternity, the Father commissioned the Son who then willingly laid aside the glory He had with the Father to come and purchase our pardon and renewal.”¹³

God the Father sent the Son to die

It was the Father’s will for the Son to go to the cross to die for lost sinners, and the Son willingly went to His death and bore the Father’s wrath in our place. This was explained in Isaiah, where the prophet wrote about the Suffering Servant, saying, “But the LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering” (Isa 53:10a). It is simultaneously true that the Father sent and the Son went. In the Gospel of John, we’re told, “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him” (John 3:16-17). Jesus said, “This is the work of God, that you believe in Him whom He has sent” (John 6:29), and “I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 6:38). The apostle John wrote, “God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10), and “the Father has sent the Son to be the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:14). Walvoord states:

Jesus Christ’s main purpose in coming to the world... was to provide salvation for those who put their trust in Him. Jesus expressed this in Luke 19:10, “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” In His public ministry Jesus spoke of many truths, and His teachings were so comprehensive that a systematic theology could be written based on what He said and taught. However, this was a background to His dying on the cross for our sins. In this supreme act of dying, He fulfilled His main purpose in becoming incarnate, of being “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).¹⁴

¹³ Bruce A. Ware, “Tampering with the Trinity: Does the Son Submit to His Father?,” in *Biblical Foundations for Manhood and Womanhood*, ed. Wayne Grudem, Foundations for the Family Series (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 248.

¹⁴ John F. Walvoord, *What We Believe*, 73.

