THE TRINITY: DID GOD DIE ON THE CROSS?[[1]](#footnote-1)

There is only one God. Yet, within the one God, there are distinctions: God is also somehow three. To refer to the threeness of God, we use the word “Trinity.”[[2]](#footnote-2) How do we know that God is also three? The apostles affirmed it. (See the scripture references at the end of this article.)

The traditional explanation for the Trinity is that the three persons differ only in their relations to one another. God the Father is unoriginate (without origin). God the Son is eternally begotten by the Father. God the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son. (“Begotten” and “proceeds” refer to the same process, a constant arising. But to distinguish the Son’s constant arising from the Spirit’s constant arising, “begotten” is used for the Son, and “proceeds” for the Spirit.)

In the traditional understanding, the *only* distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit is their manner of origin. “Origin” here does not mean coming into existence from nonexistence: God is eternal and unchangeable. To emphasize God’s eternity and immutability, we add the adjective “eternally” to “begotten.” (I think we should also say “eternally proceeds.”)

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A triangle is a traditional illustration of the Trinity:

Father Son

▽

Spirit

Since English speakers read texts from left to right and top to bottom, we put the Father at the upper left: he is unoriginate. The Son is to the right of the Father so that we can indicate that the Spirit proceeds from both (diagonal lines progress from both).[[3]](#footnote-3)

One person of the Trinity, the Son, became incarnate 2000 years ago.[[4]](#footnote-4) That means Jesus is both God and man. (But Jesus’ divine nature is not the Trinity: his divine nature is one person of the Trinity, the Son.) Jesus is not 50% divine and 50% human: he has a complete divine nature and a complete human nature, so he is 100% divine (meaning all of divine nature is in him) and 100% human (meaning all of human nature is in him: mind, will, body, ethnicity, gender, sensations, thoughts, emotions, etc.).[[5]](#footnote-5) We can use a graph to represent the relation of his two natures:

Jesus

|

| |

divine nature human nature

🙞

In his article, “Did God Die on the Cross?”[[6]](#footnote-6) Brandon D. Smith condemns a heresy in the ancient Church called modalism.[[7]](#footnote-7) He says, “modalists . . . taught the heresy of patripassianism—that the Father . . . suffered on the cross . . .”[[8]](#footnote-8)

In answer to the question he raises in the title of his article (did God die on the cross?), however, he responds unequivocally: “The short answer is yes.”

Smith does not realize that he is guilty of a heresy similar to patripassianism. Call it logopassianism (from *Logos*, Word)—the Son suffered on the cross.

How does Smith justify the idea that the Son died?

(1) He says, “God the Son died in the person of Jesus Christ.” It is certainly true that Christ’s divine nature and his human nature were present at his death. Also, for Christ to have died in any sense, his human nature has to have died. (“Died” here means “transitioned to the supernatural realm,” not “ceased to exist altogether.”) But just because Christ’s divine nature—the Son—was present at his human nature’s death, it does not follow that his divine nature also died.

Smith equivocates on the word “die.” Sometimes he uses it to mean the transition from the natural realm to the supernatural realm. For example: “As with any human death, his body was separated from his soul/spirit, but his soul/spirit did not cease to exist.” But sometimes he uses “die” to mean “cease to exist,” not just from the realm of the living, but from all creation (creation consisting of both the natural and supernatural realms). For example: “the human soul/spirit of Jesus remained alive (thus, his nature did not die) . . .”

In fact, it is impossible that Jesus’ divine nature, the Son, died. (a) Jesus’ divine nature cannot die in the first sense (passing from the realm of the living to the realm of the dead). For one thing, God is transcendent from creation. For another, being omnipresent, he is present at every point in both the natural and the supernatural realms. He can’t “transition” from one to the other.

(b) But Jesus’ divine nature also cannot die in the second sense (ceasing to exist). Smith explicitly says, “His divine nature did not die or cease to exist.” Since God is sustaining everything in existence right now, if God *were* to cease to exist, then all creation would wink out of existence with him. And it could never come back. If God did not exist, he could not bring himself into existence (pulling himself up by his bootstraps, so to speak), because you can’t get something from nothing. And, since God could never exist, he could not bring creation back into existence either.

But if the Son did not die in the sense of passing from the living to the dead, and if the Son did not die in the sense of ceasing to exist, then in what sense can Smith claim that “God the Son died in the person of Jesus Christ”?

(2) Smith also justifies himself by saying, “. . . Jesus is both God and man; and Jesus died.” Here Smith equivocates on the meaning of the word “Jesus.” In the first instance of “Jesus” in the sentence (“Jesus is both God and man”), “Jesus” means both the divine nature and the human nature. But in the second instance (“Jesus died”), “Jesus” means only the human nature. Hence, despite Smith’s sentence, the death of Jesus’ human nature does not entail the death of Jesus’ divine nature.

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Smith is also careless in some of his other statements.

(1) “God the Son in his divine nature continued to exist . . .” That is incorrectly said: *Jesus* can be in his divine nature (or in his human nature), but God the Son cannot be “in” his divine nature: he *is* the divine nature.

(2) “God the Son died according to his human nature but did not cease to exist.” That is incorrectly said: God the Son does not have a human nature. Not the Son, but *Jesus* died according to his human nature.

(3) “. . . the human body of God the Son died . . .” That is incorrectly said: God the Son does not have a human body, *Jesus* does.[[9]](#footnote-9)

In all three of these misstatements, Smith speaks of “God the Son” when he should instead speak of “Jesus.” It is probably this misidentification which is at the root of Smith’s logopassianism (belief that the Son suffered). Remember the second graphic from above:

Jesus

|

| |

divine nature human nature

The Son is the divine nature (lower left), and only the divine nature. The Son is not Jesus, whether “Jesus” refers to both natures (top) or to the human nature (lower right). (The latter usage is unfortunate because careless, but it is a frequent colloquialism.) Instead of saying that *the Son* died on the cross, Smith should say (colloquially) that *Jesus* died on the cross, or, even better (because more precise), Jesus’ *human nature* died on the cross.

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REFERENCES TO THE TRINITY IN SCRIPTURE

References to the Second Person

Jesus is God’s Word.

Gen 1:3, “God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light.” (In Gen 1, God says “Let X” 8 times: creation is by his *word*.)

Wis 9:1, “O God . . ., [you] have made all things by your word . . .”

John 1:1-2, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God.”

John 1:14ab, “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . .”

1 John 1:1-2, “We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the *word* of life—2 this life was revealed, and we have seen it and testify to it, and declare to you the eternal life that was with the Father and was revealed to us . . .”

Col 1:16, “for in him [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible . . . all things have been created through him and for him.”

Jesus is God’s Wisdom.

Wis 9:1-2, “O God . . . by your wisdom [you] have formed humankind . . .”

1 Cor 1:24b, “Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God.”

1 Cor 1:30, “Christ . . . became for us wisdom from God . . .”

Jesus is God’s Son.

Matt 3:17 (//Luke 3:22), (Jesus’ baptism) “And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.””

Luke 1:35, “The angel said to her [Mary], “. . . the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.””

Luke 9:35, (transfiguration) “Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!””

Heb 1:2-5, God “has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. 3 . . . and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, 4 having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. 5 For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son; today I have begotten you”? Or again, “I will be his Father, and he will be my Son”?”

other statements that Jesus is God

Rom 9:5, “to them [the Jews] belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Christ, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.” (Other translations punctuate differently. E.g., the Revised Standard Version: “to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.”)

Col 1:15-20, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; 16 for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created . . . all things have been created through him and for him. 17 He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together. . . . 18 He is . . . the firstborn from the dead . . . 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell . . .”

Phil 2:6-9, “though he was in the form of God, [Jesus] did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited . . .”

Col 1:15, “He is the image of the invisible God . . .”

Heb 1:3, “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being . . .”

References to the Third Person

The Spirit is God.

Matt 3:16‑17 (//Luke 3:21‑22), “And when Jesus had been baptized, just as he came up from the water, suddenly the heavens were opened to him and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alight­ing on him. 17 And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.””

Luke 1:35, “The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.””

Luke 9:34-35, “a cloud came and overshadowed them . . . 35 Then from the cloud came a voice that said, “This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him!””

John 14:16-17, “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.”

References to All Three Persons

Matt 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . .”

Luke 10:21-22, “At that same hour Jesus rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth . . .”

Acts 2:33, “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he [Jesus] has poured out this that you both see and hear.”

Rom 1:3-4, God has now revealed “the gospel concerning his Son, who was des­cended from David according to the flesh 4and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead . . .”

Rom 8:9bc, “you are in the Spirit, since the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him.”

1 Cor 12:4-6, “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; 5 and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; 6 and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone.”

2 Cor 13:13 (benediction concluding the letter), “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you.”

Eph 4:4-6, “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all.”

Titus 3:6, “his Spirit he [God] poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ . . .”

Philem 3, “grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (“Grace and peace” appears in other salutations by Paul as well.)

1 Pet 1:2, you “have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ . . .”

Jude 1:20b‑21, “pray in the Holy Spirit; 21keep yourselves in the love of God; look forward to the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ . . .”

Based upon the scriptures, the Apostles’ Creed (a Roman baptismal creed, c. ad 200) and the Nicene Creed (ad 325) adopted a Trinitarian structure: “I believe in God . . . I believe in Jesus Christ . . . I believe in the Holy Spirit . . .”

1. Scripture quotations, except quotations from others, are from the New Revised Standard Version, unless indicated otherwise. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Trinity” is not in the New Testament. The Church Father Tertullian was first to use Latin *trini* (threefold) for God (in *De pudicitia* § 21, c. ad 210-20). The parallel in English between “unity” and “Trinity” is especially helpful. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Eastern Orthodox Christians (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc.) say that the Spirit does not proceed from the Father and the Son, but only from the Father. Their graph might show the Father with two diagonal arrows under him, one to the left pointing to the Son, and one to the right pointing to the Spirit. Catholics and Protestants object that, if the only distinctions between the persons of the Trinity are their manner of origin, and the constant arising of both the Son and the Spirit are the same (from the Father alone), then Son and Spirit are not distinct, and the Trinity collapses into a Binity. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Incarnate” is from Latin *caro*, “flesh” (compare “chili con carne”). See John 1:14, “the Word became flesh . . .” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Orthodox Christianity (affirmed at the Council of Chalcedon (ad 451) says the two natures are inseparable but unmixed. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Smith, Brandon D. “Did God Die on the Cross?: The Trinity and the Crucifixion.” *CenterforBaptistRenewal*.*com*. 16 Dec. 2019. 17 Jan. 2022. Web. <centerforbaptistrenewal.com/blog/2019/12/14/did-god-die-on-the-cross-the-trini ty-and-the-crucifixion>. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Modalists so emphasized the unity of God and deemphasized the trinity of God that they said that the names “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” only refer to three “modes” in which the one God acts. Thus they would say that all of God is incarnate in Jesus, whereas trinitarians say that only one person, the Son, is incarnate in Jesus. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. “Patripassianism” is from Latin *pater*, “father,” and *passio*, “suffering.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Smith’s misstatements are not limited to those that confuse the Son and Jesus. For example: “God the Son substituted himself for us. He didn’t send a mere messenger.” That’s incorrectly said: it was not God the Son who sent the Son at the incarnation, but the Trinity. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)