



TRINITARIANISM VERSUS ARIANISM

QUEST LESSON G-6

The Problem: Jehovah's Witnesses and some other religious organizations reject the doctrine of the Trinity. They teach that only the Father is supreme Deity. Jesus Christ is thought of as an inferior God who, back in the eternal ages before the creation of our world, was brought into existence by the Father. Bruce M. Metzger has provided the following brief description of Jehovah's Witness teaching regarding Christ: "According to the Jehovah's Witnesses, Christ before his earthly life was a spirit-creature named Michael, the first of God's creation, through whom God made the other created things. As a consequence of his birth on earth, which was not an incarnation, Jesus became a perfect human being, the equal of Adam prior to the Fall. In his death, Jesus' human nature, being sacrificed, was annihilated. As a reward for his sacrificial obedience God gave him a divine, spirit nature. Throughout his existence, therefore, Jesus Christ never was co-equal with God. He is not eternal, for there was a time when he was not. While he was on earth he was nothing more than a man, and therefore the atoning effect of his death can have no more significance than that of a perfect human being." ("The Jehovah's Witnesses and Jesus Christ, "Theology Today, April 1953.)

The Holy Spirit is viewed, not as a divine Person, but as God's influence on the mind and heart of man.

This teaching is quite consistent with the teachings of Arius (c. 250 c. 336 A.D.), a presbyter in the church of Alexandria, who began to teach his distinctive views concerning Christ about the year A.D. 318. His fundamental premise was that only God the Father is absolutely unique and transcendent. He alone is eternal and the Source of all reality and existence. "Since it is unique, transcendent and indivisible, the being or essence (ousia) of the Godhead cannot be shared or communicated. For God to impart His substance to some other being, however exalted, would imply that He is divisible . . . and subject to change . . . which is inconceivable. Moreover, if any other being were to participate in the divine nature in any valid sense, there would result a duality of divine beings, whereas the Godhead is by definition unique. Therefore whatever else exists must have come into existence, not by any communication of God's being, but by an act of creation on His part, i.e. must have been called into existence out of nothing." [J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 227.

Arius drew four conclusions regarding Christ: (1) The Word, Christ, is a creature who, like other creatures, was formed by the Father out of nothing. (2) Christ, the Word must have had a beginning. Arius wrote: "We are persecuted because we say the Son has a beginning whereas God is without beginning." (Kelly 228). Arius and his followers liked to repeat their slogan, "There was when He was not." For Arius it was a contradiction of monotheism to say that Christ, like the Father, had eternity of existence. Hence, he taught that the Son was brought into existence by the Father back in the eternal ages before creation. (3) Because he 'is a creature, the Son has no direct knowledge of the Father or communion with him in any sense other than that possible to other creatures. (4) Unlike God, the Son's nature is subject to change and the possibility of sin. Arius argued that the titles God and Son of God were merely courtesy titles given to Christ.

As we study the Scriptures regarding the nature of God and the Deity of Jesus Christ, we soon discover that we are treading on very sacred ground, and that there are many mysteries not explained to us mere mortals. But to attempt a solution to those mysteries based on philosophical arguments, instead of accepting the clear teachings of the Word of God, is to arrive at error that will ultimately undermine our faith in Christ. What does the Bible teach regarding the eternity of Christ and the Holy Spirit and their relationship with the Father? Are there three Gods, one supreme and the other two inferior? Or is there only one God, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit?

We turn now to the Bible for the answers.

Objectives

First, we note the Bible teaching that there is only one God.

Second, we shall discover that, like the Father, Christ is supreme Jehovah (Yahweh), i.e. eternal God.

Third, the Holy Spirit is also supreme Jehovah (Yahweh), eternal God.

Fourth, there is only one Creator, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, we will briefly examine a few special texts which are incorrectly used by the Jehovah's Witnesses.

I. There Is Only One God

There can be no question that the Bible writers were all monotheists, that is, believers in the existence of only one God. But they did not arrive at their monotheism in the way that Arius did. They never attempted to explain the nature of God in philosophical terms. They simply recorded the truths that the Lord revealed to them and faithfully accepted the fact that "the secret things belong unto the Lord our God" (Deuteronomy 29:29).

The Word

1. How did Moses state his faith in only one God? Deuteronomy 6:4; 4:35.
2. What indications did the Psalmist give that there is only one God? Psalm 83:18; 86:10.
3. How did Isaiah deny that any other God has ever been in existence? Isaiah 43:10; 44:6.
4. According to Jesus, how many Gods are there? Mark 12:28-34.
5. How many Gods did Christ's apostles believe in? 1 Corinthians 8:4; Ephesians 4:4-6; James 2:19.

Explanation: The Hebrew of Deuteronomy 6:4 reads literally: "Jehovah our God, Jehovah [is] One." Unlike the nations around them, who were polytheists, the Jews were monotheists, believing in only one true God. Consistently God revealed Himself to the prophets as One. No God ever preceded Him, and no other has ever come into existence to share His glory. Whatever we believe about Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, we must not contradict the Scripture teaching that there is only one God. Jesus, Paul, and James taught the same truth, and it was believed consistently by the early Christian Church,

Relevance: The doctrine of the Trinity taught in Scripture does not contradict the truth that there is only one God. This doctrine does not teach that there are three separate Gods who are only morally and spiritually in perfect agreement. It teaches that there is one God, comprised of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is a divine mystery that no human being will ever be able to explain in this life. By faith we must accept the teaching of Scripture, even though we cannot explain it all.

II. Like The Father, Christ Is Supreme Jehovah (Yahweh), Eternal God

There is no clearer teaching in Scripture than that Jesus Christ is supreme Deity, equal with the Father in authority and power, having exactly the same nature as well as eternity of existence.

The Word

6. What dwells in Christ? Colossians 1:19; 2:9.
7. With whom did Jesus make Himself equal? John 5:18; 8:58-59
8. Who came to earth at the birth of Jesus? How long had He existed prior to His birth in Bethlehem? Matthew 1:23; Isaiah 9:6; Micah 5:2; (compare Hebrews 7:2-3).
9. Whom did Thomas claim Jesus to be? John 20:28.
10. Whom did Paul say was manifest in the flesh? 1 Timothy 3:16.
11. Compare the following texts as evidence that Jehovah of the Old Testament is Jesus Christ of the New Testament:
 - a. Isaiah 40:3 with Matthew 3:3:

- b. Isaiah 8:13-14 with 1 Peter 2:7-8
- c. Isaiah 6:5 with John 12:41
- d. Isaiah 45:21-23 with Romans 14:9-11; Philippians 2:9-11
- e. Zechariah 12:1,10 with John 19:37

Explanation: Paul's statements in Colossians 1:19 and 2:9 establish conclusively that the full and complete nature of the Deity dwells in Christ. The word "fulness" (pleroma) means "the sum total." "In Col. 2:9 the whole fulness of Godhead, understood from the standpoint of power, is ascribed (pres.) to the exalted Lord; this belongs wholly and undividedly to Christ." [Gerhard Kittel (ed.), Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vol. VI, p. 303-304] the word "Godhead" (2:9) translates the Greek word that means Deity (theotes). Thus, the total Deity dwells bodily in Christ.

Jesus claimed equality with God (John 5:18). He referred to Himself as the "I AM" (John 8:58), the name given to Himself by Yahweh in the time of Moses (Exodus 3:214). The Jews, who rejected His claim, took up stones to cast at Him. To them this was supreme blasphemy because no one could make a more exalted claim for Himself.

When Jesus was born in Bethlehem in fulfillment of the Old Testament prophecies, in His Person God came to be with mankind (Matthew 1:23). Mysteriously the babe in the manger was "The mighty God, the everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace" (Isaiah 9:6). This does not mean that the Father and the Son are the same Personality. It means that, though having a distinct personality, Jesus was, and still remains, the "express image" of the Father (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus said, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). The Son of God who came to earth to show us how to live and to die for our sins was the One "whose goings forth have been from of old, from everlasting" (Micah 5:2). That means that, as the supreme Deity, Christ, like the Father, has existed from the days of eternity. The same thought is expressed in Hebrews 7:2-3. The priest Melchisedec is likened to Christ. Exactly who Melchisedec was we are not told. Suffice it to say that Christ is described as "having neither beginning of days, nor end of life." Thomas claimed Jesus Christ as his Lord and God (John 20:28), a claim that would have been impossible if Christ had been a created being. Paul taught that the One manifest in the flesh was God (1 Timothy 3:16).

Each of the Old Testament texts under question 11 refer to Yahweh, the supreme Deity of the Old Testament. But it is clear from the New Testament use of these passages that they refer to Christ. Thus, the Yahweh (or Jehovah) of the Old Testament is Christ of the New Testament.

Relevance: Jesus Christ is the supreme Deity, one with the Father in nature, authority, and power, possessing all of the characteristics and prerogatives of God. There never was a time when He did not exist. He was not brought into existence by the Father but has an eternity of pre-existence. The Christ who bore our sins on the cross is the King of the universe. The union between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is so mysteriously close that it is true to say that there is only one God. How three personalities could possess the same identical nature and be one God is beyond human explanation. Nevertheless, that is the Bible teaching.

III. The Holy Spirit Is Also Supreme Jehovah (Yahweh), Eternal God

The Holy Spirit is not presented in the Bible as a mere divine influence. He is a Person who in nature, authority, and power, is equal to the Father and the Son.

The Word

12. What three marks of personality are possessed by the Holy Spirit?
 - a. John 14:26; 16:13
 - b. Acts 16:6-7; 1 Corinthians 12:11
 - c. Acts 15:28; Ephesians 4:30; Isaiah 63:10
13. What form did the Holy Spirit assume at the baptism of Jesus and on the day of Pentecost? Matthew 3:16; Acts 2:3-4,
14. To whom did Ananias and Sapphira lie? Acts 5:3-4.
15. Who spoke through David? 2 Samuel 23:2-3.

16. With whom is the Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets identified? 2 Peter 1:21; 2 Timothy 3:16.
17. How may 2 Corinthians 3:18 be legitimately translated? See the Revised Standard Version.
18. Who placed His hand upon Ezekiel and lifted him up, transporting him to another location? Ezekiel 8:1,3.

Explanation: Because the Holy Spirit is the divine Teacher, we know that He has intellect. Because He can forbid God's servants to do certain things or to go to certain places, and because He can give spiritual gifts to whom He wishes, we know that He has a will. The fact that the Spirit can be pleased, grieved, and vexed, we can be sure that He is capable of emotion. But intellect, will, and emotion are major evidences of personality. No mere influence can do the things that the Holy Spirit is said to do.

The Holy Spirit assumed the form of tongues like fire on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:3-4), which came upon the believers and gave them the power to speak with other tongues. The obvious intention was to show that the Spirit is a divine Person who comes into people's lives. At the baptism of Jesus the Holy Spirit assumed the form of a dove which came and rested on the Savior (Matthew 3:16). No mere influence would be represented in these ways.

Ananias and Sapphira lied "to the Holy Ghost" (Acts 5:3), or "unto God" (verse 4). The point is that the Holy Ghost is God. "The Spirit of the Lord" who spoke by David (2 Samuel 23:2) is the same Person as "the God of Israel" (verse 3). Holy men of old (the prophets) were inspired by the Holy Ghost (2 Peter 1:21), who is God (2 Timothy 3:16).

2 Corinthians 3:18 is correctly translated by the Revised Standard Version, "... for this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit."

The "hand of the Lord God," which fell upon Ezekiel, was the hand of the Holy Spirit, who lifted him up and took him in vision to another location (Ezekiel 8:1,3).

These are but a few examples of the many that could be given from Scripture illustrating that the Holy Spirit is the Deity. He is spoken of as "the eternal Spirit" (Hebrews 9:14), and as the source of spiritual power for God's people (Micah 3:8; Acts 1:8; Romans 15:18-19).

Relevance: Just as the Father and the Son are supreme Deity having eternity of existence, so is the Holy Spirit. His union with the Father and the Son is so mysteriously intimate that it is true to say that these three Persons comprise only one God.

IV. There Is Only One Creator: The Father, The Son, And The Holy Spirit

The creatorship of God is a prominent Scriptural truth. Our one God made man in His own image. The passages that speak of the Creator emphasize His oneness, yet our one Creator comprises the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

The Word

19. According to the Bible, how many Creators were there? Malachi 2:10; 1 Peter 4:19; compare Genesis 1:26.
20. What was the Father's role in creation? Genesis 1:1; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Psalm 100:3.
21. What part did Christ perform in creation? John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:3.
22. How did the Holy Spirit function in creation? Genesis 1:2; Job 33:4; 26:13; Psalm 104:30.

Explanation: The point is that the Creator, who is one Deity not three, comprises three divine Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. We can only conclude that there is such a close and mysterious bond between them that it is never correct to regard them as three Gods. Our Creator God is one. Christians are not polytheists; but they recognize the Bible teaching that the monotheistic faith accepts the presence of three Personalities within the Deity.

Relevance: Christ and the Holy Spirit exercise all of the same powers and prerogatives as does the Father. There is no suggestion in Scripture that the Son and the Spirit are subordinate or inferior to the Father. Those passages that speak of the Father as greater than the Son, or as knowing more than the Son refer to the limitations in relation to the Father

which Christ imposed upon Himself while here on earth. Having accepted the limitations of humanity, Jesus assumed a subordinate and dependent role, not because He ceased to be supreme Deity, but because He wished to demonstrate to us how a human being could live in complete obedience to God's will by relying upon Him for power.

V. A Few Special Texts That Are Used Incorrectly By The Jehovah's Witnesses

Anything can be proved from the Bible if we take passages out of their contexts and combine them together in an arbitrary way. For example, what message would you receive if you combined the following three texts together in sequence: "Judas went out and hanged himself" (Matthew 27:5); "Go and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37); "What thou doest, do quickly" (John 13:27). This extreme example illustrates the danger of combining passages in an indiscriminate way. Let us look now at a few of the passages used by Jehovah's Witnesses.

The Word

23. What is the meaning of John 1:11?
24. How is Colossians 1:15-17 to be explained?
25. How should we interpret Revelation 3:14?
26. How should we translate Philippians 2:6?
27. What is the teaching of Titus 2:13?
28. Did Jesus mean by His statement recorded in John 4:28?

Explanation: We will take each of these passages in turn and say a brief word about each:

John 1:1. Bruce M. Metzger makes the following pertinent observations: "In the New World Translation [used by Jehovah's Witnesses] the opening verse of the Gospel according to John is mistranslated as follows: 'Originally the Word was, the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.' footnote which is added to the first word, "'Originally,' reads 'Literally, "In (At) a beginning.'" By using here the indefinite article "a" the translators have overlooked the well-known fact that in Greek grammar nouns may be definite for various reasons, whether or not the Greek definite article is present. A prepositional phrase, for example, where the definite article is not expressed, can be quite definite in Greek, as in fact it is in John 1:1. The customary translation, 'In the beginning was the Word,' is therefore to be preferred to either alternative suggested by the New World translators.

Far more pernicious in this same verse is the rendering, '... and the Word was a god,' with the following footnote: "'A god." In contrast with "the God.'" . . . As a matter of solid fact, however, such a rendering is a frightful mistranslation. It overlooks entirely an established rule of Greek grammar which necessitates the rendering, '... and the Word was God.' Some years ago, Dr. Ernest Cadman Colwell of the University of Chicago pointed out in a study of the Greek definite article that, 'A definite predicate nominative has the article when it follows the verb; it does not have the article when it precedes the verb... The opening verse of John's Gospel contains one of the many passages where this rule suggests the translation of a predicate as a definite noun, The absence of the article [before Theos] does not make the predicate indefinite or qualitative when it precedes the verb; it is indefinite in this position only when the context demands it. The context makes no such demand in the Gospel of John, for this statement cannot be regarded as strange in the prologue of the gospel which reaches its climax in the confession of Thomas [John 20:28, "My Lord and my God"].'

Colossians 1:15-17. The Jehovah's Witnesses translate the passage: "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, because by means of him all other things were created in the heavens and upon the earth. In all other things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all other things and by means of him all other things were made to exist." The four uses of the word 'other,' in this translation are insertions by the translators. The word does not occur in the Greek text. The Jehovah's Witnesses interpret "the firstborn of all creation" (verse 15) to mean that Christ was the first being to be created by God. The Greek word used by Paul, that is translated "firstborn," is *prototokos*. The same word is used in Revelation 1:5 which describes Christ as "the first begotten [*prototokos*] of the dead." But Jesus was not the First in point of time to be raised from the dead. Moses, Lazarus, the widow's son at Nain and others were raised from the dead before Jesus. "Firstborn," or "first-begotten" (*prototokos*) does not necessarily mean the first in point of time. It sometimes is used in a figurative sense meaning the strongest of its kind. Job 18:12-13 speaks of a

disease that was the "firstborn of death." It was the strongest of its kind. Isaiah 14:30 refers to the "firstborn of the poor," that is, the poorest of the poor. Sometimes in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) the "firstborn" (prototokos) denotes status of dignity or honor invested on a person who is not the first son to be born in a family. For example, David was the youngest son of Jesse, but the Lord said of him, "I will make him my firstborn" (Psalm 89:27). We are told of Zimri, "for though he was not the firstborn, yet his father made him the chief" (1 Chronicles 26:10). Jacob was slightly younger than his twin brother Esau, but the Lord called him "my firstborn" (Exodus 4:22). Manasseh was the firstborn son of Joseph, yet his brother Ephraim had called him "my firstborn" (Jeremiah 31:9).

The point is that Christ is the "firstborn of all creation" (Colossians 1:15) in the sense that He is the pre-eminent One over creation. He was the Creator (verse 16). As such He is supreme over all creation. In Revelation 1:5 He is the pre-eminent One to be raised from the dead (cf. Colossians 1:18), because His resurrection makes possible all other resurrections.

Revelation 3:14. Metzger's comment is very much to the point: "The New World Translation... makes the exalted Christ refer to himself as 'the beginning of the creation by God.'" The Greek text of this verse... is far from saying that Christ was created by God, for the genitive case, the Theou, means 'of God' and not 'by God' (which would require the preposition upon). Actually the word archē [beginning, origin, first cause, ruler, authority, Yule], translated 'beginning,' carries with it the Pauline idea expressed in Col. 1:15-18, and signifies that Christ is the origin, or primary source, of God's creation (compare also John 1:3, 'Apart from him not even one thing came into existence')." (Theology Today, April 1953, pp. 79-80).

Philippians 2:6. Jehovah's witnesses translate the text: "Christ Jesus, who, although he was existing in God's form, gave no consideration to a seizure, namely, that he should be equal to God." In fact, the verse reads more accurately:

"Who being in the form of God, did not consider it a prize [to be retained] to be equal with God." Since Christ was already in the form of God, "equal with God" (John 5:18), the "I AM" (John 8:58), there was no question of His wishing to seize or rob equality with the Deity. He was already God in the fullest sense. The word translated "robbery" in the King James Version (harpagmos) may also mean "prize, booty" (Arndt and Gingrich). Christ did not consider His equality with the Deity a prize to which He should cling, but "emptied himself taking the form of a servant" (verse 7). This does not mean that Jesus Christ ceased to be Deity; for the purposes of the incarnation He laid aside some of His divine powers and prerogatives. Even so, He exercised His divine right to forgive people's sins (Matthew 9:6). Although during His earthly existence He remained God in the fullest sense, Jesus chose not to use His divine power to give Himself an advantage over us in the battle with sin.

Titus 2:13. The Jehovah's Witnesses New World Translation reads: "We wait for the happy hope and glorious manifestation of the great God and of our Savior Christ Jesus." Metzger comments: "This rendering, by separating 'the great God' from 'our Savior Christ Jesus,' overlooks a principle of Greek grammar which was detected and formulated in a rule by Granville Sharp in 1798. This rule, in brief, is that when the copulative kai [and] connects two nouns of the same case, if the article precedes the first noun and is not repeated before the second noun, the latter always refers to the same person that is expressed or described by the first noun. This verse in Titus, therefore, must be translated, as in fact the Revised Standard Version (1952) renders it, 'Awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ.'" (Theology Today, April 1953, p. 79). The same may be said for 2 Peter which is correctly translated: "... of our God and Savior Jesus Christ."

John 14:28. Jesus said, "My Father is greater than I." In His earthly existence Jesus had accepted the dependent role of a human being, even though He retained His full Deity. In the same chapter Jesus stated the divine mystery in these terms: "... he that hath seen me hath seen the Father... Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? (verses 9, 10). Since there was a divine unity between the Son and the Father, Christ remained God in the fullest sense. Yet He had adopted the position of a human being so that He might be our example in the battle with sin. (cf. 1 Peter 2:21). In His dependent role during the incarnation, it was true to say that His Father was greater.

Relevance: The Bible teaching is very clear, that there is only one God: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. This is the doctrine of the Trinity. Seventh-day Adventists, like other orthodox Christians, are trinitarian monotheists. Christ and the Holy Spirit are not inferior Beings. They are the Deity in the fullest sense. The Bible leaves us with the divine mystery

unexplained, that our one God comprises three distinct Persons. Only in the heavenly Kingdom will we understand more fully the nature of God.

Have you accepted Jesus Christ as your Lord and God, as Thomas did? (John 20:28). Can you pray to Him as your supreme Lord, as Paul urged us to? (Philippians 2:10-11).

Review Questions

1. True or False
 - a. The Bible teaches that Jesus Christ ceased to be God in His period on this earth.
 - b. The Holy Spirit is a Personality.
 - c. It is impossible to have three Persons in one Deity.
 - d. When on this earth, Jesus could have used his divine powers whenever He chose.
2. Discuss: If Jesus and the Holy Spirit are, like the Father, supreme Deity, to which One do we pray? When we pray to Christ, does the Father hear also? Is it possible to pray to the Holy Spirit?