

# 17

## The Blessed Trinity

**D**oor-to-door missionaries such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons will attempt to convince any Catholic who will listen that the Catholic doctrine of the Trinity is wrong. They argue that the concept of one God in three co-equal, co-eternal, consubstantial Persons is not biblical. The Bible, however, says otherwise. Based on these few representative chapters, we can see that:

- ✚ There is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4; Mark 12:29; 1 Timothy 2:5)
- ✚ The Father is God (Deuteronomy 32:6; Colossians 1:2; Matthew 25:34; Luke 11:2; 1 Corinthians 15:24; Ephesians 4:6; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; John 20:17; Romans 1:7)
- ✚ The Son, Jesus Christ, is God (John 1:1–14; 8:58; 20:28; Acts 20:28)
- ✚ The Holy Spirit is God (John 14:16–17, 26; 16:7–14; Acts 5:3–4; 13:2–4; 21:10–11)

From these explicit truths, and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church “into all truth” (John 16:12–13; see 14:25–26), the Catholic Church teaches that if there is only one God, and if the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are each God, then

the doctrine of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—must also be true. Otherwise, these revelations become a jumbled mass of irreconcilable contradictions. And though one will not find the word “Trinity” in Scripture, the above passages point us toward the doctrine, which God revealed gradually, indirectly and in various ways (Hebrews 10:1).

Saint Theophilus of Antioch used the term “Trinity” in the year AD 180. He wrote in his *Epistle to Autolykus* (Autolykus was a pagan critic of the Catholic Church), that God, his Word and his Wisdom are a “Trinity” (Greek: *triados*). Some years later, Tertullian (AD 160–c. 250) coined the Latin term for “Trinity” (*trinitas*) in his work *On Modesty*. He wrote about the “Trinity of the One Divinity; Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>1</sup>

In addition to drawing upon the many biblical references to God’s unity and transcendence, these early Church writers also cited Old Testament episodes known as *theophanies*—mysterious appearances of one or more Persons of the Trinity. References to these mysterious encounters (some of which are only implicit) are found in Genesis 1:26 (where God speaks of himself in the plural form); 3:22; 11:27; 18; Psalm 2:7; 109:1–3; Isaiah 7:14 (*Immanuel* means “God with us”); 9:6; 11:2 and 35:4. Other passages include Proverbs 8:22–31; Wisdom of Solomon 7:22–28; 8:3–8; Ezekiel 11:5, 36:27; Joel 2:28 and Malachi 3:1.

Two more explicit Trinitarian passages are found in Matthew 28:18–19 and John 1:1, 14. In the first passage, the Lord says: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.” Notice that Christ uses the singular form “name,” not the plural “names,” when he gives this directive. This usage implies the unity of the Three Divine Persons in the Trinity.

The second passage, John 1:1, 14, reads: “In the beginning was the Word [Christ], and the Word was *with* God and the Word *was* God.... And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father.” Here we see that Christ is true God, the Second Person of the Trinity—a theme Saint Paul echoed when he wrote that Christ is “the *image* of the invisible God” (Colossians 1:15, emphasis added) and the “radiance of the glory of God and *the very stamp of his nature*” (Hebrews 1:3, emphasis added).

As the Catholic Church matured and grew, so did its theological vocabulary. Terms such as “Trinity” were developed as a way to express more precisely what the Church meant by God. And though the Church’s understanding of her teaching deepened and developed, she did not invent new doctrines. Rather, she inferred truths with certitude from other truths. Some of these truths, such as that there is only one God, are explicitly taught in the Bible as well as Sacred Tradition. Since, in the sense described above, doctrine “develops” in the Catholic Church (though it never changes or ceases to mean what it once did), the First Council of Nicaea authoritatively defined the doctrine of the Trinity as dogma in AD 325.

These days, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons, Oneness Pentecostals and other religious groups try to convince people that the Catholic Church invented the doctrine of the Trinity, but that is simply false. The Catholic Church could not have invented the truth about the Trinity anymore than it could have invented the law of gravity—it has always been true, revealed by God himself.

**Further Reading:** Matthew 3:16ff; 11:27; Mark 12:29;  
 Luke 10:22; John 10:30, 38; 14:9ff; 16:15; 17:10; Ephesians 4:6;  
 1 Timothy 2:5  
 CCC, 232–267

# 18

## Are Catholic Prayers “Vain Repetition”?

In Matthew 6:7, Christ said, “And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words.” The Protestant King James version renders it this way: “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye, therefore, like unto them.” (see Sirach 7:10). Some Protestants understand the command to avoid “vain repetition” as a condemnation of formulaic Catholic prayers, such as the rosary. But did Christ really mean that repeating prayers, as Catholics do, is wrong?

No. And here’s how we can know this for sure.

Christ condemned “*vain* repetition,” but he did not condemn repetition itself. He singled out the prayers of pagans who invoked false gods (such as Zeus, Apollo, Diana and so on). Such prayers are vain because those gods don’t exist. The priests of the false god Ba’al did exactly this in their contest against Elijah in 1 Kings 18:20–40. (Read the passage and see where all that vain babbling got them!)

But Christ could not have forbidden repetitious prayers per se because in Matthew 6:9–15, immediately after forbidding vain

repetition, he gave us the greatest of all prayers: the Our Father. It seems clear that he intended this prayer to be repeated for he said, when you pray, "Pray then like this" (v. 9).

During his Passion, while in the garden of Gethsemane, Christ repeated the same prayer three times during his agony. "And going a little farther he fell on his face and prayed, 'My Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as thou wilt'.... Again, for the second time, he went away and prayed, 'My Father, if this cannot pass unless I drink it, thy will be done'.... So, leaving them again, he went away and prayed for the third time, saying the same words" (Matthew 26:39–44). Why would Christ do something that he told us was wrong, if repeating prayers was, in fact, wrong?

The Holy Spirit inspired many repetitious prayers in Scripture, intending that they be prayed and sung frequently by believers. Consider, for example, Psalm 136, which repeats the phrase "for his steadfast love [mercy] endures forever" over a dozen times! Similarly, Psalm 150 contains eleven repetitions of the prayer "praise the Lord" and "praise him" within just five verses. Daniel 3:35–68 contains many repetitions of the prayer "Bless the Lord."

And finally, look at Revelation 4:8–11: "And the four living creatures...day and night they never cease to sing, / 'Holy, holy, holy, is the Lord God Almighty, / who was and is and is to come.' / And whenever the living creatures give glory and honor and thanks to him who is seated on the throne, who lives for ever and ever." Isaiah 6:1–3 indicates that the angels in heaven also repeat this prayer continually before the throne of God.

Christ did not mean that we should not use repetitious prayers—after all, he did, the Bible does and the saints and angels in heaven do. The Bible is clear that while here on earth, we should also. Keep in mind that Christ forbade only mindless,

mechanical prayers, in particular those of the pagans invoking the assistance of gods who did not even exist, much less hear and answer those prayers.

**Further Reading:** Ephesians 6:18; Colossians 1:9;  
1 Thessalonians 3:10; 5:17; 2 Timothy 1:3  
CCC, 2759–2865

# 19

## Do Christians Have an *Absolute* Assurance of Salvation?

Many Protestants understand being “saved” as a once-in-a-lifetime moment—an act of repentance and acceptance of Jesus Christ as one’s “personal Lord and savior” (a phrase that appears nowhere in the Bible, by the way). This irrevocable step eliminates the penalties of past sins, and it guarantees, no matter what might happen from that point forward, that nothing can undo or rescind one’s salvation. In a life-changing moment of transformation, the lost sinner has become a saved child of God.

“Once saved always saved” is a slogan many Protestants use to describe their belief in a Christian’s absolute assurance of salvation. And though not all Protestants accept the once-saved-always-saved formula, many do (Southern Baptists and the myriad of “non-denominational” denominations, for example). Two Bible passages commonly cited in support of this view are:

**1 John 5:13** “I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”

**John 10:27–29** “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My

Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand."

Saint John's assurance that "you *have* eternal life" is a proclamation of every Christian's *moral* (not absolute) assurance of salvation. Christ offers us the gift of salvation, and he will not go back on his word. But you and I are entirely capable of going back on *our* word by abandoning Christ and thereby forfeiting his gift of salvation.

Saint Paul speaks about this in 2 Timothy 2:11–13: "If we have died with him, we shall also live with him; / if we endure, we shall also reign with him; / if we deny him, he also will deny us; / if we are faithless, he remains faithful— / for he cannot deny himself."

Yes, it's true that we "have" salvation, but whether or not we keep our grasp on it is another matter, as we will see Saint Paul demonstrate in a moment.

But first, let's consider Saint John's other statement: No one can snatch out of Christ's hand those whom the Father has given him. No external power is capable of wresting us out of Christ's loving embrace (Romans 8:28–29); but *you* can do it, if you decide to willfully rebel against God through mortal sin (1 John 5:16–17).

If you die unrepentant in that state, you will have lost your salvation because you will have, in effect, snatched *yourself* out of Christ's hand. This is demonstrated by the following verses:

**Romans 11:20–22** "They [i.e., those who lost their salvation by rejecting Christ] were broken off because of their unbelief, but you stand fast only through faith. So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, neither will he spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God: severity toward those who have fallen, but God's kindness to you, provided you continue in his kindness; otherwise you too will be cut off."

**Hebrews 10:26–31** “For if we sin deliberately after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a fearful prospect of judgment, and a fury of fire which will consume the adversaries.... How much worse punishment do you think will be deserved by the man who has spurned the Son of God, and profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and outraged the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge his people.’ It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

**2 Peter 2:20–21** “For if, after they have escaped the defilements of the world through the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, they are again entangled in them and overpowered, the last state has become worse for them than the first. For it would have been better for them never to have known the way of righteousness than after knowing it to turn back from the holy commandment delivered to them.”

Is there some way to “escape the defilements of the world” other than by being “saved”? No. So this means that some who have been saved fall back into grievous sin, thereby losing their salvation.

And recall the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18:21–35. Although the merciful king forgave him and wiped out his debt, the unforgiving servant proceeded to mistreat a fellow servant. When the king discovered this, he reinstated his debt and threw him into prison!

Christians can indeed lose their salvation by sinful rebellion against God, for as Christ promised, “*So also my heavenly Father will do to every one of you, if you do not forgive your brother from your heart*” (Matthew 18:35, emphasis added). Ask yourself: Why would Christ warn Christians about this, if there was no danger that it could happen to them?

**Further Reading:** Matthew 7:21–23; 10:22; John 5:29;  
Romans 2:5–11; 8:24–25; 1 Corinthians 9:27; 10:12;  
Hebrews 6:11; Philippians 2:12–13; 1 John 3:21–24; 4:20–21