

Evangelicals Cannot Define or Explain the Trinity: A Latter-day Saint Defense

LDS Apologetics Research
ABSTRACT

1. Introduction

One of the most effective Latter-day Saint apologetic observations is not an argument from scripture or history but a simple challenge: explain the Trinity without falling into heresy. Evangelicals and other creedal Christians affirm that God is three persons in one being (or substance). But when asked to explain what this means, they consistently fall into one of several positions that their own tradition condemns as heretical. This is not a minor rhetorical point. If the central doctrine of God cannot be stated coherently by its own adherents, the claim that it is self-evidently biblical and that all Christians must affirm it loses considerable force. The Latter-day Saint understanding of three distinct divine beings united in purpose, will, and glory is not only scripturally grounded — it is intelligible.

2. The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The strongest evangelical response to this challenge runs as follows: The Trinity is a mystery — not in the sense that it is contradictory, but in the sense that it exceeds full human comprehension, as one would expect of an infinite God. The doctrine can be stated precisely: there is one God in three co-equal, co-eternal persons — Father, Son, and Holy Spirit — who share one divine essence. Each person is fully God, yet there are not three Gods but one. The difficulty of explanation does not invalidate the doctrine any more than the difficulty of explaining quantum mechanics invalidates physics. Finite minds should expect to struggle with the nature of an infinite being. Moreover, the church has carefully defined the boundaries: modalism (one person appearing in three modes) is wrong; tritheism (three separate gods) is wrong; partialism (each person is one-third of God) is wrong. The Trinity lies within these boundaries, and the inability of any individual to articulate it perfectly does not mean the doctrine itself is incoherent.

This is a reasonable defense. But it has significant problems.

3. Biblical Response

The Bible Never Asks Believers to Accept a Mystery of Divine Ontology

The word "mystery" (*mysterion*) appears in the New Testament 27 times. It refers to truths previously hidden but now revealed — the inclusion of Gentiles (Ephesians 3:3-6), the gospel itself (Colossians 1:26-27), the future resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:51). In every case, the mystery is

something that *can* be understood once revealed. Paul says he is making the mystery *known* (Ephesians 6:19), not that it remains permanently incomprehensible.

The appeal to mystery as a defense of the Trinity reverses the biblical usage. The Bible does not present the nature of God as an unsolvable puzzle. It presents a Father who can be known (John 17:3), a Son who reveals the Father (John 14:9), and a Spirit who teaches all things (John 14:26). The God of the Bible is a God who makes Himself understood.

The Biblical Picture Is Coherent Without the Trinity

The New Testament consistently presents:

- A Father who is God (1 Corinthians 8:6)
- A Son who is God (John 1:1, Hebrews 1:8) and is distinct from the Father (John 17:1-5)
- A Holy Spirit who is God (Acts 5:3-4) and is distinct from both (John 14:26, 15:26)
- All three are united in purpose, will, and action (John 10:30, John 17:21-22)

This is perfectly coherent. It only becomes a "mystery" when one insists — on philosophical, not biblical, grounds — that these three must also be one being. The mystery is not biblical. The mystery is created by the creedal framework.

Jesus Explained His Relationship With the Father Clearly

In the Gospel of John, Jesus repeatedly describes His relationship with the Father in terms that are intelligible without philosophical mediation:

- "The Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand" (John 3:35)
- "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do" (John 5:19)
- "As the Father hath life in himself; so hath he given to the Son to have life in himself" (John 5:26)
- "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" (John 6:38)
- "My Father is greater than I" (John 14:28)

These descriptions present a relationship between two distinct agents — a sender and one sent, a giver and a receiver, a greater and a lesser. This is not mysterious. It is clear. The mystery arises only when these passages are forced into a framework that requires the two agents to be one being.

4. Early Christian Evidence

The Trinity Was Debated Precisely Because It Was Not Self-Evident

If the Trinity were clearly taught in scripture, the first three centuries of Christianity would not have been marked by intense, often violent disagreement about the relationship between Father and Son. The historical record shows:

Adoptionism (2nd century): Some early Christians believed Jesus was a man adopted as God's Son at his baptism. This was not a fringe view — it was held by the Ebionites and possibly reflected in early christological formulas.

Modalism/Sabellianism (3rd century): Sabellius and others taught that Father, Son, and Spirit were modes or manifestations of one divine person. This was popular enough that it was one of the most frequently condemned heresies — suggesting that many Christians found it more intuitive than the alternative.

Subordinationism (2nd-3rd century): As documented extensively, virtually every pre-Nicene theologian held some form of subordinationism — the Son was divine but secondary to the Father. This was the majority view for the first 300 years of Christianity.

Arianism (4th century): Arius taught that the Son was a created being. The widespread acceptance of Arian and semi-Arian positions after Nicaea (the "whole world groaned and was astonished to find itself Arian," per Jerome) demonstrates that the Nicene formula was not the obvious reading of scripture.

The fact that Christians could read the same Bible and arrive at modalism, subordinationism, tritheism, and Arianism — all of which Trinitarianism rejects — demonstrates that the Trinity is not self-evident from the text. It is an interpretive framework imposed on the text.

Evangelical Theologians Acknowledge the Difficulty

Prominent evangelical and orthodox theologians have admitted the problem:

Karl Rahner warned that most Christians are "mere monotheists" in practice — they believe in one God and do not functionally distinguish the persons at all (*The Trinity*, 1970).

Karl Barth acknowledged that the word "person" as applied to the Trinity does not mean what it means in ordinary language, and proposed replacing it with "modes of being" — a move critics said was dangerously close to modalism.

Gregory of Nazianzus (4th century), one of the architects of Trinitarian theology, candidly wrote: "No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish them than I am carried back to the One" (*Orations*, 40.41). This is a poetic admission that the concept resists coherent articulation.

William Lane Craig, a leading contemporary evangelical philosopher, has proposed that the Trinity is best understood as three "centers of consciousness" within one soul — a formulation many evangelicals reject as tritheistic.

The inability of the church's greatest minds to explain the Trinity without falling into condemned territory is not evidence of divine mystery. It is evidence of conceptual incoherence.

5. LDS Doctrinal Position

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints teaches:

1. **The Godhead consists of three distinct beings:** God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost (Articles of Faith 1:1).
2. **The Father and Son have glorified, perfected bodies of flesh and bone;** the Holy Ghost is a personage of spirit (D&C 130:22).
3. **Their unity is one of purpose, will, and glory,** not one of substance or being (John 17:11, 21-22).
4. **This understanding is coherent, scriptural, and revealed.** It does not require appeal to mystery, philosophical categories, or paradox.
5. **The First Vision of Joseph Smith** (1820) confirmed that the Father and Son are distinct personages, restoring the clarity that creedal theology had obscured (Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

The LDS position has a decisive advantage: it can be stated, explained, and understood without contradiction. A father prays to a son? No — a son prays to a father. One is sent, one sends. One gives authority, one receives it. One is greater, one willingly submits. This is the biblical picture, and it makes sense.

6. Key Scriptures

- **John 17:3** — "That they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent" — two beings, knowable
- **John 5:19-20** — Son sees and imitates what the Father does — personal, visual distinction
- **John 14:28** — "My Father is greater than I" — relational hierarchy
- **John 6:38** — "Not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me" — two wills
- **Acts 7:55-56** — Stephen sees two distinct personages
- **Matthew 3:16-17** — Three simultaneous, distinct manifestations
- **Mark 13:32** — Son lacks knowledge the Father has — impossible if one being
- **1 Corinthians 15:27-28** — Son will be subject to the Father — eternal distinction
- **John 20:17** — "My God and your God" — the Son has a God
- **1 Corinthians 8:6** — "One God, the Father... and one Lord Jesus Christ" — distinguished roles

7. Responses to Common Objections

"The Trinity is a mystery — finite minds can't fully grasp an infinite God."

The Bible never describes God's nature as permanently incomprehensible. Biblical mysteries are truths that *were* hidden but are *now* revealed (Colossians 1:26). If the Trinity cannot even be stated without falling into heresy, the problem is not human limitation — it is conceptual incoherence. The LDS understanding of the Godhead can be stated clearly and understood by anyone who reads the New Testament. See [FairLatterdaySaints: Trinity](#).

"Just because it's hard to explain doesn't mean it's wrong."

There is a difference between "hard to explain" and "impossible to state without contradiction." Quantum mechanics is hard to explain but can be mathematically formalized without logical contradiction. The Trinity — three persons who are each fully God yet there is only one God — has never been formalized without either collapsing the persons (modalism), multiplying the beings (tritheism), or dividing the substance (partialism). This is not complexity. It is incoherence.

"You're just tritheists — three gods."

Three divine beings who are perfectly united in purpose, will, knowledge, power, and glory constitute one Godhead. This is the unity Jesus described in John 17:21-22. If calling this "three gods" makes Latter-day Saints polytheists, then calling the Trinity "three persons" should make Trinitarians polytheists by the same logic. The label depends on definitions, and the LDS definition of divine unity is the one Jesus Himself articulated.

"The creeds define the boundaries — they don't explain everything."

A doctrine that can only be defined by what it is *not* (not modalism, not tritheism, not partialism) but cannot be positively and coherently stated is not a doctrine. It is an empty set. Defining God by philosophical negation is itself a product of Greek apophatic theology (defining God by what He is not), not biblical revelation.

"Early Christians understood the Trinity intuitively even if they couldn't articulate it."

The historical record shows they did not. They disagreed profoundly about the relationship between Father and Son. Modalism was popular because it made more sense to many believers than the alternative. Subordinationism was the majority view for three centuries. The claim of intuitive Trinitarian understanding is a retrojection of later orthodoxy onto earlier diversity. See [FairLatterdaySaints: Godhead](#).

8. Conclusion

The challenge is simple and has never been met: state the doctrine of the Trinity in positive terms without falling into modalism, tritheism, or partialism. Seventeen centuries of theological effort have not produced a coherent, positive formulation. The greatest minds in Christian history have acknowledged the difficulty, and many of their attempts have been rejected by their own tradition as heretical. The Latter-day Saint understanding of the Godhead — three distinct divine beings, perfectly united in purpose, will, and glory — does not face this problem. It can be stated clearly, explained simply, and supported scriptorally. It is the position Jesus Himself articulated when He prayed that His disciples would be one "as we are one" (John 17:11). The burden of proof rests on those who insist on a formulation that even its greatest defenders cannot coherently explain. See [Church of Jesus Christ: Godhead](#).