

The Trinity Is Not Biblical Orthodoxy: A Latter-day Saint Defense

| Introduction

Of all the criticisms leveled at The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the charge that we reject the Trinity — and are therefore not Christian — is perhaps the most frequent. It carries emotional weight because it strikes at identity: if the Trinity is the test of Christianity, and we fail it, then we are outside the fold. But this argument rests on a series of assumptions that do not survive careful historical and scriptural scrutiny. The Nicene formulation of the Trinity was not the teaching of the New Testament apostles. It was a philosophical synthesis developed centuries later, using categories borrowed from Greek metaphysics, to resolve debates that the biblical text itself does not resolve in Nicene terms. Latter-day Saints do not reject the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. We reject the post-biblical philosophical framework that redefined their relationship in terms foreign to scripture.

| The Criticism (Steelmanned)

The strongest version of the Trinitarian argument runs as follows: The ecumenical councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Chalcedon (451 AD) represented the universal Christian church settling, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, what the apostles had always believed but never formally defined. Key biblical passages support ontological oneness: John 1:1 ("the Word was God"), John 10:30 ("I and my Father are one"), Colossians 2:9 ("in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"), and John 14:9 ("he that hath seen me hath seen the Father"). The Trinity is not an invention but a faithful articulation of what scripture teaches. Any group that rejects this understanding is departing from what Christianity has always believed, and is therefore not authentically Christian.

This is a serious argument, and it deserves a serious response.

| Biblical Response

The Proof-Texts Do Not Teach Nicene Trinitarianism

John 1:1 — "The Word was God"

The Greek here is carefully constructed. John writes *kai theos en ho logos* — "and God was the Word." Notably, *theos* appears without the definite article when applied to the Word, while it carries the article when referring to the Father (*pros ton theon* — "with THE God"). Many scholars acknowledge this construction indicates the Word is divine in nature without collapsing the distinction between the Word and the Father. The Word was *with* God — a preposition requiring two

distinct beings. If the Word simply *was* the Father in an ontological sense, saying the Word was "with" God would be incoherent. The Latter-day Saint reading — that the Son is fully divine, a God, and was with the Father as a distinct being — fits the Greek grammar naturally.

John 10:30 — "I and my Father are one"

The Greek word for "one" here is *hen* (neuter), not *heis* (masculine). Jesus did not say "I and my Father are one person" or "one being." He said they are one — in purpose, will, and mission. This is confirmed by Jesus' own explanation of what this oneness means. In John 17:11, 21-22, Jesus prays that His disciples "may be one, as we are" and "that they may be one, even as we are one." If "one" in John 10:30 means ontological identity of substance, then Jesus is praying that His disciples become one substance — an absurdity no Trinitarian affirms. The parallel is devastating to the Nicene reading: the oneness of the Father and Son is the same *kind* of oneness Jesus desires for believers — unity of purpose, will, love, and mission.

Colossians 2:9 — "In him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily"

This passage affirms the full divinity of Christ. Latter-day Saints agree wholeheartedly. The Son possesses the fulness of divine attributes and power. But possessing the fulness of divinity does not require being the same ontological substance as the Father any more than a son who inherits his father's entire estate becomes his father. The Father bestowed this fulness upon the Son (Colossians 1:19, John 3:35, John 5:26). A bestowed fulness implies a giver and a receiver — two beings.

John 14:9 — "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father"

Jesus is the perfect revelation of the Father — His character, His will, His love. This is representational language, not ontological identity. In the same discourse (John 14:28), Jesus says, "My Father is greater than I." In John 17:3, He calls the Father "the only true God" and Himself one "whom thou hast sent" — distinguishing Himself from the Father. Hebrews 1:3 calls the Son "the express image" of the Father's person — an image is not the thing itself, but a perfect representation of it.

Passages That Contradict Nicene Trinitarianism

The following passages are difficult or impossible to reconcile with the claim that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are one substance, one being:

- **Mark 13:32** — "But of that day and that hour knoweth no man, no, not the angels which are in heaven, neither the Son, but the Father." If the Son is the same being as the Father, how can He not know what the Father knows?
- **John 17:3** — "And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent." Jesus identifies the Father as "the only true God" and Himself as a separate, sent being.
- **John 20:17** — "I ascend unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God." Jesus calls the Father "my God." If they are the same being, this is self-referential nonsense.

- **1 Corinthians 15:27-28** — "When he saith all things are put under him, it is manifest that he is excepted, which did put all things under him. And when all things shall be subdued unto him, then shall the Son also himself be subject unto him that put all things under him, that God may be all in all." The Son will be *subject* to the Father. Eternal subordination within a single being is philosophically incoherent.
- **Acts 7:55-56** — Stephen, "being full of the Holy Ghost, looked up stedfastly into heaven, and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing on the right hand of God, And said, Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing on the right hand of God." Stephen sees two distinct personages. This is not a vision of one being appearing in two modes.
- **Matthew 3:16-17** — At Jesus' baptism, the Son is in the water, the Spirit descends like a dove, and the Father speaks from heaven. Three distinct manifestations in three distinct locations simultaneously.

| Early Christian Evidence

The Pre-Nicene Fathers Did Not Teach the Nicene Trinity

The claim that the Trinity was "always believed" does not survive examination of the earliest Christian writers.

Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD) described the Son as "another God and Lord" distinct from the Father, subordinate to Him: "There is...another God and Lord subject to the Maker of all things; who is also called an Angel, because He announces to men whatsoever the Maker of all things — above whom there is no other God — wishes to announce to them" (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 56). This is not Nicene Trinitarianism. It is much closer to the Latter-day Saint understanding of distinct divine beings.

Irenaeus (c. 130-202 AD) wrote: "The Father is God, and the Son is God, for whatever is begotten of God is God" (*Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*, 47). While affirming the divinity of both, Irenaeus understood them as distinct, with the Father as the supreme God and the Son as begotten from Him.

Origen (c. 185-254 AD) explicitly taught that the Son was subordinate to and distinct from the Father: "We say that the Savior and the Holy Spirit exceed all creatures without possible comparison, in a wholly transcendent way, but that they are exceeded by the Father by as much or even more than they exceed the other creatures" (*Commentary on John*, 13.25). Origen was later deemed partially heterodox — precisely because his views, which were widespread and early, did not match the later Nicene settlement.

Tertullian (c. 155-220 AD) was the first to use the Latin word *trinitas*, but his understanding was economic and subordinationist: "The Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole" (*Against Praxeas*, 9). He emphasized that there was a time before the Son was generated for the purpose of creation.

The Nicene formulation of *homoousios* (one substance) was a philosophical innovation in 325 AD. The term does not appear in scripture. It was controversial even among orthodox bishops at the time — Eusebius of Caesarea accepted it reluctantly, and subsequent decades saw fierce debate, with the semi-Arian *homoiousios* (similar substance) position holding the majority at several councils. The idea that the Trinity was universally understood from the beginning is historically false.

The Role of Greek Philosophy

The early Christian apologists worked within a Hellenistic intellectual environment and borrowed its categories. The Nicene Creed's language of "substance" (*ousia*), "person" (*hypostasis/prosopon*), and "begotten, not made" comes from Greek metaphysics, not from Hebrew prophetic tradition or apostolic preaching. As historian R.P.C. Hanson wrote: "There is no theologian in the Eastern or Western church before the outbreak of the Arian controversy [c. 318 AD] who does not in some way regard the Son as subordinate to the Father" (*The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, p. xix).

| LDS Doctrinal Position

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

1. **God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost are three distinct beings** who are one in purpose, will, power, and glory (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. **Jesus Christ is fully divine** — the Only Begotten Son of God, the Creator of worlds, the Redeemer of mankind, and the Judge of all the earth.
4. **Their oneness is the oneness Jesus described in John 17** — perfect unity, not ontological identity.
5. **This understanding was restored through the First Vision**, in which Joseph Smith saw the Father and the Son as two distinct, glorified personages (Joseph Smith—History 1:17).

This is not a departure from biblical Christianity. It is a restoration of the biblical understanding that was altered by post-apostolic philosophical development.

| Key Scriptures

Scripture	Point
John 17:3	Jesus identifies the Father as "the only true God" and Himself as one sent by the Father — distinct beings
John 17:11, 21-22	The oneness of Father and Son is the same kind of oneness Jesus prays His disciples will have — unity of purpose

Scripture	Point
Acts 7:55-56	Stephen sees the Father and the Son as two distinct personages
Matthew 3:16-17	All three members of the Godhead manifest simultaneously in different locations
Mark 13:32	The Son does not know what the Father knows — impossible if they are one being
John 20:17	Jesus calls the Father "my God" — a distinct being He worships
1 Corinthians 15:27-28	The Son will be subject to the Father — eternal distinction
Hebrews 1:3	The Son is the "express image" of the Father — an image, not the original
John 14:28	"My Father is greater than I" — subordination in relationship
Genesis 1:26	"Let us make man in our image" — plural language indicating distinct persons
Philippians 2:5-6	Christ was "in the form of God" — form implies embodiment, not abstract substance
John 5:19-20	The Son does what He <i>sees</i> the Father do — implying visual, personal distinction

| Responses to Common Objections

Objection: "The Trinity is a mystery — you just can't understand it."

Response: The appeal to mystery is an admission that the doctrine cannot be derived from scripture by reason. The Bible never asks believers to accept that three persons are one being. The Bible presents a Father who loves a Son, a Son who obeys and prays to a Father, and a Spirit who testifies of both. These relationships are intelligible, personal, and relational — not philosophical paradoxes.

Objection: "The Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4) says God is one — 'Hear O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord.'"

Response: The Hebrew word for "one" here is *echad*, which regularly means a composite unity, not an absolute singularity. Genesis 2:24 uses the same word: man and woman become "one (*echad*) flesh." They are two persons unified. The same word supports the Latter-day Saint understanding of the Godhead as perfectly united distinct beings.

Objection: "If Jesus is a separate God from the Father, you're polytheists."

Response: The Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are three divine beings perfectly united in one Godhead — one in purpose, will, power, and glory. This is not the polytheism of competing deities with conflicting agendas. It is the revealed truth that God the Father, His Son Jesus Christ, and the Holy Ghost work together as one God in every meaningful sense, while being distinct persons in the fullest sense. The biblical text presents exactly this picture. The charge of polytheism applies equally to any Trinitarian who affirms that the three "persons" are genuinely distinct — the question is merely where you draw the line of distinction.

Objection: "Every Christian church for 2,000 years has affirmed the Trinity."

Response: This is historically false. The Nicene formulation was bitterly contested for decades after 325 AD. The pre-Nicene Fathers held views much closer to Latter-day Saint theology. The "universal" acceptance of the Trinity was achieved through imperial enforcement (Theodosius I's Edict of Thessalonica, 380 AD), not through unanimous consent. Furthermore, the appeal to universal tradition is itself an argument *against* Sola Scriptura — if tradition determines doctrine, then Protestantism's own founding principle is undermined.

Objection: "John 1:1 clearly says the Word was God — they are the same being."

Response: John 1:1 says the Word was *with* God AND the Word *was* God. Both clauses must be held together. The Word is divine (theos) and is with the Father (pros ton theon). Two beings, both divine. This is precisely what Latter-day Saints teach.

| Conclusion

The Nicene Trinity is not biblical orthodoxy. It is a post-biblical philosophical construct that used Greek metaphysical categories to impose a framework on the biblical text that the text itself does not require or support. The Bible consistently presents the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost as three distinct beings who are perfectly unified in purpose, will, and love. The earliest Christian writers understood this distinction. The Latter-day Saint doctrine of the Godhead is not a departure from biblical Christianity — it is a return to it.

The real question is not whether Latter-day Saints accept a fourth-century philosophical formula. The real question is whether we worship the Father, follow the Son, and are guided by the Holy Spirit. The answer is an unequivocal yes.

| Sources and Further Reading

- [FAIR: Godhead and the Trinity](#)
- [FAIR: Is the Nicene Creed Biblical?](#)
- [Church of Jesus Christ: Godhead](#)
- R.P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988)
- Larry Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003)
- Stephen E. Robinson, *Are Mormons Christians?* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1991)
- [BYU Studies: The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Early Church](#)

| Addresses

- [[_obsidian_research/arguments/The-Trinity-Is-Biblical-Orthodoxy|Argument: The Trinity Is Biblical Orthodoxy]]

| Related Defenses

- [[_obsidian_research/defense-drafts/mormons-polytheism-full|Polytheism Defense (Full)]]
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