

# OpenTheo

## Can Non-Trinitarians Be Saved?

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### #STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether the heresy of modalism prevents salvation and whether the greetings in the apostles' letters that don't reference the Holy Spirit are evidence the early church didn't teach the Holy Spirit is a person.

\* Is modalism a heresy that prevents followers from being saved, and if so, what is it about it that is spiritually fatal to salvation, and what about those who don't know it's a heresy?

\* Do the greetings in the apostles' letters that don't include references to the Holy Spirit count against the idea that the early church taught the Holy Spirit is a person?

## Transcript

[MUSIC]

[MUSIC] Welcome to Stanterereasons #SDRAskpodcast. I'm Amy Holland. I'm here with Greg Kocal, and we're here to answer your questions that you send on Twitter with the #SDRAsk, hence the name of the show.

And also, I should throw out there. If you enjoy this show, pass it on to someone else today. We could actually double our time listening audience if you did that.

So if you're enjoying it, let somebody else know. We'd love to increase the number of people listening. And if you enjoy it, there you go.

All right, Greg. All right, Amy. Yep.

Thank you. I have a couple questions on the Trinity this morning. So let's start with one from Jason Clark.

Three questions if it's going to be on the table. A couple. That's a heresy.

Oh, man. I should have waited until I found a third one, but I'm sorry, Greg. We only have

two on that.

All right. All right. Jason Clark asks, "Is modalism/one is Pentecostalism a heresy that prevents followers from being saved? If so, what is it that is spiritually fatal to salvation? Is it just as fatal to those who hold to modalism but don't know it's a heresy?" Well, it's an interesting question.

Modalism is the view that there is one God who is only one person but manifests himself in three different modes. So in the Old Testament, he manifested himself as the father in the New Testament in the Gospels as the son and in the church age as the spirit. So it is similar when people use the illustration of one man can be both a father and a brother and a son at the same time, a brother to his sister, a father to his kids and a son to his father, own father, parents.

That is also an illustration of modalism, whether that can be either ice or water or liquid or gas. So a lot of these illustrations that people use to describe the Trinity turn out to be descriptions, very good descriptions of a heretical view and established as such by the early church as they work through these issues. And we know that modalism as an understanding of who God is is false and the reason is if God is in the mode of Jesus when Jesus is on the earth and to whom is Jesus talking when he prays.

You see the father speaking at his baptism, you see the Holy Spirit descending. You don't have three modes operating at the same time. At least that's not what's depicted there.

These are distinct. Then you have Jesus talking to the father in the garden and praying it other times. And so you modalism is simply false.

Now the question that's being raised, now we have a foundation of the idea there is why is it so critical? And the reason is because there's a couple of passages that I'll mention. One, most obviously I think is in John chapter four where Jesus said that the father must be worshiped in spirit or God must be worshiped in spirit and in truth. So having a right and accurate notion about God is really important.

I mean if you think about the gods that were available to worship in the Old Testament, the ancient Near East, there were lots of them. Baal, Ashtrath, Molech, etc. And God said you can't worship them.

Now one could say hey well if there is only one God and that isn't what the people of the ancient Near East believed. This is a clarification that God brought to the Jews. But if there is only one God then, what differences it make, what name we use or how we describe them.

Well God did care about the distinctions. In fact when I think in the book of Exodus where the Ten Commandments are given, it's said when he says just worship me, he gives some characteristics for I visit the inequities of the wicked to the third and fourth

generation but show faithfulness to the thousands of generations. So he's kind of characterizing something about himself.

That's really important. I understand that this is an unusual passage for people. They kind of wonder what he's talking about.

But let me set that aside for the moment and just simply say that he is telling us something about the nature of the true God. Worship this true God not another. And when God continues to reveal himself progressively through scripture and his plan, we get more and more of a more robust understanding of what God is like.

Now in the New Testament we get a whole bunch more details. The reason, and I never thought about this before, but I think it was our friend Fred Sanders that pointed this out. The reason that the Trinity isn't revealed in the Old Testament is because of the details.

Of course the word Trinity doesn't appear anywhere in the New Testament. It's a word that was tertullian I think in the late second century adopted the word to describe something that was actually in the New Testament. The reason we don't have more that is because it was only in the New Testament time that God in his various persons entered into unique activities that were appropriate to the new covenant.

So now you've got the sun made flesh who dwelt among us who John says was God. In the beginning was the word, the word was God. In the word was God.

He was in the beginning with God and all things came into being through him. And apart from him nothing came in. So he's the uncreated creator.

So there's the divine characteristic right there in the first three verses of John of this one called the word. Well why is this distinct now? Because now we have the word becoming a human being and dwelling among us and revealing the Father and then being the Lamb of God. All right.

Who initiates the new covenant, which new covenant is a covenant of the Spirit. And now the Spirit is given through regeneration as part of this promised covenant that is different than the old covenant which they broke. Jeremiah 31 31 and following describes that.

So now we have this new revelation of who God is. And as in it was Jesus who said worship the Father and Spirit and in truth. So these kinds of details matter and this matter to the early church.

We've got to get Jesus right. The first big controversy actually of the first big issue that the church at large dealt with. And this was after the Jerusalem Council which had to do with the issue of grace.

We see that next chapter 15. But the big extra biblical council, the first one is the Council of Nicaea. And this was all about what does it mean to say that Jesus is the Son of God.

They knew they had to get this right. Is he is he homo ousius or is homo ousus or whatever? I'm not so good in the Greek but the point is just the difference of the diphthong was indicating whether he was like God or he was God of the similar essence or of the same essence. And that was the you know as one put it at the time the whole empire is divided on a diphthong.

Well that's because it mattered. And then later on it and other councils like the Calcedonian council for example and others Ephesus this is a clarifying more and more and more about who is this Jesus. So who Jesus was is really critical.

Jesus said in John 8, "Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins." Now I am he well that would be the Messiah right. Well that certainly is included there but in that whole passage Jesus is identifying himself with the with the eternal name of God. I am and this is what upset the leaders and caused them to want to murder Jesus.

So as we go through the text and we look at the history of the church we see in both cases that the having precision about who Jesus was and who God is has always been important. Okay now when it comes to this this particular concern called modalism and one of Pentecostalism teaches this as doctrine. Well if they teach it as doctrine then that group is not Christian.

The word Christian means something in particular and it entails a certain understanding about God and Jesus and the first the most foundational understanding that the church squared away was Trinitarianism and spent a couple of councils kind of refining that. If you read the conclusions you could see it's almost tedious the way they describe it because they care so much about understanding this correctly. So one is Pentecostalism isn't Christian.

Now by the way it doesn't mean that they're bad people generally or even that they're wrong. I'm saying they're not Christian okay I do think they're wrong but to say that they're not Christian all that means is that they don't comport with the normal ordinary common definition of what a Christian what Christianity is and that's why Jehovah's Witnesses are not Christian. This way Mormons are not Christian.

In the classical sense we've always used the word and to use the word Christian to describe them as misleading. All right they're a separate religion they have a different understanding they have a different Jesus okay. Now I want to make a distinction here Amy between a formal heresy and a material error heresy.

A formal heresy is when you state something that as stated is actually heretical and so modalism as stated is a heretical view. Now there are people who will use illustrations

like I just described there are illustrations of modalism but they don't they're not really committed to modalism so it's it's it's they're formally mistaken but it's not a material distinction that is really clear on their own mind. They're just confused okay.

If a person in a material way in a adopts consciously the formal understanding of modalism then they have separated themselves from Christianity. They believe in a different Jesus than the scripture describes okay and that's serious. So but there are a lot of people and maybe even in one of those Pentecostal churches I mean for goodness sake Amy we know think of all the people in Christian churches good solid Christian churches who can't give you any characterization of the Trinity at all it's ever three and one which is to as far as it goes but they have no sophisticated clear understanding of what's entailed and this is why because of that they have no protection against formal falsehood when it comes to God.

If they are fully taken in on this and they hold to this view contrary to the contrary to the classical understanding then I think this is serious business. I think then there's a problem but I think there's a lot of people probably in those environments and even in even in evangelical circles classical Christian circles who just just don't got it get it so they are formally mistaken but they are not holding to the error in a material fashion which that would be the problem. So I mean that's the best way in order to answer that I'm curious from what your response is though.

Well I like what you said about the persons being involved in salvation in different ways because that's how it directly affects the whole topic of salvation and gospel each of the the persons were you know had a different role but in terms of knowing the true God I just want to throw out an example here of the huge difference that this actually makes because there's the whole issue of who God is in terms of love. A modalistic God is cannot have any sort of loving relationship before creation. So now you have a God who needed to create in order to love.

So love isn't an essential part of his nature anymore. Now it's something that is added on and so that's a huge deal and I just think about something like I was just I just pulled up John 17 because Jesus high priestly prayer is all about or part of it is all about how God loved him and he wants that love to be in his followers also. And here's verse 24.

You have you loved me before the foundation of the world. So even if someone were to say well he's talking about in the incarnation well this is actually before the foundation of the world the father loved the son. I don't know how you make sense of that except in a trinitarian understanding.

Yeah and by the way some people might say well that's poetic and he knew us before we were created well and so maybe but that isn't when you read this passage that the level of intimacy with the father that's expressed there is drives one to properly conclude that Jesus is talking about his pre-existence the pre-existence of the word. I mean you you

can always say well maybe this is a possibility but what you can't say this is a possibility and so it's the right reading simply because it fits your theology. You have to you have to justify it in the context does this seem to be what Jesus is offering and no he is he is it to me it's a it's a very difficult passage to absorb for me because what is said there is this intimacy and closeness that he had with the father as the divine word proceeding from the father from eternity past in the divine nature is the kind of closeness that he prays that we will have with them as well and that's that just blows my mind I can't even comprehend that and it's not going to happen in an unresurrected body that's for sure you know but but that's what he's asking him that's what he's asking for so there's a very powerful example there of the pre-existence of the divine son as a separate person if you will center of consciousness from the father and I'm sure we have I'm sure there are people listening to this right now that this is news to them so I encourage you to maybe just read through the New Testament and look for the places where the persons of the Trinity interact with each other and you'll see that it it treats them as three persons and a book that I always recommend Greg I'm sure I've recommended it on here many times is *Delighting in the Trinity* by Michael Reeves and in particular that does talk about the love about how love is foundational to God's essence his character and that is something that requires the Trinity and does not work in something like modalism and lastly I just want to say because I think the one of the reasons why they define this as a heresy so early on is because it's so clear in scripture if you go through if you I think you have to reject scripture in order to come to a conclusion of oneness yeah like one one is Pentecostalism the modalistic view yeah I agree and I think that not when when people say well they might be thinking if it's so clear then why is there so much confusion and this is where I think the concept that I have used as a title to a talk on this that the Trinity is a solution not a problem is so important because if you take all the passages that give some characterization of God the Father the Holy Spirit and Jesus wrong order God Jesus Holy Spirit okay and and and and and see what they tell us about God if you do not have the Trinity then you have a big problem because it says there is one God this is really clear from the very beginning not just the Ten Commandments but I mean it's all through there you know and but you have the Father who is God and then you have the Son who is God and the Spirit who is God so how could you have that circumstance and and and and communicated without blushing without a sense of incongruity about it it's because there are three centers of consciousness in the one God how do we know all that other stuff well because the both the Son and the Spirit are called God in the text and they also they have divine qualities okay and they exercise divine prerogatives for example Jesus is worship you know so these are these are solid reasons why the Trinity is an appropriate characterization of the biblical record and and when you say it's all over all of those things are all over there you're right it's it ought to be very clear but it it is a kind of a head scratcher and this is why I took the church a while to kind of come to terms with how to describe it but the most common attestation for Jesus in the early church from the very beginning is that Jesus is Lord the Lord Jesus Christ God son God who became man in his Messiah the Lord Jesus Christ all right and

there's no other way that the word Lord can be construed when used of Jesus in those contexts I'm people called other people Lord all the time kind of superiors but that is not the way Jesus is being addressed as the boss man is the you know this who's in charge right here no he is the Lord the Lord not a Lord the Lord and this was a realization very early in the church that pointed to the deity of Christ so as a follow-up question to that here's a question from see for the truth did the early church teach that the Holy Spirit is a person is it significant that Paul Peter and John do not include the Holy Spirit in greetings to the churches um I I don't know that it's significant I'm just trying to think of this um I guess here's the way I'd want to back into answering that question I don't want to look at the details that were mentioned the way they don't mention this and the Holy Spirit whatever and so therefore maybe the Holy Spirit isn't divine no I you start with this what does the text teach about the Holy Spirit okay so ananias and sapphire what is that x5 or whatever you have not lied to man but to God you lied to the Holy Spirit I mean it's right in there in the text so lying to the Spirit is lying to God okay the Spirit is referred to frequently as the Spirit of God okay so we have we have lots of we have references to the Spirit with the same characteristics divine characteristics and and and therefore we have every biblical theological reason to understand the biblical teaching biblical new mythology is the deity of the Holy Spirit however we okay not however but now with that in place and that's where you've got to start then you wonder well why didn't Peter and Paul use the Holy Spirit in their declarations of some sort well I know that there's the trinitarian declaration is in a number of places you know you know and the Father's son and the name of the Father's son and Holy Spirit okay for example that's the baptismal kind of declaration whatever so but in there were a number of other places where you see that why didn't Paul and Peter use it in the the opening and I have no idea but it wasn't because the Spirit wasn't divine because they taught the Spirit was so this is an actually there's a side issue here do not get derailed by questions you can't answer into thinking something different from what the Scripture actually teaches well why didn't he do this or that or the other thing you know I don't know well maybe the Holy Spirit is God isn't God yes he is well how do you know because the Scripture says yes I don't know why Peter and Paul didn't do that and there was another little piece to that question but as I think it's you know the same kind of thing could you read that ending part well it was just about the did they teach the Holy Spirit as a person and is it significant that they do not include the Holy Spirit in greetings no the the last part that is not significant no I don't see any significance whatsoever and secondly did they teach the Holy Spirit that yes in the sense that it is implicit in the text that they write in the way they talk about the Holy Spirit and include the Holy Spirit okay so it once again there is no specific place where the trinity is taught as such it's not that's this true with systematic theology you're not going to find systematic theology in the scriptures what you're going to what systematic theology is like theology proper and the the doctrine of God the doctrine of salvation the doctrine of Jesus it's in that spirit etc new metologies Christology, Soteriology, Theology, you're going to get a systematization a systemizing of the scriptural teaching they go into the scripture and pull out all the stuff pertaining to this

particular issue what the scripture teaches and then they kind of put it in a whole chapter so you could see the whole teaching on what the scripture says about the cross okay and that's a systematic the Bible isn't systematic that's the difference between systematic theology and biblical theology biblical theology is kind of work through the text see what it says systematic sums up what all these different texts say so you have the whole council of God on a particular topic so you don't get imbalanced all right we can't expect the text to function like a systematic all right and that's we're able to do systematic so because the text teaches particular things and when you group them all together oh wait a minute Trinity's a solution it's not a problem so I actually something came to mind here I actually think that this isn't correct that they never said anything in a greeting because I didn't go through every single one but the one that came to mind was the beginning of first Peter because here's what it says Peter's sending the letter to those who reside as aliens and then he says who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father by the sanctifying work of the Spirit to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood so right there you've got a Trinitarian formulation and towards the middle of this chapter he also talks about the gospel being they preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven the Holy Spirit sent from heaven that's not talking about the Father that's talking about a person of the Trinity so right there in the first chapter you have all three persons and I would suspect and I know Fred Sanders has talked about this you can go through all of the New Testament and you can look for the three person formulation even if it's not in the greetings I don't know why that would matter if it's elsewhere in the letters where you can see Father, Son and Holy Spirit described so both of those things I would I would say just to add on to everything you said Greg about looking at the what the scripture says as a whole about the Trinity by the way that teaching is available at standard reason just so people know the Trinity is solution not a problem yeah and we have it in audio form and also don't we have a lecture of that also Greg yeah and we have a I think it's a two-part article also the Trinity solution might be one I'm not sure but you can find it under that title all right thank you for sending in your questions we'd love to hear from you again this is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle we hope to hear from you on twitter with the hashtag #SDRask thanks for listening

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