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Is Jesus the Father?

The Trinity, modalism, and the personal preexistence of the Son



JESUS AND THE TRINITY

Thinking biblically and entering into conversation

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The Trinity, modalism, and the personal preexistence of the Son

THE ACTUAL QUESTION IN DISPUTE

The actual question is not merely “Is Jesus God?” but: who is this Jesus in relation to the Father — and since when has this relationship existed?

The discussion revolves around a question extending far beyond individual biblical verses: how can the Bible simultaneously teach that there is only one God, that the Father is God, that the Son is God — and nevertheless distinguish Father and Son from one another?

Two fundamentally different explanatory models encounter one another here. One position understands Father and Son primarily as different manifestations or modes of existence of the same divine “I,” with sonship particularly connected to the incarnation. The Trinitarian position, by contrast, maintains that the Son is already personally distinct from the Father before his incarnation and nevertheless of the same essence with him.

Translation note: Complete English translation of the supplied German source. Biblical quotations are translated from the wording in that source, not quoted verbatim from an official English Bible. Statements about the discussion reproduce the original account; no independent theological revision has been made.

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PART I

Starting point: judgment and relational language. John 5, 1 Peter 1, and the question of what “entrusting” presupposes.

1. The starting point: does the Father judge — or does only the Son judge?

John 5 and 1 Peter 1

The starting point is an apparent tension between two biblical statements.

> The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son.

By contrast, 1 Peter 1:17 speaks of the one whom believers invoke as Father and who “judges without regard to persons.” Precisely here the discussion begins: how can both statements be true simultaneously?

One possible hasty conclusion would be:

- John 5: the Father does not judge.
- 1 Peter 1: the Father judges.
- Therefore the Bible contradicts itself.

The Trinitarian answer, however, operates at a different level.

Acting through an authorized representative

The idea is that the Father can be designated as the one who judges, although the actual judgment is exercised through the Son, because the Father has transferred this authority to the Son.

This is not an unusual pattern within biblical ways of speaking. Actions can be attributed to God although they are performed through a means, an authorized representative, or a secondary cause.

The discussion refers, among other things, to David’s census: one biblical account attributes the prompting to God, another to Satan. The idea is not that the two are identical, but that one can distinguish between sovereign causation or permission and immediate execution.

The same principle is applied to creation and judgment:

- The Father can be called Creator.
- Nevertheless, everything is said to have been created through the Son.
- The Father can be called Judge.
- Nevertheless, judgment is entrusted to the Son.

THE LEVEL OF ACTION

The question is not only who acts, but at what level and through whom the action is performed.

2. The deeper problem: if the Father is the Son, to whom does he entrust judgment?

At this point the discussion shifts. The decisive question is no longer merely: who judges? Rather: how can one person entrust something to another if both are the same person?

John 5 describes more than an action of God through a human nature. The language contains a relational structure:

- Someone entrusts.
- Someone receives.
- The Father entrusts.
- The Son receives.

> **THE QUESTION OF RELATIONSHIP**
> If the Father and the Son really were the same person, why does it say at all that the Father “entrusted” judgment to the Son?

The modalistic answer runs approximately as follows: the one God became flesh. As God, he possesses all power from eternity; as a true human being, he receives this power or judgment in his human mode of existence.

This acknowledges a real distinction between Christ’s deity and humanity. Yet precisely here a further problem arises.

> **PART II**
> Person and essence. The two-I’s question and the logical form of the Trinitarian statement.

3. The “two I’s” question

This part is one of the most philosophically and logically interesting sections of the entire discussion. The question is deliberately formulated very simply: is the Father an “I”? The answer is yes.

Then comes the second question: is the Son the same “I” as the Father or another “I”? The female conversation partner’s eventual answer amounts to: as a human being, the Son possesses his own “I.” The conversation draws this conclusion:

- The Father is an “I.”
- The Son is an “I.”
- The Son’s “I” is not identical with the Father’s “I.”
- There is therefore a personal distinction.

Identity is not arbitrary

If A is identical with B, then A = B. If, however, A is a different personal subject from B, then precisely A = B does not hold.

> **PERSONAL DISTINCTION**
> If the Father is a personal “I” and the Son is also a personal “I,” and these two “I’s” can be distinguished, then Father and Son are not the same person.

This does not yet automatically mean that there are two gods. Precisely here the Trinitarian distinction between person and essence begins.

4. One God — but more than one person

The Trinitarian position seeks to maintain two biblical data points simultaneously.

First: there is only one God

Not three gods, not three independent divine beings.

Second: Father and Son are personally distinguished

- The Son speaks to the Father.
- The Father sends the Son.
- The Father loves the Son.
- The Son loves the Father.
- The Father gives to the Son.
- The Son receives from the Father.
- The Son glorifies the Father.
- The Father glorifies the Son.

The solution therefore does not consist in abandoning either group of statements. Rather, the Trinitarian thesis is:

> **UNITY AND DISTINCTION**
> God is one with respect to his essence and threefold with respect to personal distinction.

The discussion describes this through the classical distinction between God's "what" and "who":

- What is God? One single divine essence.
- Who is God? Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Father and Son are therefore not two different divine beings. Each does not possess a separate deity of his own. Rather, they are personally distinguishable while sharing in the one divine essence, or possessing this one indivisible divine essence.

> **THE TRINITARIAN CLAIM**
> The Trinity does not mean: three persons are one person. The Trinity means: three persons are one God.

The apparent logical contradiction arises only when "one" and "three" refer to the same respect. Yet the doctrine specifically maintains:

- One with respect to essence.
- Three with respect to persons.

The claim is therefore not 1 = 3, but one essence — three personal distinctions.

> **PART III**
> Incarnation and prayer. One person, two natures — and why Jesus prays to the Father.

5. Incarnation: what exactly happens to the Son?

The discussion then moves into Christology. If the eternal Son becomes human, the question arises: does this produce a second person? The classical Trinitarian answer is no.

The Son remains the same person but assumes a real human nature.

One person — two natures

Before the incarnation the Son possesses the divine nature. Through the incarnation he does not cease to be God, but additionally assumes human existence.

Statements can therefore be made about Jesus that are true only on account of his humanity:

- He grows.
- He learns.
- He moves within space and time.
- He suffers.
- He dies.

Other statements concern his deity:

- Preexistence.
- Divine glory.
- Participation in creation.
- Divine power.

The discussion describes Christ as one person possessing different modes of knowing — one divine and one human — while expressly maintaining that there is nevertheless one person.

This matters for the overall argument, because here lies the difference between two models.

Model A

A divine “I” becomes human, and in some sense this produces another human “I.”

Model B

An already existing divine person — the Son — assumes human nature.

> **THE PERSONAL SUBJECT**
> In the second model, the personal subject remains the Son throughout.

6. Why does Jesus pray to the Father?

One natural follow-up question is: if Jesus is God, why does he pray at all? Or more pointedly: if the Son were only another manifestation of the Father, to whom does he speak?

The eternal relationship between Father and Son

Father and Son have not been in relationship only since Bethlehem. Accordingly, the Son did not first become a counterpart of the Father through the incarnation. Personal fellowship between Father and Son already exists before the incarnation.

The incarnation changes the mode of this relationship

As a human being, the Son now additionally lives within a genuinely human mode of existence. He prays. He obeys. He trusts. He says:

> Not my will, but your will.

These statements need not mean that Jesus is less divine. Rather, they show that his humanity is no illusion.

The discussion points out that the Son, as a human being, really lives within human conditions and communicates with the Father within this human existence.

> **JESUS'S PRAYERS**
> Within the Trinitarian model, Jesus's prayers are not God conversing with himself, but the incarnate Son communicating with the Father.

> **PART IV**
> The personal preexistence of the Son. John 17, John 1, and Hebrews 1 as key texts.

7. The actual turning point: did the Son already exist before Bethlehem?

This brings us to the central question of the entire discussion. Both sides agree on remarkably many points:

- Jesus is true man.
- Jesus is true God.
- Jesus existed in some sense before his birth.
- God is one.
- Father and Son can be distinguished after the incarnation.

The decisive dividing line is:

> **THE DIVIDING LINE**
> Was the Son already personally distinct from the Father as Son before his incarnation?

The modalistic position in the conversation affirms Jesus's preexistence as God, but identifies this preexistent God with the Father. The Trinitarian position maintains, by contrast, that the one who became human was already personally with the Father as Son or Word beforehand.

Precisely for this reason the rest of the discussion concentrates on several key texts.

8. John 17:5: "The glory that I had with you"

John 17:5 plays a key role in the discussion. Jesus speaks to the Father about the glory "that I had with you before the foundation of the world."

Its argumentative significance lies particularly in the personal pronouns. There is:

- An “I.”
- A “you.”
- A relationship: I was with you.

The discussion therefore emphasizes that Jesus does not say, in effect: “The glory that I had when I was you,” but “that I had with you.”

The argument is thus:

- The speaker is the Son.
- The one addressed is the Father.
- The Son describes himself as being with the Father.
- This relationship is located before the foundation of the world.
- The personal distinction therefore does not begin only with the incarnation.

The text is thus intended to prove more than preexistence. The modalistic position can also affirm preexistence. The decisive question is: what kind of preexistence does the text describe?

> **TRINITARIAN READING**
> The Trinitarian reading sees here the preexistence of a personal counterpart of the Father.

9. John 17:24: love before the foundation of the world

This idea becomes still clearer a few verses later. Jesus says to the Father:

> You loved me before the foundation of the world.

Here too there is a relational structure:

- Someone loves.
- Someone is loved.
- Father and Son stand in relationship to one another.
- This relationship exists before the foundation of the world.

This matters because love is relational. If the Father loved the Son before the foundation of the world, it must be explained who the beloved was.

The modalistic answer in the conversation connects this with God’s eternal counsel: God could already love the future Son of Man before his actual incarnation, just as believers can be chosen before the foundation of the world.

The Trinitarian counterposition, however, considers the immediate context weightier: Jesus speaks as an “I” to a “you” and connects the relationship with a glory that he possessed with the Father. John 17:5 and 17:24 are therefore read together:

- I was with you.
- I had glory with you.
- You loved me.
- This happened before the foundation of the world.

> **REAL PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP**
> The more strongly these statements are understood as a real personal relationship, the more difficult an explanation relating exclusively to the future incarnation becomes.

10. John 1:1: the Word was with God — and was God

Another key text is John 1. The familiar structure is:

- In the beginning was the Word.
- The Word was with God.
- The Word was God.

Precisely this combination is decisive for the Trinitarian argument.

“With God”

The wording distinguishes the Word from the one with whom it is. The Word stands in relationship to God. It is with him.

“Was God”

At the same time, the Word is not described as a created being or mere instrument. Divine quality or divine essence is ascribed to it.

> **DISTINCTION AND DEITY**
> The Word is distinguished from the Father and simultaneously designated as being of divine essence.

The same structure thus emerges again: distinction without separation. The Word is not the Father as person. Yet the Word is nevertheless God.

11. Why John 1:14 is decisive

John 1:14 then adds the next piece of information: the Word became flesh. This statement matters for both positions. The question is: who became flesh?

According to the Trinitarian reading: the one who already was in the beginning, was with God, and was God. The person who becomes human therefore does not first come into existence through the incarnation. The incarnation concerns an already existing person.

> **BETHLEHEM**
> The person of the Son does not begin to exist in Bethlehem — his human nature begins there.

The incarnation thus becomes an addition rather than the coming into existence of a new divine-human subject.

12. John 1:18 and monogenes

The discussion then focuses on John 1:18 and the term monogenes. Two possible directions of meaning are mentioned in the conversation:

- Only-born / only-begotten.

- Unique / only one of his kind.

The actual argument, however, does not depend solely on the translation of this single word. Again, the relationship is decisive: the Son is described in the bosom of the Father.

The question is therefore again not merely whether Jesus is unique. Much more fundamental is: what relationship between Father and Son does John presuppose?

Within the discussion, the text is therefore understood as part of a larger Johannine pattern.

13. Hebrews 1: through the Son the worlds were created

Hebrews 1 expands the argument. It says that God has spoken in the Son in these last days and that the worlds were created through him.

This creates a temporal difficulty for the thesis that sonship begins only with Bethlehem. For if God created the world through the Son, the term “Son” seems to be applied to the one who was already involved in the act of creation.

Hebrews 1:2–3 and 1:10–12 are particularly highlighted in the discussion. The argument is:

- The Father acts through the Son.
- The Son participates in creation.
- Creation precedes the incarnation.
- Therefore the Son exists before the incarnation.
- At the same time he is distinguished from the Father.

> **PERSONAL PREEXISTENCE**
> Again, therefore, the issue is not merely preexistence. It is personal preexistence.

14. Preexistence and eternal generation are not the same question

An important point in the discussion can easily be lost. The female conversation partner repeatedly expresses difficulties with the doctrine of the Son’s eternal generation. The answer is that this question should first be distinguished from another.

> **TWO QUESTIONS**
> One can first ask: does the Son exist personally before his incarnation? Only afterward: how is the eternal relationship between Father and Son to be understood more precisely?

The discussion expressly points out that eternal generation is a separate topic and should not prevent examining the biblical statements about the Son’s preexistence first.

> **ORDER OF EXAMINATION**
> A clearer question should not be made dependent on a more difficult one.

Even if someone has not yet reached a final position concerning eternal generation, they can still investigate whether John 1, John 17, or Hebrews 1 teach the Son’s personal preexistence.

15. “I and the Father are one”

Later John 10 enters the discussion: “I and the Father are one.” Both sides often use this verse. Again, the decisive question is: what does “one” mean?

The discussion draws attention to two linguistic observations.

“Are”

The verb is plural. Father and Son therefore are not simply one single personal subject.

“One”

“One” is not understood as “one person.” The statement thus combines two ideas:

- Real distinction.
- Real unity.

> **UNITY WITHOUT SEPARATE GODS**
> Father and Son are distinguishable — but not separate gods.

> **PART V**
> Glory, judgment, and salvation-historical bestowal. How Christ can possess and simultaneously receive.

16. The Son’s glory and the Father’s glory

Another major complex of topics concerns Christ’s glory. John 17 connects the Son’s preexistent glory with the Father. Later this glory is connected with Christ’s exaltation after resurrection and ascension.

The discussion asks: why is Christ said to come in the Father’s glory?

The answer connects several ideas:

- The Son possesses God’s glory.
- The incarnate Christ is glorified after his resurrection.
- As the God-man, he enters royal dominion.
- His position at God’s right hand describes co-regency or dominion.

An important Christological tension thus becomes visible. As God, the Son possesses divine glory. As the incarnate Messiah, he simultaneously receives dominion and exaltation within salvation history.

> **IN WHAT RESPECT?**
> The fact that something is “given” to him does not therefore prove by itself that he cannot be God in his nature. One must always ask: in what respect is something being stated?

17. The same principle also explains judgment

Here the discussion comes full circle. At the beginning stood the question: how can the Son receive judgment if he is God? Later, the same structure appears with:

- Glory.
- Power.
- Kingship.
- Judgment.

The Son can possess in respect of his deity what is bestowed upon him in respect of his messianic or human position. This shows why distinguishing the natures is so important.

Without this distinction, apparent contradictions arise:

- Jesus knows everything — and grows in wisdom.
- Jesus possesses all power — and receives all power.
- Jesus is God — and has a God.
- Jesus reigns — and receives dominion.
- Jesus possesses glory — and is glorified.

Classical Christology does not answer these tensions by denying either type of statement. Rather, it asks what is being said of Christ as God and what of Christ as human being or Messiah.

> **PART VI**
> Methodology, overall argument, and dividing line. How many individual texts form a consistent theological model.

18. The methodological core: do not play one verse off against another

A significant methodological idea in the discussion is that biblical doctrine does not arise by isolating one verse and subordinating every other statement to it. Instead, the relevant statements must be brought together.

For this, the discussion takes up the idea from Psalm 119:

> The “sum” of the word is truth.

This does not mean that difficult verses may be harmonized by forcing an alien meaning upon them. Rather, every theory must be able to explain all relevant data.

A viable Christology must simultaneously explain:

- There is only one God.
- The Father is God.
- The Son is described in divine terms.
- Father and Son are distinguished.
- The Son exists before the incarnation.
- The Son becomes human.
- Jesus possesses a real human nature.
- Jesus prays to the Father.
- The Father sends the Son.

- The Son possesses and receives glory.
- The Father entrusts judgment to the Son.

> **BEST EXPLANATION**
> The best explanation is not the one that explains an individual verse particularly simply, but the one that can explain the entire evidence coherently.

19. Exactly where modalism and the Trinity diverge

One remarkable result of the discussion is how close the two positions come on some points. The female conversation partner accepts:

- Christ's deity.
- His real humanity.
- His preexistence.
- A distinction between Father and Son after the incarnation.
- Different "I" perspectives.

The actual point of dispute thus becomes increasingly precise.

The modalistic or nonclassically Trinitarian position

In simplified form:

- God is one personal divine "I."
- This God is called Father.
- This one God becomes flesh.
- The incarnation produces the Son relationship.
- Therefore Jesus is the Father with respect to his deity, and the Son with respect to his human existence.

The Trinitarian position

By contrast:

- God is one essence.
- Father and Son are already personally distinct eternally.
- The Son possesses the same divine essence as the Father.
- This eternal Son becomes human.
- Therefore the Son is neither a second God nor the Father.
- The incarnation does not create the Son's person, but adds human nature to his person.

> **DECISIVE DIVIDING LINE**
> Does personal sonship begin with the incarnation — or does an already preexistent divine person become human?

20. Why personal preexistence becomes the key

Here lies probably the most important internal connection in the entire discussion. If one merely proves that Jesus existed before Bethlehem, the dispute is not yet settled, because both sides can affirm that.

The Trinitarian argument requires a stronger statement: the one who existed before Bethlehem was already personally distinct from the Father.

Precisely for this reason certain texts matter significantly more than a mere preexistence verse. Particularly relevant are statements in which the following occur together:

- Preexistence.
- Personal language.
- Relationship to the Father.
- Divine attributes or divine glory.

Here lie the strengths of:

- John 1:1–3.
- John 1:18.
- John 17:5.
- John 17:24.
- Hebrews 1.

> **SHARED PATTERN**
> The Son or Word exists before creation or at creation, stands in relationship to the Father, and simultaneously possesses divine identity or attributes.

21. The logical structure of the Trinitarian argument

The argument can be summarized approximately as follows from the entire discussion.

Premise 1

There is only one God.

Premise 2

The Father is identified as God.

Premise 3

The Son is also described with attributes, activities, and glory belonging to the divine realm.

Premise 4

The Father is personally distinguishable from the Son.

Premise 5

This distinction already exists before the incarnation.

Conclusion

Father and Son can be neither two independent gods nor the same person. One must therefore distinguish between unity of divine essence and personal distinction.

> **THE CHRISTOLOGICAL CORE**
> The Son is not the Father. Nevertheless, the Son is no less God than the Father. Precisely these two statements together form the core of Trinitarian Christology.

22. The strongest challenge for modalism

Modalism can explain comparatively easily why God is one. Its greater challenge lies elsewhere: how does it explain the enduring relational language between Father and Son?

Texts become particularly difficult when several features occur simultaneously:

- “I” and “you.”
- Mutual relationship.
- Love.
- Shared glory.
- Preexistence.
- Mission.
- Entrusting.
- Shared dominion.

The more strongly this language is understood as a real relationship, the harder it becomes to reduce Father and Son to one single personal subject.

> **THE RECURRING QUESTION**
> This explains why the discussion repeatedly returns to the question: is the Son another “I” than the Father?

For if this question is answered yes, a fundamental personal distinction has already been acknowledged.

23. The strongest challenge for the Trinitarian position

Conversely, the challenge for the doctrine of the Trinity must not be underestimated either. It must explain how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can truly be distinguished without thereby postulating three gods.

The answer “one essence, three persons” is therefore not a mere formula. It is an attempt to maintain two groups of biblical statements simultaneously.

Anyone wishing to criticize the doctrine of the Trinity would therefore have to show either:

- That personal distinction is not really biblical.
- That the Son’s deity is not really biblical.
- Or that God’s unity must be explained differently.

Merely saying that “three and one” are difficult to understand does not yet address the doctrine’s actual claim. For the doctrine of the Trinity specifically does not maintain that God is three and one in the same respect.

24. What makes the discussion particularly valuable

What is interesting about this conversation is that slogans do not simply conceal the difference. Terms such as Trinity, modalism, sonship, preexistence, and incarnation are increasingly traced back to their logical consequences.

This reveals that the actual controversy does not depend on a single theological technical term. It depends on very basic questions:

- Who speaks to whom?
- Who loves whom?
- Who sends whom?
- Who gives something to whom?
- Who was with whom?
- Who possesses what glory?
- Since when has this relationship existed?

These questions compel every position to use its terms precisely.

25. The overall picture

At the end, the many individual topics can be traced to one central connection. The Bible simultaneously describes Jesus Christ as:

- Truly human.
- Preexistent.
- Divine.
- Distinct from the Father.
- Sent by the Father.
- Loved by the Father.
- Glorified with the Father.
- Involved in creation.
- Recipient of divine dominion.
- Executor of judgment.

The Trinitarian explanation seeks to combine all these statements within one model:

> **OVERALL EXPLANATION**
> The eternal Son, who possesses the same divine essence as the Father and nevertheless is personally distinct from the Father, truly became human.

The apparent tensions thus also become more understandable:

- He can be God and pray to God.
- He can possess divine glory and be glorified as a human being.

- He can be Lord and receive dominion from the Father.
- He can be Judge and have judgment transferred to him by the Father.
- He can be one with the Father and nevertheless say to him: “You.”

Closing thought

Ultimately, the decisive question is not whether we want to defend a theological tradition. The decisive question is which explanation best does justice to the entire biblical evidence.

John 1, John 17, and Hebrews 1 in particular compel us to let several truths stand simultaneously:

- The Son is God.
- The Son is not the Father.
- The Son was already with the Father before his incarnation.
- Nevertheless, there is only one God.

Precisely from this tension the classical doctrine of the Trinity arises: as an attempt to lose none of the Bible’s central statements, rather than to make the Bible more complicated.

A. For further study

Particularly important for the questions discussed in the video are:

- John 1:1–3.
- John 1:14.
- John 1:18.
- John 5:22–23.
- John 10:30.
- John 17:5.
- John 17:24.
- Hebrews 1:2–3.
- Hebrews 1:10–12.
- 1 Peter 1:17.

Accordingly, the discussion does not end in complete agreement. What is remarkable, however, is that the actual difference has become significantly more precise by the end: the issue is less whether Christ is preexistent and divine, and more whether the preexistent Son was already personally distinct from the Father before his incarnation. Precisely this point is finally identified by the conversation as the decisive remaining dividing line.

Basis: transcript of the video discussion.