

The God Family Controversy

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Introduction

This is a unique moment in human history; never before have so many people had such easy access to God's Word, the Bible. Every year, the Bible is one of the world's best selling books, yet it is also one of the least read and least understood books of all time. Surveys show that people are often unable to name the four Gospels or the 10 Commandments. Apparently, many people are happy to buy a Bible as a gift for someone else, but they are not actually willing to study it for themselves.

Although the Bible was written to reveal the Creator of the universe, many people today do not understand who God is because they are biblically illiterate. The doctrine of the Trinity is also often poorly taught in churches today or generally ignored by Trinitarians themselves, and there is a broad spectrum of opinion among many modern theologians about the nature of God because many of them have rejected the doctrine of biblical inerrancy. As a result, they tend to base their views on church tradition, human reason or philosophical speculation rather than on biblical revelation.

So, it should come as no surprise that many people have begun to question basic beliefs about the nature of God. Groups like the Mormons, the Jehovah's Witnesses and others reject the doctrine of the Trinity and promote new views about God. In the 20th century, radio and TV evangelist Herbert Armstrong also rejected the doctrine of the Trinity and taught his God Family doctrine instead. The purpose of this paper is to offer a careful evaluation of the Armstrong God Family doctrine.

Comparison of Armstrongism and Trinitarianism

The best way to begin is by contrasting some of the key differences between Armstrongism and biblical Trinitarianism. Based on Armstrong's book, *The Mystery of the Ages*, the God Family doctrine can be summarized into eight main points.¹

Armstrong's first point is that God is a family composed of two supreme beings. Armstrongism is a fundamentally bi-theistic teaching and not binitarian as some have mistakenly claimed. Armstrong's writings on this point are very clear; he believed in the existence of two separate "God persons" as he called them, which constitute a single "God Family." Clearly, Armstrongism is not monotheistic in the proper sense of the word despite any claims regarding belief in a single God Family.

The second point is that God the Father and Jesus Christ have eternally existed and created all things. Armstrong acknowledged the deity of the Father and the Son as two co-eternal persons. He also taught that the Father has greater authority than the Son and that the Father created all things through the Son.

The third point is that God and Christ are both composed of spirit. They are separate and distinct from each other just as two human beings are both composed of flesh but not the exact same flesh; in other words, they have a separate existence.

The fourth point is that God and Christ have human form and finite shape. Armstrong cited various biblical passages where God is described as having a head, a torso, arms, legs, hands and

¹ Herbert Armstrong, *Mystery of the Ages*, (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1985), 41-57.

feet as proof that God literally has a body. He also claimed that God created men and women in His image as physical replicas of Himself.

The fifth point is that the Holy Spirit emanates from God and Christ as an impersonal force. Armstrong rejected the idea that the Holy Spirit is a divine person. He believed that the Holy Spirit is simply a form of divine energy that radiates out from God and Christ just as a radio tower transmits radio waves into the atmosphere.

The sixth point is that God is able to project His Spirit to any place in the universe. Armstrong taught that God is omnipresent, but his use of the term was imprecise and misleading. If God has a finite shape, this is not actual omnipresence but rather a form of virtual presence or tele-presence.

The seventh point is that the Holy Spirit is a divine power that does what Jesus commands. According to Armstrong, God uses His Spirit to gather information and act on objects at a distance. Thus, the Holy Spirit is simply a means to establish a remote presence. Jesus Christ used this power to create all things in the beginning.

The last point is that Christians will become “God persons” in the resurrection. According to Armstrong, God is reproducing Himself through humanity and adding more “God persons” to His family. Armstrong taught that when human beings are changed from flesh to spirit in the resurrection, they will be elevated to divine status and become part of the God Family. This is commonly known as the doctrine of apotheosis or human deification.

The next step is to compare these same points with biblical Trinitarianism. There are some differences of opinion among Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant theologians regarding the Trinity. According to noted church historian Roger Olson, many non-magisterial Protestant denominations pay little or no attention to the ecumenical councils; various denominations in the free church tradition tend to regard the ecumenical councils and creeds as having no authority for Christians because they were so far removed from the New Testament in both time and ethos. Many of them agree wholeheartedly with the doctrine of the Trinity but argue that since it can be found in Scripture it is unnecessary to confess the metaphysical language of the creeds.² Likewise, this paper will focus on the general consensus among conservative theologians regarding the nature of God and the biblical evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity.

The first point is that God is one being existing as three coequal and coeternal persons. Trinitarianism is fundamentally monotheistic; Trinitarians do not believe that there are three separate Gods or that God is one person who appeared in three successively different disguises but rather that there is only one God who simultaneously exists as three distinct persons.

The second point is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit have eternally existed and are responsible for the creation of all things. Although all three are equally divine, the Father is pre-eminent within the Trinity; thus the Father created all things through the Son by the Holy Spirit.

The third point is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are consubstantial. In other words, they are distinct from each other, and yet they are composed of the same spiritual essence just as a man’s right hand and left hand are distinct from each other and yet are composed of the same material, that is, the same flesh. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct from each other as persons but they are not separate beings.

² Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 158-159.

The fourth point is that God is incorporeal. Although God is able to manifest Himself within the physical universe in various ways, the one triune God is not limited to a human form or finite shape. God created humans in His spiritual likeness. Humans are sentient beings who have a moral conscience; they also form complex social relationships with each other and with their Creator. Animals were not created with any of these abilities.

Although God is not composed of matter or limited to a finite shape, theologians recognize that Jesus Christ has a body because He was born as a human being. Jesus became fully human and fully divine through the miracle of the incarnation; His human nature and divine nature were perfectly joined together in one person. His human nature was later transformed in the same way that Christians will be changed in the resurrection (1 Cor 15:45ff, 1 John 3:2).

The Bible does not tell us how the miracle of the incarnation is possible only that it is the truth. Many paradoxes exist in nature, so people should not disbelieve something simply because they cannot understand it.

The fifth point is that the Holy Spirit is a divine person who is sent by the Father and the Son. Within the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is responsible for performing miracles, revealing truth to God's prophets, imparting spiritual gifts to God's servants as well as converting and regenerating God's people. All of these activities take place in the invisible, supernatural realm where angels and demons also operate.

The sixth point is that God is an infinite spirit who is not limited in either space or time. God exists everywhere and at all times throughout the universe. This is the true meaning of omnipresence. God existed before the physical universe came into being; in fact, He created time, space, matter and energy. He is not subject to these limited dimensions in any way.

The seventh point is that the Holy Spirit is a divine person who has all power. The Holy Spirit is omnipotent, and He implements the will of the Father and the Son. The Father created all things through the Son by the innate power of the Holy Spirit.

The last point is that Christians are destined for glorification, not deification, in the resurrection. Christians will be changed from flesh to spirit, but since they are created beings, they cannot become divine as God is.

Having defined some of the basic differences between Armstrongism and Trinitarianism, the next step is to examine some of the specific arguments that are used to support the God Family doctrine. Many of these arguments come from Armstrong's book, *The Mystery of the Ages*, but some have been drawn from anti-Trinitarian literature on this topic.

First, Armstrong pointed out that the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible, but this argument does not prove anything. Theological terms were created by theologians long after the Bible was written so they could summarize biblical truths without having to make a long list of Scriptures each time they wanted to talk about a subject. For example, the term "incarnation" does not appear in the Bible, but the Bible clearly teaches that Jesus came as God in the flesh. Ironically, Armstrong never seemed to notice that the terms "God Family" or "God persons" are not found in the Bible either.

Second, Armstrong also claimed that there is no Scriptural support for the doctrine of the Trinity. Actually, the doctrine of the Trinity is an organized summary of what the Bible says about the nature of God, but this summary took many years to develop in the same way that a speech or a research paper will go through several drafts until the final product is ready. Early

theologians needed many years to reach a common approach on what they wanted to say about the nature of God, and there were many mistakes and adjustments along the way.

The doctrine of the Trinity was created from and is supported by many different passages throughout the Bible. For example, Christian apologist Robert Bowman has created a list of over 700 biblical references in support of the doctrine of the Trinity.³

On the other hand, the Bible never actually says that God is a divine family composed of two supreme beings. In fact, the Bible is completely silent when it comes to the specifics of Armstrong's God Family concept.

Another argument advanced by Armstrongism is that the doctrine of the Trinity was borrowed from paganism.⁴ Actually, the doctrine of the Trinity is unique in all of religious history; it was rejected by Jews and pagans alike because neither group could relate to it.

Anti-Trinitarians often cite examples of an ancient god or goddess who was depicted with different forms or shapes as evidence of Trinitarianism, but this is actually Modalism not Trinitarianism. Modalism is the belief that an individual deity can appear to mortals in a sequence of different disguises or forms. Trinitarianism is the teaching that one God exists as three distinct persons at the same time. A Christian heretic named Sabellius actually taught the doctrine of Modalism and was rejected by the early church because he disagreed with the basic tenants of Trinitarianism.

Anti-Trinitarians also cite ancient polytheistic triads as evidence of Trinitarianism,⁵ but this is simply tri-theism not Trinitarianism. For example, the ancient Egyptians worshipped Horus, Isis and Osiris as three separate deities not as one single deity; they were not consubstantial (of the same essence) as in Trinitarianism. Hecate, the goddess of travelers, was sometimes depicted with three faces because her images were placed at a fork in a road; but this is simply three identical copies of the same deity facing three different directions and not Trinitarianism. Actually, most pagans did worship some type of divine family of gods; so technically, paganism has much more in common with Armstrongism than it does with Trinitarianism.

Another anti-Trinitarian argument is that the doctrine of the Trinity is based on ancient Greek philosophy;⁶ however theologian Norm Geisler correctly observes that no other religion in human history is explicitly Trinitarian. For example, Plato had a triad in ultimate reality that consisted of the Good, the Demiurgos and the World Soul, but these three did not share one nature; in addition, the Good was neither personal nor God, and the World Soul was also not personal. Neo-Platonism had a One, a Nous (Mind) and a World Soul; but this series of emanations is not three distinct persons in one essence. Neither the One nor the World Soul is personal, and the One has no essence or being.⁷

While some early theologians did use Greek philosophy and allegorical methods of interpretation to communicate with the Hellenistic society around them, other theologians

³ Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *The Biblical Basis of the Doctrine of the Trinity*, (Grand Rapids: Institute for Religious Research, n.d.), <http://www.irr.org/trinity-outline.html> (accessed May 9, 2009).

⁴ Worldwide Church of God, *Is God a Trinity?*, (Pasadena: Ambassador College, 1973), 17-18.

⁵ The Sabbatarian Network, *The Pagan Trinity*, (n.l.: n.p., n.d.), <http://www.sabbatarian.com/Paganism/HecateTrinity.html> (accessed April 9, 2009).

⁶ Worldwide Church of God, *Is God a Trinity?*, 15-19.

⁷ Norman Geisler, "How Does Christianity Fare at the Religious Roundtable?" in *The Portable Seminary*, ed. David Horton (Bloomington: Bethany House, 2006), 421.

strongly opposed the use of these techniques.⁸ Individuals like John Chrysostom and Theodore of Mopsuestia followed the Syrian school of interpretation which was based on a thorough understanding of the grammar and historical background of the biblical text; they opposed the allegorical methods of the Alexandrian school, which was based on the example of Origen.⁹

Ironically, it was the highly anti-philosophical theologian Tertullian (ca. 200 AD) who laid the foundation for official church orthodoxy in the East and West. He worked out minute details of the doctrine of the Trinity and the person of Christ while opposing the modalistic heresy of Praxeas, but his contribution was set aside or largely forgotten (possibly because he wrote in Latin rather than Greek or because he later defected to Montanism).¹⁰

Eastern Christians later retraced the same ground without knowing it, and the creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries came very close to his formulations. According to Olson, the conceptual parallels are uncanny; Tertullian seems to have already settled these doctrines hundreds of years before the rest of the church, and if church leaders had only listened more carefully to Tertullian, many of the later theological disputes could have been avoided.¹¹

There was a great deal of debate in the third and fourth centuries because certain heretics began to teach new and unbiblical ideas about the nature of God; but when the dust finally settled, most Christians accepted the doctrine of the Trinity because it was the best explanation based on the testimony of Scripture. As the philosophical climate of western civilization changed over the centuries, each succeeding generation restated the doctrine of the Trinity in the language of their day, but the basic biblical framework has remained intact.

Ironically, anti-Trinitarians also make use of metaphysical and ontological assertions that are not explicitly stated in Scripture. Defining the nature of God is a theological problem that is based on biblical data, but defining the nature of personality is a philosophical problem that is based on reason and observation. When Armstrong claimed that the Father and the Son are two divine persons, he was engaging in philosophy whether he realized it or not.

In fact, Armstrong himself produced a booklet that was based on ancient Greek philosophy. In this booklet, Armstrong argued that God must be the necessary first cause of all matter and the divine watchmaker who must have designed the universe.¹² His arguments are simply a modern version of some of the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, who presented five famous arguments for the existence of God based on human experience with the natural world, but all of his arguments, in some form, can be found in Aristotle's philosophy.¹³ Clearly, Armstrong did not have a problem with dabbling in Greek philosophy when it suited his needs.

Armstrong also taught that *elohîm*, the Hebrew word for "God," is a collective noun like the terms *family*, *group* or *church*, but this is a gross distortion of Hebrew grammar that is not supported by any legitimate Hebrew scholar or biblical text. Collective nouns in Hebrew are singular nouns that refer to more than one object, but *elohîm* is the plural form of the Hebrew

⁸ As evidenced by Tertullian's famous rhetorical quip, "What does Athens have to do with Jerusalem?" (*Prescription Against Heretics* 7 ANF 3).

⁹ Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 134-135.

¹⁰ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 92-95.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Herbert W. Armstrong, *Does God Exist?*, (n.l.: Worldwide Church of God, 1972), 6-15.

¹³ Roger Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology*, (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 338.

word *el*, which can refer to any powerful individual or deity. There is no grammatical or lexical evidence that either term is a Hebrew collective noun.

The fact that *elohîm* is a plural form does not mean that there is more than one God because Hebrew nouns were sometimes pluralized in order to intensify their meaning. These so-called honorific or intensive plurals are actually treated like singular nouns; they can refer to a special person or exalted deity, and they take singular verbs and pronouns just like any other singular noun.¹⁴ For example, Job 40:15 mentions a powerful creature named Behemoth. The Hebrew term for Behemoth is *behemôt*, which is the plural form of *behemah*, but this verse also refers to Behemoth using a masculine singular pronoun showing that Behemoth is an intensive plural. Another example is found in 1 Kings 11:5, which mentions Ashtoreth, the goddess of the Sidonians. In this passage, the Hebrew term for “goddess” is *elohê*, which happens to be the plural construct form of *elohîm*. Unfortunately for Herbert Armstrong, there is no biblical, historical or archaeological evidence that Ashtoreth was a family of Sidonian deities.

Some people claim that *elohîm* is effectively the surname of the God Family, and therefore, the Father and the Son can both be called God.¹⁵ The truth is that Yahweh (i.e., the LORD) alone is God and there is no other. In Deuteronomy 4:35, Moses wrote, “To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him.”¹⁶ Verse 39 says, “Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the LORD, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.” Notice that there are no limits on these statements; they are all-encompassing in their scope. The use of the singular pronouns in these verses also clearly proves that *elohîm* is not the surname of a polytheistic God Family; there is only one God.

Armstrong also claimed that God has a human form and a finite shape, but the Bible teaches that God is omnipresent. He literally exists everywhere all the time. For example, in Psalm 139:7-8, David said, “Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? (8) If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there.” In Jeremiah 23:24, God asks, “‘Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?’ declares the LORD. ‘Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?’ declares the LORD.”

The Bible often speaks poetically or figuratively about God having body parts, but those passages cannot be taken in a literal sense. For example, in Psalm 18:8, David described God this way: “Smoke went up out of His nostrils, And fire from His mouth devoured; Coals were kindled by it.” According to Armstrong’s logic, God must be a fire breathing deity. In Psalm 17:8, David wrote, “Keep me as the apple of the eye; Hide me in the shadow of Your wings.” If this passage is taken literally, God must also have wings like a bird, but the Psalms are Hebrew poetry set to music, and poetry often uses figurative language.

The Bible also reveals that Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, was able to appear in both human and nonhuman forms. For example, in Genesis 15:7, God appeared to Abraham and made a covenant with him by passing between the pieces of Abraham’s sacrifice in the form of a smoking oven and a flaming torch; this was a special ritual in ancient times that made the covenant absolutely binding. In Exodus 13:21, Yahweh traveled ahead of the children of Israel in

¹⁴ Christo Van der Merwe, Jackie Naudé, Jan Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar*. electronic ed. (Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997), S. 182, 185.

¹⁵ United Church of God, *Who Is God?*, (n.l: n.p., 2001), 29.

¹⁶ All Scriptures are quoted from the New American Standard Updated Edition unless otherwise noted.

a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. God is certainly able to appear in various forms, but these manifestations were often quite symbolic and should not be taken literally.

God existed before there was matter, energy, time or space; in fact, He created all of these things. What kind of life form is able to exist apart from matter, energy, time or space? Human beings cannot possibly understand the nature of the heavenly realm where God lives, and it would be a great mistake indeed to fashion God in a human image.

Despite the fact that God is invisible and infinite, the truly marvelous thing about God is that He reaches out to His people in ways that they can understand (as a father) so they can have a relationship with Him. He adopts familiar roles and images so they can have a mental foothold until they can finally see Him on His terms when they are transformed in the resurrection.

Another basic point of the God Family doctrine is that the Holy Spirit is merely God's power and not a divine person, but the Bible actually distinguishes the Holy Spirit from God's power. In Acts 10:38, Peter said that God anointed Jesus of Nazareth "with the Holy Spirit and with power." If the Holy Spirit is some form of divine power, then Peter is effectively saying that God anointed Jesus with power and with power, which makes no sense at all.

The Bible does not teach that the Holy Spirit is power but that the Holy Spirit has all power because the Holy Spirit is a divine person. In Acts 13:2, several people heard the Holy Spirit speak to them using first person singular pronouns. Clearly, a personification cannot issue audible commands. Again, in Acts 15:28, the apostles told the church that the Holy Spirit had made an important decision regarding Gentile converts. Obviously, an impersonal force is incapable of having an opinion or rendering a decision.

Armstrong also claimed that the Holy Spirit cannot be a divine person because the Bible sometimes speaks of the Holy Spirit being poured out, and a person cannot be poured like a liquid; but this is just another example of figurative language. In Psalm 62:8 David wrote, "Trust in Him at all times, O people; Pour out your heart before Him." A human heart is not a cup that can be poured out; this is simply figurative language. In Ezekiel 22:31, God said, "Thus I have poured out My indignation on them; I have consumed them with the fire of My wrath." Again, indignation is an emotion that cannot literally be poured out like a liquid. This is just another example of figurative language.

According to Armstrong's logic, Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul cannot be persons. In Isaiah 53:12, God said He would give the Messiah a great reward because "He poured out Himself to death." A human being cannot literally pour himself out like a liquid; this is just another example of figurative language. In 2 Timothy 4:6, the apostle Paul said that he was "already being poured out as a drink offering." This is another example of figurative language; the same kind of figurative language that was used about the Holy Spirit.

Armstrong also taught that Christians will become "God persons" when they are resurrected, but the Bible says that Christians will receive glorification, not deification, in the resurrection. They will inherit a glorified spiritual body, immortality and a perfectly sinless, holy nature; they will become like Jesus and the angels in this limited aspect. Theologians refer to this event as glorification or complete and final sanctification.

While glorification is a truly wonderful destiny, it falls far short of being elevated to divine status. God is divine because He alone possesses the unique attributes of deity; He is all-powerful, ever-present, all-knowing, eternal and unchangeable.

The Bible says that human beings can never inherit God's unique attributes and become divine. “‘You are My witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘And My servant whom I have chosen, So that you may know and believe Me And understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me’” (Isa 43:10). In Luke 20:35-36, Jesus explained that “...those who are considered worthy to attain to that age and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry nor are given in marriage; (36) for they cannot even die anymore, because they are like angels, and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection.” Humans and angels are created beings, finite creatures that can never possess God's unique attributes. Christians simply cannot become “God persons.”

By this time, it should be clear that the Armstrong God Family doctrine has some serious problems. Although this summary has not exhausted all the different arguments and claims related to this topic, it has covered the core of this teaching, and any further examination would only provide additional examples of the same basic errors.

The Armstrong God Family doctrine may be easier to understand than Trinitarianism, but simplicity is not a measure of truth. Aristotle’s view of nature is much easier to understand than Quantum Physics or the Theory of Relativity, but no educated person today would say that Aristotle was more correct than Einstein.

The doctrine of the Trinity offers a better explanation of the biblical data than Armstrong ever could, but the Trinity does require diligent study and meditation. The Bible does not offer a complete or systematic teaching about the nature of God in one specific passage, but it does contain many different clues scattered throughout the text, and each clue must be carefully identified and pieced together. The Bible reveals that God’s nature is very different from that of human beings, which adds extra complexity to this task. To some degree, theologians have made this a little more difficult by using highly technical terms and esoteric language that can be confusing to the uninitiated, but this too can be overcome with careful study.

For example, the modern definition of the Trinity is that God is one being existing as three coequal and coeternal persons. At first glance, the individual terms of this statement may seem fairly clear, but the overall meaning probably is not because there are some additional subtleties here that need to be explained.

Most people, including the authors of the New Testament, use the term “God” to refer to the Father, but theologians generally use the term “God” to refer to the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit collectively. When people use different definitions for the same term, miscommunication and misunderstanding are inevitable.

The expression “one being” also needs some explanation. The doctrine of the Trinity is a fundamentally monotheistic concept; therefore, theologians generally do not describe the Father, Son and Holy Spirit as separate beings because that would imply tri-theism. They are said to be distinct from each other but not separate.

For centuries, theologians have offered various analogies to show how a threefold distinction can exist within an overall unity. For example, water molecules can exist in three distinct states at the same time (frozen ice, liquid water, and gaseous vapor). A musical chord is a unique sound (wave) composed of several different notes (frequencies). Several other intriguing analogies are possible based on the seemingly miraculous aspects of Quantum Physics or the Theory of

Relativity, but these simple analogies are sufficient to illustrate that things can be distinct without being separate. Of course, all analogies are limited and should not be pressed too far.

The next term that needs to be explained is “co-equal.” This term refers to the divine nature of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit and not to their functional roles within the Trinity. In other words, all three persons possess the unique attributes of deity. For example, the Bible shows that each person within the Trinity is eternal. Functionally, the Father is preeminent within the Trinity; theologians say that the Son and the Holy Spirit are “relationally subordinate” to the Father, but this does not mean that they are any less divine than the Father.

The term “person” is probably the most misunderstood of all. This term has a common definition and a theological definition; when theologians try to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, people naturally get confused by these two different definitions. The primary definition refers to a human being or an individual, but the theological definition refers to one of the three modes of being in the Trinitarian Godhead. When theologians say that there are three distinct persons within the Trinity, many people think that there are three separate Gods and that these three Gods are somehow one God, which is not the case at all.

Shakespeare said that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet (*Romeo and Juliet II, ii*), but theologians have been generally unhappy with the term “person” for centuries. They would love to find another term, but no one has been able to come up with a better alternative. The Moody Handbook of Theology says:

“The word *persons* tends to detract from the unity of the Trinity, and it is readily recognized that *persons* is an inadequate term to describe the relationship within the Trinity. Some theologians have opted for the term *subsistence*, hence, ‘God has three subsistences.’ Other words used to describe the distinctiveness of the Three are: distinction, relation, and mode.”¹⁷

The development of television and motion picture technology can provide another helpful analogy to illustrate this concept; in recent years, special effects have been developed that have allowed one actor to play three different roles in the same movie at the same time, which would be impossible in a stage production. Using special makeup, one actor is able to appear in a movie as a young man, and as the young man’s father and grandfather all at the same time. Each persona appears to talk to the others and interact with them, but God does not need any special effects to be at different places at the same time. He is truly omnipresent, and the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are, in reality, three eternal, personal distinctions within the one true God of Israel.

People have tried for a very long time to come up with a precise definition of what exactly constitutes a person, but there is general agreement that every person has three basic attributes, which are intellect, will, and emotion. This definition does not require a person to have a material body, so angels and demons (like Michael the archangel or Satan the Devil) can also be referred to as persons. Anti-Trinitarians rarely question the personality of the Father or the Son, but the Bible shows that Holy Spirit also possesses intellect (Rom 8:27), will (1 Cor 12:11), and emotions (Eph 4:30).

Theologians generally use five different arguments to support the modern definition of the Trinity (given above). Sometimes they are divided into six or seven different statements for the

¹⁷ Paul P. Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, (Chicago, Ill.: Moody Press, 1997, c1989), S. 200.

sake of clarity, but each of these points is either explicitly stated or implied in the biblical text. They are not based on pagan religious ideas or Greek philosophy.

The first point is that the Father is God. For example, Hebrews 1:1-2 equates the Father with the God of the Old Testament. Hebrews 1:13 contains a statement that is attributed to the Father (cf. Heb 1:1-12), but this statement is also a quote from Psalm 110:1, which was spoken by Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. Hebrews 5:5 contains another statement attributed to the Father, but this is a quote from Psalm 2:7, which was also spoken by Yahweh.

The second point is that the Son is God. Hebrews 1:10 clearly identifies the Son as the Creator of the heavens and the earth (cf. Heb 1:8), but this passage is a quote from Psalm 102:25, which is discussing Yahweh (cf. Ps 102:21). In John 19:37, the apostle quoted from Zechariah 12:10 to explain why the soldiers pierced Jesus with a spear as He hung on the cross, but this is another passage talking about Yahweh, the God of Israel (cf. Zech 12:1). Paul also taught that in Jesus “all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form” (Col 2:9).

The third point is that the Holy Spirit is God. In Acts 28:25-26, Paul quoted from Isaiah 6:9 and attributed that quotation to the Holy Spirit, but the Book of Isaiah says that this passage was spoken by Yahweh (cf. Isa 6:1-9). In Acts 5:3-4, Peter equated lying to the Holy Spirit with lying to God; the Holy Spirit is clearly a person because it is impossible to lie to an impersonal force.

The fourth point is that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are distinct persons. Scripture provides abundant evidence that the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit is not the Father. For example, in Matthew 28:19, Jesus commanded the disciples to baptize new converts in the name of, that is, on behalf of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The phrase “in the name of” occurs throughout the Bible, but in every case where action was required, a delegated servant acted on behalf of someone not something.

During the Last Supper, Jesus said that He and the Father would send the Holy Spirit (cf. John 14:26, 15:26). Jesus referred to the Holy Spirit as the Helper, and the Greek term for “Helper” refers to someone who acts as an advocate on behalf of another person. Jesus also said that the Holy Spirit would teach and testify about the truth, which are personal activities; His choice of nouns, pronouns and verbs clearly indicates that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons.

The last point is that there is only one God. This is not an extrapolation or inference; God Himself said that He alone is God and that there is no other (Isa 44:6, 45:5). Jesus, James, and Paul also confirmed that there is only one God (Mark 12:29, Jas 2:19, 1 Cor 8:4).

Armstrong claimed that there was no biblical support for the doctrine of the Trinity, but this is simply not true. There is actually much more evidence that could be presented, but this brief summary is sufficient to explain the five basic claims of biblical Trinitarianism and to provide some evidence for each them.

In conclusion, the Armstrong God Family doctrine contradicts several basic tenets of biblical Trinitarianism. The Armstrong God Family doctrine teaches that God is a bi-theistic family composed of two supreme beings that have finite, human form. The Armstrong God Family doctrine explicitly denies the personality of the Holy Spirit and advances the unbiblical and sacrilegious teaching of human deification.

Each of these positions is based on a misinterpretation of the biblical text or a fundamental misunderstanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. The Armstrong God Family doctrine twists the

definitions of various terms and assumes that figurative language can be taken literally. The Armstrong God Family doctrine promotes false claims and invalid arguments against the Trinity without offering a better explanation of the biblical data.

Some might wonder if any of this makes any real difference; but human beings cannot live in error and truly prosper because false doctrine becomes an impediment to having a proper relationship with God and with other Christians. False doctrine often leads to wrong choices in life sometimes with tragic consequences; in fact, many of Armstrong's followers suffered needless poverty, divorce, sickness and untimely death due to teachings that Armstrong created and then later abandoned. In extreme cases, false doctrine can even result in the loss of salvation.

Everyone will have to stand before judgment seat of Jesus Christ, therefore positive action is required in this matter. While many of the errors covered earlier are relatively simple and not salvation issues by themselves, they have not been corrected after many decades because of serious spiritual problems among the leaders and members of the Armstrong movement (Matt 6:22-23). Furthermore, Armstrong's doctrine of human deification is both heretical and blasphemous; individuals who support such teachings are clearly in serious moral peril and must be warned for the sake of Christian love and duty.

Some organizations and churches in the Armstrong movement are more open than others toward dialog with outsiders and internal reform; therefore Christians should foster positive change wherever possible but withhold any material support or cooperation when necessary. Christians, either individually or collectively, must not share in the responsibility for another man's sins (e.g., 1 Tim 5:22).

The nature of God is a difficult subject that requires advanced theological skills, an open mind and extensive meditation; therefore a Christian, a pastor or even an entire church should not be embarrassed to adopt a neutral position on these issues while taking the time to investigate them properly. Armstrong lacked formal theological training and could not read Hebrew or Greek, which led to many avoidable mistakes, yet to his own shame, he repeatedly claimed that he alone understood the Bible (2 Tim 2:15); anti-Trinitarians should cease their criticism until they can prove that they understand the doctrine of the Trinity and can teach it correctly.

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