

WHAT IS THE TRINITY?

THE TRINITY OR GODHEAD:

The doctrine of the Godhead or Trinity is the most frequently attacked of all the Christian doctrines. This is because it is the cornerstone of the Christian faith without which all other doctrines become meaningless and incoherent. A denial of the doctrine on the grounds that it cannot be fully comprehended or that it does not make sense is to opt for a Unitarian view of God which is really idolatrous in that it reduces God to the mere level of man's intellect and understanding. If the Being of God were fully comprehensible to man, then man could claim to be greater, or at least, just as great as God Himself. If the concept of God's unity could be understood by the human mind, then it could quite easily have been conceived there to begin with. Hence, the God of the cults is really an idol – an invention of man's rational mind – God has been carefully "worked-out" and defined. He has become an object for discussion. The deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit is denied out of hand and not even considered in a vain attempt to make the God of the Bible finite enough to be comprehended by man's limited and often perverse mind. As St. Augustine said, "If you can understand it, it's not God!"

The Doctrine Stated:

The doctrine has been adequately formulated in the Athanasian and Nicene Creeds but it may be briefly stated as, "*God is One in His essential being, but in this One divine being there are three Persons or individual subsistences, yet they are so as not to form separate and distinct individuals*". When speaking of the Trinity of God then, we refer to a trinity in unity, and to a unity that is trinal (not $1+1+1=3$, but $1 \times 1 \times 1 = 1$). God is *Triune*, not *triplex*! He is not a *triad*. His nature is not a mathematical contradiction, it is merely outside the realm of mathematical application.

The Oneness of God:

There are many Scriptures which stress the oneness of God, e.g. Deut.6: 4 "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God *is* one LORD." But "one" in the Bible is not always necessarily a mathematical "one"; sometimes it is used in the sense of a *compound unity* or a unity which involves *plurality*. For example:

Gen.2: 24 "*For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become ONE flesh.*"

Gen. 11:6 "*And the LORD said, Behold, the people is ONE, and they have all ONE language...*" (KJV). Here in this single sentence, the word ONE is used in both the compound sense as well as in the singular sense.

John 17:21-23 "*That they all may be ONE; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be ONE in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me. And the*

glory which thou gavest me I have given them; that they may be ONE, even as we are ONE: I in them, and thou in me, that they may be made perfect in ONE; and that the world may know that thou hast sent me, and hast loved them, as thou hast loved me." (KJV).

The Persons of the Godhead:

The three Persons of the Trinity are Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Matt.28: 19). The word "Persons" is not to be understood in the ordinary sense of individual human beings. The Bible reveals that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit each possess the qualities and characteristics of personality, hence for want of a better word, the Church uses the word "Persons" to describe them. Each of the Persons possesses the whole of the divine essence or substance and are co-equal, co-existent and co-eternal, immutable (unchangeable) forever. The three are not subordinate in being the one to the other, although the order reflected in their work is that the Father is the executive, the Son is the legislative and the Holy Spirit is the administrative function of the Godhead. Thus, broadly speaking, we have the Father making a decision (e.g. deciding to create the world), the Son carrying out the will of the Father (in making the world) and the Holy Spirit being the administrator of the Father's will and the Son's work in maintaining or upholding the world. We see a similar pattern in the plan of salvation: the Father sends the Son to be the Saviour (Jhn.6: 57) and the Son prays the Father to send the Holy Spirit to comfort and guide the saved (Jhn.14: 16 & 26). The order then is that the Father sends the Son and the Son sends the Holy Spirit via the Father. We thus see a continuous and inseparable bond between the three Persons as they work together as one in the Godhead. I Cor.8: 6 speaks of the executive and legislative functions of the Father and the Son as follows, *"Yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live."*

The Father:

The word "Father" is sometimes used in the Bible as a euphemism for the Trinity, e.g. Heb.12: 9; Jas.1: 17. God is called the Father of Israel in Deut.32: 6 & Isa.63: 16 and the Father of believers, e.g. in Matt.5: 45 & Rom.8: 15, but the main sense in which the word Father is used, however, is in relation to the Son, e.g. Jhn.1: 14 & 18; Jhn.8: 54; Jhn.14: 12 & 13. Here the term Father in relation to the Son is a functional term used to express the relationship between the two in terms of time during Christ's sojourn on earth. Thus, it can be seen that the word Father is used in several ways in the Bible and its meaning must be understood from the context in which it is used. We use the word Father for the first Person of the Trinity because this is how Jesus spoke of Him when He was here on earth. When the words "God" or "Jehovah" are used in the Bible they could refer to all three Persons of the Trinity or to any one or two of them.

The Son:

The word Son is never referred to prior to the incarnation except in prophetic Old Testament passages such as Ps.2: 12; Prov.30: 4 and Isa.9: 6. In the New Testament, like the word Father, it is a functional term used to explain the relationship between Jesus and the Father in terms of time while He was here on earth. However, when the Bible

speaks of the "only begotten" (Gk. *monogenes*) Son of God it means "unique" or "one of a kind" and not "eternally generated" in the sense of "created" as some, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses, have tried to reach. Thus, when John 1: 14 states, "*And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth*" (KJV), this indicates that Jesus was the sole representative of the Being and character of God the Father. The glory He displayed was that of a unique relationship and was not a secondary type of glory. In Isa.42: 8 God says, "*I am the LORD: that is my name: and my glory will I not give to another, neither my praise to graven images*" (KJV) and in Isa.48: 11 & 12 He says, "*...and I will not give my glory unto another. ...I am he; I am the first, I also am the last*" (KJV). This indicates very clearly that the Son is equally God for He shares His glory. The term "only begotten" can therefore only be understood in the sense of *unoriginated* relationship - not an event in time but a fact from all eternity. Christ did not *become* the Son at any point - He *is* the Son from all eternity. Jhn.1: 18 says, "*No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.*" (KJV). Jesus is thus the visible expression of the invisible God (Col.1: 15: Heb.1: 3), but more than this, He is in eternal union with the Father. The statement, *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son...*" (KJV) in Jhn.3: 16 does not imply that Jesus *became* God's son in the incarnation. The similar statement in I Jhn.4: 9, "*...because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world...*" (KJV) also does not imply that Jesus became God's son when He was born into this world, but simply that the unique, one and only Son Who existed from all eternity, was brought into the world of mankind for man's salvation. This can be clearly seen from Gal.4: 6, which says that, "*...God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts...*" This could not mean that the Spirit only *became* the Spirit when God sent Him. He was obviously the Spirit before this. That the Son is fully God is confirmed by Col.2: 9, "*For in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form.*" As the Church Father, Irenaeus wrote, "*The Father is God, and the Son is God, for whatever is begotten of God is God.*"

The Holy Spirit:

The Holy Spirit is often spoken of as the third Person of the Trinity. This does not imply any kind of inferiority of course but is simply indicative of His role in the works of God for He is the One who testifies of Christ (Jhn.15: 26) and who glorifies Christ (Jhn.16: 13-15). He is commonly spoken of as the Spirit of God, as the Spirit of the LORD, as the Spirit of Christ, or as the Holy Spirit but has other titles as well such as the Comforter (Jhn.14: 26). The personality of the Holy Spirit can be seen in such passages as Jhn.14: 16, 17 & 26.

A Biblical Illustration of the Trinity:

There is a marvelous description of the Trinity in Rev.4 & 5 where the apostle John is taken up to heaven and sees the throne of God. John's vision of God is as a being of light (4: 3), "*And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and carnelian. A rainbow, resembling an emerald, encircled the throne.*" John then observes in 4: 5 "*...Before the throne, seven lamps were blazing. These are the seven Spirits (or, sevenfold Spirit) of God*". This is a symbolic representation of the Holy Spirit in connection with the one who sat on the throne (the

Father). (See Rev.1: 20 for a similar pattern of sevens in connection with the church. There is really only one church spiritually speaking and it exists in numerous congregations, not just seven, but it is symbolically represented by the number seven because this is God's number for fullness, completion and perfection). Then, in 5: 6 he sees the Son, *"Then I saw a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain, standing in the centre of the throne, encircled by the four living creatures and the elders. He had seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth"*. Once again we note the reference to seven (God's perfect number) in connection with the Holy Spirit who is now associated with the Lamb (the Son). Note too the sudden appearance of the Lamb - He suddenly appears "in the centre" as though he was projected from the Father on the throne. Then in 5: 8 to 14 the entire creation in heaven and earth worship the Lamb and the Father (v. 13), *"Then I heard every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all that is in them, singing: 'To him who sits on the throne and to the Lamb be praise and honour and glory and power, for ever and ever!'"* Here, very clearly, the Son is worshipped with the Father and implicit in this worship is the Holy Spirit who is intimately associated with the Son in verse 6. This vision is therefore a perfect symbolic representation of the Trinity.

History of the doctrine:

The term "Trinity" was apparently first used by Tertullian c.190-211 A.D. but it was only in the fourth century that the doctrine was officially formulated in response to the heresies that were springing up concerning the being of God. The most important of these are as follows:

- *Tritheism* – belief in three gods.
- *Arianism* – a Christological heresy named after its most prominent advocate, Arius (256-336), a presbyter of Alexandria. It denies that the Son is of the same substance with the Father and reduces Him to the level of a creature which was created before the world was made. Athanasius (297-373), the Primate of Alexandria, was chiefly responsible for the rejection of Arianism by the Church. It was his fervent logic at the Council of Nicea in 325 which had been specially summoned to deal with the Arian controversy, that led to the rejection of Arianism. Five times Athanasius was exiled by his opponents but on each occasion he returned to champion the orthodox view. His views are incorporated in the so-called Athanasian Creed (circa 600).
- *Sabellianism* – this heresy is named after its founder, Sabellius, an Egyptian or Libyan Christian priest who lived in the 3rd century. His view was that the Trinity was one of manifestation – the one God appeared in three different modes like an actor on the Greek stage. He is able to take different parts at different times by putting on a new mask. This is a superficial solution to the problem of plurality and is out of harmony with the Scriptures.
- *Monarchism* – a heresy of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. The Adoptionist or Dynamic Monarchists saw Jesus as a mere man and the Holy Spirit as simply a divine influence, while the Modalistic Monarchists regarded the Father, the Son, and the

Holy Spirit, merely as three modes of manifestation successively assumed by the Godhead.

Arguments against the Trinitarian doctrine:

The modern proponents of Unitarianism often address themselves against the doctrine thus:

1. *The word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible!*

True, it is a theological term used to convey a particular meaning in the same way that the terms eschatology, deity, millenium, etc., which are also not found in the Bible, are used. This in no way implies that these doctrines are unscriptural! The Bible does use the word "Godhead", however in Acts 17: 29; Rom.1: 20 and Col.2: 9, which is saying the same thing as implied by the word "Trinity".

2. *The doctrine of the "Trinity" is man-made!*

True, but so are all other doctrines! There are no doctrinal formulas in the scriptures; all doctrines are formulated by men from the Scriptures.

3. *The doctrine was formulated only in the 4th century by the Roman Church along with other erroneous dogmas.*

False, the term was in use already in the 2nd century (Tertullian) and was merely enlarged, clarified and re-inforced in the 4th century because of Arianism. The Roman Church also believes in the virgin birth, resurrection, ascension, etc., which are not erroneous.

A.H.Strong in his "Systematic Theology" says that the doctrine of the Trinity "was implicitly held by the apostles and other N.T. writers in their declaration with regard to the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, even though they did not formulate it as a precise doctrine. They held it, as it were, in solution; only time, reflection, and the shock of controversy and opposition caused it to crystalize into definite and dogmatic form."

Furthermore, during the period of Arian supremacy in the church, the Bishop of Rome (later known as the "Pope") was the *leader* of the Arian group. Constantine, the head of the Roman Church, himself reinstated the founder of Arianism, Arius, after he was exiled, and was baptised on his deathbed by an Arian!

4. *The doctrine has pagan origins.*

False. The accusation is sometimes made that pagan religions often had a "trinity" of gods such as Osiris, Isis and Horus in Egyptian mythology, or Brahma, Vishnu and Siva in Hinduism, and that this was the basis of the Christian concept of God. This is obviously absurd because these groups of three gods simply form a *triad* among many other gods worshipped by these religions. They are clearly three separate identifiable gods and cannot be said to be One in the Biblical sense of the Oneness of the triune God.

Some Scriptures that illustrate the doctrine of the Trinity:

Matt. 3: 16-17, *"As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and*

lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.'

Matt. 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit."

Lk.1: 35, "The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.'"

John 14:16 & 26, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever.... But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you."

II Cor.13: 14, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."

I John 5: 7 & 8, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness in earth, the spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one." (KJV). Verse 7 is sometimes omitted in modern Bible translations as it is claimed that this verse is not found in the earlier Greek manuscripts of the Bible and was therefore probably added later. We will examine this claim in a separate study entitled "The Trinity - The Johannine Comma (Paper 006C)".

There are only three definitions of God in the Bible: God is love! (I John 4:8), God is light! (I John 1:5), and God is Spirit! (John 4:24).

Man, who is made in the image of God, consists of body, soul and spirit – three components but one entity (I Thess. 5:23).

We must bear in mind, however, that the doctrine of the Trinity is not based on a few isolated proof texts. B.B.Warfield in his *Biblical and Theological Studies* states: "It is not in a text here and there that the New Testament bears its testimony to the doctrine of the Trinity. The whole book is Trinitarian to the core; all its teaching is built on the assumption of the Trinity; and its allusions to the Trinity are frequent, cursory, easy and confident."

The Trinity as a mystery:

As far as the difficulty of setting forth the doctrine due to its lack of simplicity is concerned, C.S.Lewis in *Beyond Personality* writes:

"If Christianity was something we were making up, of course we could make it easier. But it isn't. We can't compete, in simplicity, with people who are *inventing*

religions. How can we? We're dealing with Fact. *Of course* anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about!"

The doctrine of the Trinity is often ridiculed as being absurd or unscientific because it appears to be illogical and is often referred to by the church as a mystery (something beyond human comprehension). However, there are many things in life that appear to be illogical in the scientific sense and therefore constitute a mystery. One of these is the nature of light. One theory claims that it is made up of waves while the other theory says that it is composed of quanta (little packets of energy). Logic says that it cannot be both and yet both theories must be held simultaneously in order to account for the phenomenon of light. Physicists therefore cannot fully explain the nature of light - they can only acknowledge its existence.

Six essentials in understanding the doctrine of the Trinity:

It is important to note that the Bible teaches both monotheism and trinitarianism. It teaches a *monotheistic* view - that there is only one true God - and a *trinitarian* view - that this one true God exists eternally as three persons. In *Christian Theology* by Millard J. Erickson (1993, Baker Book House, Michigan, ISBN 0-8010-3433-7, Pg. 337-338), the author lists six essentials in understanding the doctrine of the Trinity:

1. There is only one God.
2. Each person in the Godhead is equally deity.
3. The threeness and oneness of God constitute a paradox or antinomy - merely an *apparent* contradiction, not a genuine one. This is because God's threeness and oneness do not exist in the same respect - that is, they are not simultaneously affirming and denying the same thing at the same time and in the same manner. God's oneness refers to the divine essence; His threeness to the plurality of persons.
4. The Trinity is eternal - there have always been three persons, each of whom is eternally divine. One or more of the persons did not come into being at a point in time or at some point in time become divine. There has never been any change in the essential divine nature of the triune God. He is and will be what He has always been forever.
5. The function of one member in the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, although this does not mean He is in any way inferior in essence. Each person of the Trinity has had, for a period of time, a particular function unique to Himself. In other words, the particular function that is sometimes unique to a given person in the Trinity is only a temporary role exercised for a given purpose. It does not represent a change in His status or essence. When the second person of the Trinity incarnated and became Jesus Christ, He did not become less than the Father, although He did become subordinate to the Father functionally. In like manner, the Holy Spirit is now subordinated to the ministry of the Son (John 14-16), as well as to

the will of the Father, but He is not less than they are. Certain examples may illustrate this. A wife may have a subordinate role to a husband, but she is also his equal. Equals in some business enterprises may elect one of their number to serve as head or chairperson for a period, without any change in rank. During World War II, the highest ranking member of an aircraft, the pilot, would nevertheless carefully subordinate his decisions to the bombardier, a lower ranking officer.

6. Finally, the Trinity is incomprehensible. Even when we are in heaven and fully redeemed, we will still not totally comprehend God because it is impossible that a finite creature could ever fully comprehend an infinite being. Thus. "Those aspects of God which we never fully comprehend should be regarded as mysteries that go beyond our reason rather than as paradoxes which conflict with reason."

There are many Scriptures that link the persons of Father, Son and Holy Spirit to the extent that if God is not three persons then it is virtually impossible to understand these Scriptures, e.g. Matt.28:19; Eph.2:18 & 21-22; Eph.3:11-16; II Cor.13:14; II Cor.1:21 & 22; Jude 20 & 21; Heb.9:14; Rom.15:30; I Thess.5:18 & 19; II Thess.2:13 & 14; Tit.3:36; I Cor.12:4-6. To further illustrate, try answering the following questions without concluding that the Bible teaches the doctrine of the Trinity (*This section is adapted from "Knowing the Truth about the Trinity"- J. Ankerberg & J. Weldon -1996 - Harvest House Publishers, Eugene, Oregon. ISBN 1-56507-587-0*) :

1. *Who raised Jesus from the dead?* The Father (Romans 6:4)? The Son (John 2:19-21; 10:17-18)? The Holy Spirit (Rom.8:11)? Or *God* (Acts 3:26; I Thess.1:10; Heb.13:20; Acts 13:30; 17:31)?
2. *Who does the Bible say is God?* The Father (Eph.4:6)? The Son (Tit.2:13; John 1:1; 20:28)? The Holy Spirit (Acts 5:3-4)? Or *God* (Deut.4:35; Isa.45:18)?
3. *Who created the world?* The Father (Eph.3:9-14; 4:6)? The Son (Col.1:16-17; John 1:1-3)? The Holy Spirit (Gen.1:2; Ps.104:30)? Or *God* (Gen.1:1; Heb.11:3)?
4. *Who saves and regenerates man?* The Father (John 6:44; I Pet.1:3)? The Son (John 5:21; I Pet.1:18-19)? The Holy Spirit (John 3:6; Tit.3:5)? Or *God* (Acts 20:28)?
5. *Who justifies man?* The Father (Jer.23:6 cf. II Cor.5:19)? The Son (Rom.5:9; 10:4; II Cor.5:19-21)? The Holy Spirit (I Cor.6:11; Gal.5:5)? Or *God* (Rom.4:6; 9:33)?
6. *Who sanctifies man?* The Father (Jude 1)? The Son (Tit.2:14)? The Holy Spirit (I Pet.1:2)? Or *God* (Ex.31:13)?
7. *Who propitiated God's just anger against man for his sins?* The Father (I John 4:14; John 3:16; 17:5; 18:11)? The Son (Matt.26:28; John 1:29; I John 2:2)? The Holy Spirit (Heb.9:14)? Or *God* (II Cor.5:19-21; Acts 20:28; I John 4:10)?

So, although one member of the Trinity may have a more prominent part in a specific action or role such as creating or redeeming, all three persons are still involved. What this means is that it is proper for purposes of illustration to substitute (or include) any specific person of the Trinity in any event in the O.T. or N.T. where the term "God" is used. In fact, Scripture itself does this, e.g. in acts 28:25-26 the Holy Spirit is said to speak to Isaiah, but in Isaiah 6:8-9, the speaker of the same words is said to be God!

As Dr. H.O. Brown points out in his book *Heresies*, modalism, for example, makes the event of redemption almost a charade! Why? Because if the Son of God is not a distinct person, as modalism teaches, He can hardly represent us before God the Father. And if Jesus Christ is not a real, separate person from God the Father - One who can stand before Him, address Him and intercede for us - then what happens to the concept of substitutionary atonement? If Christ does not exist as a separate person, how did He pay for our sins on the cross to satisfy the justice of God the Father? In other words, if there is no Trinity then there is no incarnation and no objective redemption or salvation. There is no one who is acting as a mediator between God and man.

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CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY
(PAPER 006A)

WHAT IS THE TRINITY?

Questions:

1. Why is the doctrine of the Trinity so important in the Christian faith?
2. Name some of the wrong ideas about the Trinity.
3. What is the best way of illustrating the Trinity by using numbers?
4. Why is the Trinity sometimes spoken of as a mystery?
5. What are some of the excuses people make for not believing in the Trinity?