

UNITY AND TRINITY

“three in one”

Key question

What is the Biblical basis for the idea of the “Trinity”?

Key text

Matthew 28:19

“baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”,

Key Definition

Trinity

God is one and in the unity of the Godhead there are three coequal persons who are identical in essence but distinct in subsistence.

A Fundamental of the faith

The Trinity

The Trinity has from the early centuries of the church been a concise term defining the unique nature of the Biblical portrait of the Godhead.

Introduction:

1. Why is this doctrine important?
 - a. It was the first major theological issue faced by the church.
 - b. It is distinctive of the Christian faith.
 - “Globalization” has tended to downplay Christian distinctives like the Trinity.
 - Growing missionary efforts of other religions have challenged this doctrine.
2. **An example:** *Weigh Down* author, Gwen Shamblin sent this e-mail to her followers with respect to her reluctance to use the word trinity. (Aug. 10, 2000) “As a ministry, we believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit,” “however the Bible does not use the word ‘trinity’ and our feeling is that the word ‘trinity’ implies equality in leadership, or shared Lordship.” For these remarks she was dropped by Thomas Nelson Publishers. Why?

Below are the points of argument used by a non-Christian group in challenging the idea of the Trinity. How would you respond?

- a. The word “trinity” does not appear in the Bible.

- b. Those who teach the doctrine admit it is a mystery.
- c. It is not reasonable. Can a thing be “A” and not be “A” at the same time?
- d. It is not Biblical.
 - 1. It was not known to the writers of the OT.
 - 2. It was not known to the writers of the NT.
 - 3. It is dated about 350 years after Christ.
 - 4. When Jesus was on earth he was not equal with the Father.
 - Mk.13:32 Only the Father knows some things.
 - Lk.22:41-42 Jesus prays to the Father.
 - Jn.14:28 “the Father is greater than I”
 - Jn.20:17 “My God”
 - I Cor.11:3 God is still the head of Christ.
 - I Cor.15:28 The Son is still subject to God.
 - 5. Answers to texts that seem to support a trinity.
 - Jn.10:30 “I and My Father are one” (In Jn.17:22 “... that they may all be one just as we are one.”)
 - Jn.1:1 “The Word was God” (“with God”, “no one has seen God” vs.18)
 - I Jn.5:6-8 “There are three that bear witness, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit.” (these words are found in texts only after the 16th century).
 - Matt.28:19 “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (all records of baptisms in the early church are in the name of “Jesus” - Acts 2:38, 8:15, 10:48, 19:5)
- e. The pagan origin of the three in one doctrine.
 - Babylonian trinity - Venus, moon, sun
 - Hindu trinity - Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva
 - Greek trinity - Zeus, Athena, Apollo
 - Roman trinity - Jupiter, Mercury, Venus

A. We must recognize that it is possible to misunderstand the trinity but not possible to understand it.

1. The early church constructed a doctrine of the Godhead by dealing with various Biblical witness to the relationship between the Father and the Son.
 - **Adoptionism** – There was a time at which the Son became divine.
Heb.1:5 (Ps.2:7) “For to which of the angels did He ever say, ‘Thou are My Son, today I have begotten Thee?’ And again, ‘I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me?’”
 - **Identity** – Yahweh is equated with “The Lord”
Isa.63:9 “In all their afflictions He was afflicted, and the angel of His presence saved them;”
Ps.96:10 “Say among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns; indeed, the world is firmly established, it will not be moved; He will judge the peoples with equity.’”
 - **Distinction** – There is a distinction between Father and Son.

- Acts 2:34 (Ps.110:1) “For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘sit at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet’ .”
- **Derivation** – The Son came from the Father.
Jn.14:28 “the Father is greater than I”
2. **Essential elements** of the orthodox understanding of the trinity.
 - God is one.
 - Each of three persons (Father, Son, & Spirit) are deity.
 - The threeness and the oneness of God are not in the same respect.
 - The Trinity is eternal.
 - The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members.
 - The Trinity is incomprehensible.
 3. Historic erroneous attempts to explain the Trinity.
 - a. **Jesus became the Son of God at his baptism.** (Dynamic Monarchianism (one source)) - Redefining the Deity of Christ so as to suggest that the Father acts through the Son who is “adopted” (at his baptism). **II Cor.5:19** “that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”
 - b. **The one God is revealed in three modes.** (Modalistic Monarchianism) - Denying the distinction of the Son from the Father where God is like an actor who plays several different parts in a play, (Father in the O.T., Son in the Gospels, Holy Spirit in the epistles). **Jn.10:30** “I and the Father are one.”
 - c. **Jesus is a lower form of God.** (Arianism) -Redefining the relationship between the Father and the Son so as to make the Son the highest creature, a step down from God the Father. **Prov.8:22-23** “The Lord brought me forth as the first of his works, before his deeds of old; I was appointed from eternity, from the beginning, before the world began.” **Jn.14:28** “the Father is greater than I”; **Mk.10:18** “Why do you call me good? Jesus answered, No one is good – except god alone.”
 4. Scripture bears witness to a God who demands to be understood in a Trinitarian manner.
 - a. **Definition:** There is only one God but in the unity of the Godhead there are three eternal and co-equal persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence.
 - b. The Nicene Creed A.D. 325
“I believe in one God, the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made. . . . And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life; who proceeds from the Father and the Son; who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.”
 5. **Illustrations:** (most of these illustrations have limitations)
 - a. The HUMAN MIND divides itself and holds discussion with itself.
 - b. LIGHT can be represented as a ray, a particle, or energy. This is a reality that cannot be denied yet it cannot be explained.

- c. A FAMILY includes a son who is subordinate to his father yet both have equal claim to the family name.
- d. The EGG consists of yolk, white, and shell yet all together make up one egg.
- e. WATER can take three forms - solid, liquid, and gas.
- f. HUMAN ROLES can be present at the same time in one person (Father, Professional, church member,).
- g. The HUMAN PERSONA (bearing the image of God) provides an analogy. This was Augustine's argument. Our body, personality, and mental capacity are distinct yet all one person. They are more than aspects of who we are in that without any one of them we are no longer ourselves.
- h. JOINT TENANCY is a legal contract where three people hold the some property together.
- i. Identical TWINS share the same genetic structure, interests, and reactions yet are distinct. A CLONE might be an even better analogy where identity and distinctiveness are uncompromised realities.
- j. SIAMESE TWINS share some of the same vital organs but yet are distinct in some other respects.
- k. LOVE consists of 1) the lover, 2) the one loved, 3) the feeling and acts of loving, yet all three are included in the single concept of love. *Augustine*.

B. We believe in the trinity not because it is directly referenced in the Bible but because it is the best explanation of the various Biblical references to the Godhead.

1. There are other aspects of God's person that present similar challenges to our understanding.
 - God is transcendent and yet eminent.
 - God is everywhere present and yet locally manifest.
 - God is sovereign yet capable of dynamic relationships.
 - God is eternal and yet active in time.
 - The unity and diversity in the universe.
2. **Deductions from Scripture:**
 - a. God is **unity**:
 - Deut.6:4** "Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!";
 - Isa.45:5** "I am the Lord, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God.";
 - Jn.17:3** "And this is eternal life, that they may know Thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom Thou has sent.";
 - Jn.17:11** "Holy Father, keep them in Thy name, the name which Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, even as We are.";
 - I Tim.2:5** "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,"
 - b. God is **plurality**:
 - Gen.1:26** "Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image'";
 - Gen.3:22** "Then the Lord God said, 'Behold the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil;";

Gen.11:6,7 “Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.”(both noun and verb are plural),

Isa.6:8 “Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’”

c. God is a **tri-unity**:

Isa.48:12,16 “Listen to Me, O Jacob, even Israel whom I called; I am He, I am the first, I am also the last . . . Come near to Me, listen to this: From the first I have not spoken in secret, from the time it took place, I was there. And now the Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit.”;

Matt.28:19 “baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.”,

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

Other texts where all three members of the Trinity are used together. II Cor.1:21-22; Gal.3:11-14; 4:6; Rom.14:17-18; Phil.3:3; Col.1:3-8; Eph.3:14-16; I Pet.1:2; 4:14; Heb.6:4-6.

d. The FATHER, SON, and HOLY SPIRIT are **each described as God**.

1. Jesus is God

- **Jn.1:1** “and the Word was God”
- **Jn.1:18** “the only begotten God”
- **Jn.20:28** “my Lord and my God”
- **Titus 2:13** “of our God and Savior Jesus Christ”
- Jesus’ own self-consciousness.
 1. He claimed to possess what properly belongs only to God. “his angels” Matt.13:41; “his kingdom” Matt.12:28; “his elect” Mk.13:20;
 2. He claimed to be able to forgive sin - Mk.2:8-10.

2. The Spirit is God

- **ACTS 5:3,4** lie to the H.S. --- not to men, but to God
- **II Cor.3:17,18** “Now the Lord is the Spirit”

e. The Godhead is described as a **plurality**.

1. The use of plural pronouns points to, or at least suggests, the plurality of persons within the Godhead in the Old Testament. “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...’”
2. The use of the singular word “name” when referring to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicates a unity within the threeness of God. “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” (Matt.28:19).

	Attribute	Father	Son	Holy Spirit
Persons of the Same Essence: Attributes	Eternality	Ps. 90:2	John 1:2; Rev. 1:8,17	Heb. 9:14
	Power	I Peter 1:5	2 Cor. 12:9	Rom. 15:19
	Omniscience	Jer. 17:10	Rev. 2:23	I Cor. 2:11
	Omnipresence	Jer. 23:24	Matt. 18:20	Ps. 139:7

Applied to Each Person	Holiness	Rev. 15:4	Acts 3:14	Acts 1:8
	Truth	John 7:28	Rev. 3:7	I John 5:6
	Benevolence	Rom. 2:4	Eph. 5:25	Neh. 9:20
Equality with Different Roles: Activities Involving All Three Persons	Creation of World	Ps. 102:25	Col. 1:16	Gen. 1:2; Job 26:13
	Creation of Man	Gen. 2:7	Col. 1:16	Job 33:4
	Baptism of Christ	Matt. 3:17	Matt. 3:16	Matt. 3:16
	Death of Christ	Heb. 9:14	Heb. 9:14	Heb. 9:14

Note: *Perichoresis* means that all three are involved in all the works of God.

C. Distinctions between the Father and the Son.

1. FRATERNAL:
 - a. Superiority of the Father: Matt.3:17; Gal.3:26, Acts 17:29
 - b. Subordination of the Son: Jn.14:28
2. FORMAL:
 - a. The Son, a visible manifestation: Col.1:15
 - b. The Father, an invisible Spirit: Jn.1:18, 4:24
3. FUNCTIONAL:
 - a. The Father, as author: Eph.1:3-6
 - b. The Son as actor: Col.1:16-17

D. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

1. **Jn.15:26** “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me, and you will bear witness also because you have been with Me from the beginning.”
2. **Ps.104:30** “Thou dost send forth Thy Spirit, they are created; and Thou dost renew the face of the ground.”
3. I Cor.2:11-12; Gal.4:6; Rom.8:9

E. The logic of the Trinity.

1. The doctrine of the Trinity is a contradiction only if God is three at the same time He is one and is three in the same respect as He is one.
 - a. The three members of the Trinity are the same in essence. They each are made up of the “divine nature.”
 - b. The three are distinct in subsistence. They each display the quality of a distinct individual persona (mask).
 - c. The three persons constitute three centers of consciousness within the one being, capable of interacting with one another. They are bound together so closely by the centripetal power of love that they are inseparable.
2. The fact that God is love suggests that there must be distinct persons in the Godhead for love demands both a subject (lover) and object (one loved).
3. It should not surprise us if we find the Godhead to be beyond our comprehension. If we can imagine a hierarchy of life forms (grass, dog, human, God) we can quickly see that while the dog can understand some of the attributes of humans he is unable to

understand many others. So it is not unreasonable for humans to realize that they cannot understand everything about how the Godhead is constructed.

F. The place of the person's of the Godhead in our lives.

1. Incarnation
 - a. God empathizes with our suffering.
 - b. God reveals a desire to relate to us personally.
 - c. God takes the initiative in reaching out to us.
2. The Atonement
 - a. God takes sin seriously.
 - b. God makes a personal sacrifice to demonstrate justice and love.
3. Christianity is distinct among other world religions.
4. Intimacy in prayer and worship are possible because of the Trinity.
5. The Trinity provides a model for relationships among people.
 - a. Respecting distinct functions.
 - b. Equality of worth and value with hierarchy in certain functions.

Pastoral advice

How important is the trinity doctrine?

1. The trinity doctrine is important as an explanation of the Scriptural revelation concerning the nature of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.
2. I try to avoid references to the trinity because it is not a doctrine that is clearly developed in Scripture. I refer to the deity of Christ, the unity of the Godhead, and the person of the Holy Spirit because this is more closely aligned with the Biblical portrait.
3. Most cult groups will digress from the orthodox doctrine of the trinity at one point or another. It is a good test of orthodoxy.
4. Christians should be familiar with the careful wording of a definition of the trinity out of respect for the years of struggle that have surrounded the doctrine.