Lion and Lamb Apologetics

What is the Trinity?

DENNIS A. WRIGHT, D.MIN.

The Trinity is the Christian doctrine of God, according to which He is three persons in one substance or essence. The doctrine of the Trinity is sometimes attacked as being insufficiently monotheistic, but Christians have always denied this. The doctrine developed in the early church because it was the only way in which the New Testament witness to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit could be adequately accounted for. Far from being a covert invasion by pagan philosophical and religious influences, it would appear that the doctrine of the Trinity has survived against precisely these temptations, which have occasionally threatened to push the church into a practical and even a theoretical Unitarianism.[1]

Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield explains: The term "Trinity"[2] is not a Biblical term, and we are not using Biblical language when we define what is expressed by it as the doctrine that there is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence. A doctrine so defined can be spoken of as a Biblical doctrine only on the principle that the sense of Scripture is Scripture. And the definition of a Biblical doctrine in such un-Biblical language can be justified only on the principle that it is better to preserve the truth of Scripture than the words of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent it does not cease to be Scriptural, but only comes into clearer view. Or, to speak without figure, the doctrine of the Trinity is given to us in Scripture, not in formulated definition, but in fragmentary allusions; when we assemble the *disjecta membra* into their organic unity, we are not passing from Scripture, but entering more thoroughly into the meaning of Scripture. We may state the doctrine

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[1] Ferguson, S. B., & Packer, J. I. (2000). In *New dictionary of theology* (electronic ed., 691–692). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

[2] It should be noted that the Trinity is a concept that is *impossible* for any human being to fully understand, let alone explain. God is infinitely greater than we are; therefore, we should not expect to be able to fully understand Him. The Bible teaches that the Father is God, that Jesus is God, and that the Holy Spirit is God. The Bible also teaches that there is only one God. Though we can understand some facts about the relationship of the different Persons of the Trinity to one another, ultimately, it is incomprehensible to the human mind. However, this does not mean the Trinity is not true or that it is not based on the teachings of the Bible.

in technical terms, supplied by philosophical reflection; but the doctrine stated is a genuinely Scriptural doctrine.[3]

The appearance of the Trinity in the New Testament raises the familiar problem of later interpolation, but although this has certainly been the case in 1 John 5:7, it does not appear to be true elsewhere. Even the words of Jesus in Matthew 28:19, though they are frequently attacked as spurious, bear the authentic hallmark of the most primitive Trinitarianism, which was connected with baptism. Similar early Trinitarian theology appears in 2 Corinthians 13:14, the famous "Grace", which is peculiar in that the person of Christ is mentioned first. There are however a large number of indirect references to the Trinity, of which Galatians 4:6 may be cited as perhaps the most primitive. It is also apparent from what is said in Acts 8 and elsewhere, that Trinitarian baptism goes back to the earliest days of the church, when it was felt that baptism in the name of Christ alone was insufficient.[4]

The Trinity Defined

The Trinity is one God existing in three Persons. Understand that this is not in any way suggesting three Gods. It is important to remember when studying this subject that the word "Trinity" is not found in Scripture. This is a term that is used in an attempt to describe the triune God—three coexistent, co-eternal Persons who are God. Of real importance is that the concept represented by the word "Trinity" *does* exist in Scripture. The following is what God's Word says about the Trinity:

1. **There is one God** (Deuteronomy 6:4; 1 Corinthians 8:4; Galatians 3:20; 1 Timothy 2:5).

2. **The Trinity consists of three Persons** (Genesis 1:1, 26; 3:22; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8, 48:16, 61:1; Matthew 3:16-17, 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:14). In Genesis 1:1, the Hebrew plural noun אֱלֹהִים ("Elohim") is used. In Genesis 1:26, 3:22, 11:7 and Isaiah 6:8, the plural pronoun for "us" is used. The word "Elohim" and the pronoun "us" are plural forms, definitely referring in the Hebrew language to more than two. While this is not an explicit argument for the Trinity, it does denote the aspect of plurality in God. The Hebrew word for "God," "Elohim," definitely allows for the Trinity.

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[3] Orr, *The International standard Bible encyclopedia: 1915 edition*.

[4] Ferguson, S. B., & Packer, J. I. (2000). In *New dictionary of theology* (electronic ed., 691–692). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

In Isaiah 48:16 and 61:1, the Son is speaking while making reference to the Father and the Holy Spirit. Compare Isaiah 61:1 to Luke 4:14-19 to see that it is the Son speaking. Matthew 3:16-17 describes the event of Jesus' baptism. Seen in this passage is God the Holy Spirit descending on God the Son while God the Father proclaims His pleasure in the Son. Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 are examples of three distinct Persons in the Trinity.

3. **The members of the Trinity are distinguished one from another in various passages**. In the Old Testament, יְהוָה "LORD" is distinguished from "Lord" (Genesis 19:24; Hosea 1:4). The LORD has a Son (Psalm 2:7, 12; Proverbs 30:2-4). The Spirit is distinguished from the "LORD" (Numbers 27:18) and from אֱלֹהִים "God" (Psalm 51:10-12). God the Son is distinguished from God the Father (Psalm 45:6-7; Hebrews 1:8-9). In the New Testament, Jesus speaks to the Father about sending a Helper, the Holy Spirit (John 14:16-17). This shows that Jesus did not consider Himself to be the Father or the Holy Spirit. Consider also all the other times in the Gospels where Jesus speaks to the Father. Was He speaking to Himself? No. He spoke to another Person in the Trinity—the Father.

4. **Each member of the Trinity is God**. The Father is God (John 6:27; Romans 1:7; 1 Peter 1:2). The Son is God (John 1:1, 14; Romans 9:5; Colossians 2:9; Hebrews 1:8; 1 John 5:20). The Holy Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4; 1 Corinthians 3:16).

5. **There is subordination within the Trinity**. Scripture shows that the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Father and the Son, and the Son is subordinate to the Father. This is an internal relationship and does not deny the deity of any Person of the Trinity. This is simply an area which our finite minds cannot understand concerning the infinite God. Concerning the Son: see Luke 22:42, John 5:36, John 20:21, and 1 John 4:14. Concerning the Holy Spirit: see John 14:16, 14:26, 15:26, 16:7, and especially John 16:13-14.

6. **The individual members of the Trinity have different tasks**.

   ➤ The Father is the ultimate source or cause of the universe (1 Corinthians 8:6; Revelation 4:11);
     • divine revelation (Revelation 1:1);
     • salvation (John 3:16-17); and
     • Jesus' human works (John 5:17; 14:10).
     • The Father initiates all of these things.

   ➤ The Son is the agent through whom the Father does the following works:

- the creation and maintenance of the universe (1 Corinthians 8:6; John 1:3; Colossians 1:16-17);
- divine revelation (John 1:1, 16:12-15; Matthew 11:27; Revelation 1:1); and
- salvation (2 Corinthians 5:19; Matthew 1:21; John 4:42).
- The Father does all these things through the Son, who functions as His agent.

> The Holy Spirit is the means by whom the Father does the following works:
- creation and maintenance of the universe (Genesis 1:2; Job 26:13; Psalm 104:30);
- divine revelation (John 16:12-15; Ephesians 3:5; 2 Peter 1:21);
- salvation (John 3:6; Titus 3:5; 1 Peter 1:2); and
- Jesus' works (Isaiah 61:1; Acts 10:38).
- Thus, the Father does all these things by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Three Points to Emphasize

In considering the Trinity[5], let us emphasize three points.

1. First, a narrative approach to the Holy Trinity, especially in terms of the biblical material, has proved to be an intelligible way to present the doctrine of the Trinity to a congregation or class. As Pannenberg, Moltmann, and Rogers point out, at every critical point in the narrative of Jesus all three persons of the Trinity are involved. This is evident above all in the baptism of Jesus: the Son is obedient to the Father; the Father commissions and blesses the Son; the Holy Spirit visibly descends and equips him for the messianic temptations.

2. Second, as Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa insist, "three" has nothing to do with numerals or numbers, which apply only to created beings or things. Analogies designed to explain "three" are mistaken and misleading.

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[5] The doctrine of the Trinity has been a divisive issue throughout the entire history of the Christian church. While the core aspects of the Trinity are clearly presented in God's Word, some of the side issues are not as explicitly clear. The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God—but there is only one God. That is the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. Beyond that, the issues are, to a certain extent, debatable and non-essential. Rather than attempting to fully define the Trinity with our finite human minds, we would be better served by focusing on the fact of God's greatness and His infinitely higher nature. "Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counselor?" (Romans 11:33-34).

3. Third, as Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, Hilary, and Ambrose all argue, *all persons of the Trinity* work together in every act of creation, redemption, and salvation, even if one appears the most prominent in different events. This saves a misunderstanding about the atonement. "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19).

There is nothing theoretical about the doctrine of the Trinity. It is at the heart of Christian doctrine, life, and faith, and is intensely pastoral and practical.[6]

The Trinity is a Divine Mystery

Trinity is a theological term used to define God as an undivided unity expressed in the threefold nature of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. As a distinctive Christian doctrine, the Trinity is considered as a divine mystery beyond human comprehension to be reflected upon only through scriptural revelation. The Trinity is a biblical concept that expresses the dynamic character of God, not a Greek idea pressed into Scripture from philosophical or religious speculation. While the term "trinity" does not appear in Scripture, the trinitarian structure appears throughout the New Testament to affirm that God Himself is manifested through Jesus Christ by means of the Spirit.

A proper biblical view of the Trinity balances the concepts of unity and distinctiveness. Two errors that appear in the history of the consideration of the doctrine are Tritheism and Unitarianism. In Tritheism, error is made in emphasizing the distinctiveness of the Godhead to the point that the Trinity is seen as three separate Gods, or a Christian polytheism. On the other hand, Unitarianism excludes the concept of distinctiveness while focusing solely on the aspect of God the Father. In this way Christ and the Holy Spirit are placed in lower categories and made less than divine. Both errors compromise the effectiveness and contribution of the activity of God in redemptive history.

The biblical concept of the Trinity developed through progressive revelation. The Old Testament consistently affirms the unity of God through such statements as "Listen, Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is One" (Deuteronomy 6:4 HCSB). God's oneness is stressed to caution the Israelites against the polytheism and practical atheism of their heathen neighbors.

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[6] Thiselton, A. C. (2015). "Trinity, the Holy". In *The Thiselton Companion to Christian Theology*, 820. Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

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Old Testament Implications of the Trinitarian Idea

The Old Testament does feature implications of the trinitarian idea. This does not mean that the Trinity was fully knowable from the Old Testament, but that a vocabulary was established through the events of God's nearness and creativity; both receive developed meaning from New Testament writers. For example, the word of God is recognized as the agent of creation (Psalm 33:6, 9; cp. Proverbs 3:19; 8:27), revelation, and salvation (Psalm 107:20). This same vocabulary is given distinct personality in John's prologue (John 1:1–4) in the person of Jesus Christ. Other vocabulary categories include the wisdom of God (Proverbs 8) and the Spirit of God (Genesis 1:2; Psalm 104:30; Zecheriah 4:6).

A distinguishing feature of the New Testament is the doctrine of the Trinity. It is remarkable that New Testament writers present the doctrine in such a manner that it does not violate the Old Testament concept of the oneness of God. In fact, they unanimously affirm the Hebrew monotheistic faith, but they extend it to include the coming of Jesus and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The early Christian church experienced the God of Abraham in a new and dramatic way without abandoning the oneness of God that permeates the Old Testament. As a fresh expression of God, the concept of the Trinity—rooted in the God of the past and consistent with the God of the past—absorbs the idea of the God of the past but goes beyond the God of the past in a more personal encounter.

The New Testament does not present a systematic presentation of the Trinity. The scattered segments from various writers that appear throughout the New Testament reflect a seemingly accepted understanding that exists without a full-length discussion. It is embedded in the framework of the Christian experience and simply assumed as true. The New Testament writers focus on statements drawn from the obvious existence of the trinitarian experience as opposed to a detailed exposition.

The New Testament evidence for the Trinity can be grouped into four types of passages:

1. The first is the trinitarian formula of Matthew 28:19; 2 Corinthians 13:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2; Revelation 1:4–6. In each passage a trinitarian formula, repeated in summation fashion, registers a distinctive contribution of each person of the Godhead. Matthew 28:19, for example, follows the triple formula of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that distinguishes Christian baptism. The risen Lord commissioned the disciples to baptize converts with a trinitarian emphasis that carries the distinctiveness of each person of the Godhead while associating their inner relationship. This passage is the clearest scriptural reference to a systematic presentation of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Paul, in 2 Corinthians 13:13-14, finalized his thoughts to the Corinthian church with a pastoral appeal that is grounded in "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit." The formulation is designed to have the practical impact of bringing that divided church together through their personal experience of the Trinity in their daily lives. Significantly, in the trinitarian order Christ is mentioned first. This reflects the actual process of Christian salvation, since Christ is the key to opening insight into the work of the Godhead. Paul was calling attention to the trinitarian consciousness, not in the initial work of salvation that has already been accomplished at Corinth, but in the sustaining work that enables divisive Christians to achieve unity.

In 1 Peter 1:2 the trinitarian formula is followed with reference to each person of the Godhead. The scattered Christians are reminded through reference to the Trinity that their election (foreknowledge of the Father) and redemption (the sanctifying work of the Spirit) should lead to holy living in obedience to the Son.

John addressed the readers of the book of Revelation with an expanded trinitarian formula that includes references to the persons of the Godhead (Revelation 1:4–6). The focus on the triumph of Christianity crystallizes the trinitarian greeting into a doxology that acknowledges the accomplished work and the future return of Christ. This elongated presentation serves as an encouragement to churches facing persecution.

2. A second type of New Testament passage is the triadic form. Two passages cast in this structure are Ephesians 4:4–6 and 1 Corinthians 12:3–6. Both passages refer to the three persons of the Trinity, but not in the definitive formula of the previous passage. Each Scripture balances the unity of the church. Emphasis is placed on the administration of gifts by the Godhead.

3. A third category of passages mentions the three persons of the Godhead but without a clear triadic structure. In the accounts of the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13–17; Mark 1:9–11; and Luke 3:21–22), the three Synoptic writers recorded the presence of the Trinity when the Son was baptized, the Spirit descended, and the Father spoke with approval. Paul, in Galatians 4:4–6, outlined the work of the Trinity in the aspect of the sending Father. Other representative passages in this category (2 Thessalonians 2:13–15; Titus 3:4–6; Jude 20–21) portray each member of the Trinity in relation to a particular redemptive function.

4. The fourth category of trinitarian passages includes those presented in the farewell discourse of Jesus to His disciples (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:13–15). In the context of these passages, Jesus expounded the work and ministry of the third person of the

Godhead as the Agent of God in the continuing ministry of the Son. The Spirit is a Teacher who facilitates understanding on the disciples' part and, in being sent from the Father and the Son, is one in nature with the other persons of the Trinity. Jesus said the Spirit takes what is His and declares it to believers (John 16:15). The discourse emphasizes the interrelatedness of the Trinity in equality and operational significance.

All of these passages are embryonic efforts by the early church to express its awareness of the Trinity. The New Testament is Christological in its approach, but it involves the fullness of God being made available to the individual believer through Jesus and by the Spirit. The consistent trinitarian expression is not a formulation of the doctrine, as such, but reveals an experiencing of God's persistent self-revelation.[7]

A Final Thought

The Trinity is a communion of three persons, three centers of consciousness, who exist and always have existed in union with one another and in dependence on one another … Each is essential to the life of the others, and to the life of the Trinity. They are bound to one another in love, *agape* love, which therefore unites them in the closest and most intimate of relationships. This unselfish, *agape* love makes each more concerned for the other than for himself. There is therefore a mutual submission of each to each of the others and a mutual glorifying of one another. There is complete equality of the three.[8]

"If you deny the Trinity you shall lose your soul,
if you try to explain the Trinity you shall lose your mind."

~ Saint Augustine

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[7] Henry, J. M. (2003). "Trinity". In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*,1625–1627. Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers.
[8] Erickson, Millard (1995). *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity*, 331. Grand Rapids: Baker.