

The Trinity

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8 Min Read

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is foundational to the Christian faith and to **Christian living**, since knowing God is at the heart of biblical religion and God is fully revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the unfolding of **the divine mystery**. The one true and living God eternally exists in three distinct yet inseparable persons. The creeds and confession of the church summarize the essential biblical truths about the triunity of God, providing theological nuance and support for this foundational doctrine. Nevertheless, the doctrine of the Trinity has also been frequently misunderstood, misrepresented and perverted. Considering biblical support for the doctrine of the Trinity and its historical development will help us more accurately comprehend this precious truth.

Explanation

Biblical Support

Although the word *Trinity* does not appear in Scripture, the essence of the doctrine is revealed in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, God's triunity is alluded to rather than explicitly revealed. This is due, in part, to the preparatory nature of Old Testament revelation. In the Old Testament, God did not fully reveal all that He intended to reveal throughout redemptive history. We need the New Testament revelation to give us the full unfolding of the Old Testament revelation that prepared God's people for the new covenant. Additionally, the **monotheistic** character of God is emphasized in the Old Testament in such a way as to contrast the truth of Israel's God with the polytheism of the surrounding pagan nations. This emphasis on the singular nature of God was meant to protect the people from the idolatry of the nations. There are, however, significant Old Testament allusions to the multiplicity of persons in the Godhead.

Consider the following:

- Certain theologians—most notably **Peter Lombard** and Martin Luther—found an allusion to a multiplicity of persons in the Godhead in the use of the divine name **Elohim**.
- Throughout church history, many theologians have accepted the Trinitarian character of the communication of **the divine council in Genesis 1:26**, 11:7, and **Isaiah 6:8**. The alternative proposal that God was speaking to the angels is unlikely, since **Genesis 1:26** reveals that God makes man in His “own” image rather than in the image of angels.
- There are many passages in the Old Testament in which the persons of the Godhead communicate to one another or refer to one another (e.g., **Pss. 45:6–7; 110:1; Zech. 2:8–11; Heb. 1:8–9**). This is a strong proof of the Trinitarian character of God in the Old Testament.
- Many early church, Lutheran, and Reformed theologians held to the view that the “**Angel of the Lord**” (Hebrew *malakh YHWH*) was a preincarnate manifestation of the second person of the Godhead—namely, the Logos.
- The revelation of the Spirit of God in the Old Testament—in distinction to the Father (**Isa. 63:16**) and the Son (**Ps. 2:7; Prov. 30:4**)—bears strong witness to the multiplicity of persons in the Godhead (e.g., **Gen. 1:2; Ex. 35:31; 2 Sam. 23:2; Isa. 63:10; Ezek. 2:2**). The Spirit is the agent of creation, sustenance, power, revelation, and the application of redemption in the Old Testament.

When we come to the New Testament, we see the mystery of the Trinity more clearly unfolded at the baptism of Jesus. All three persons of the Godhead are present when Jesus is baptized. The Father speaks about the Son while the Spirit descends upon the Son (**Matt. 3:13–27**). Additionally, the persons of the Godhead are specifically mentioned alongside one another in the New Testament (**Luke 1:35; 3:21–22; Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:3–4; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2**). In the Gospels, the Son prays to the Father on numerous occasions, thereby proving that He is in some way distinct from the Father and that the Father and Son are not merely different modes or manifestations of the same divine person, as suggested in the view known as modalism (**Luke 22:42; 23:34, 46; John 12:28; 17:1**). Rather, Jesus is **God incarnate**—the eternal Son of God—in perfect unity with and yet distinct from His Father and the Spirit. Jesus speaks explicitly of all three persons of the Godhead in His discourse in **John 14–16**. The divine personhood of the Spirit is taught throughout the pages of the New Testament—and most strikingly in the references to His speaking (**Acts 13:2; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22; 14:13; 22:17**). “The Holy Spirit says,” “The Spirit said through . . .,” and “As the Spirit says,” are common ways in which Old Testament citations are introduced in the New Testament.

The New Testament speaks both of the eternal divine equality between the Father, Son, and Spirit and of the functional subordination of the Son to the Father in the work of redemption that He performed as the incarnate God-man. Theologians have commonly distinguished between **the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity**. The ontological Trinity describes God as He is in Himself. In the ontological Trinity there is absolute divine equality without any subordination of being. As to the being and attributes of God, the Son is absolutely equal to the Father (**John 1:1; 8:58; Col. 1:15, 19; Heb. 1:3**). The economic Trinity describes the persons of the Godhead in God’s external working. As to the work of God in redemption,

there is **functional subordination** of the incarnate Christ to the Father (John 5:19–23; 1 Cor. 11:3). This subordination in time as Christ carried out the work of salvation fulfilled the Father’s commitment to send the Son and the Son’s commitment to purchase our redemption that was made in the **covenant of redemption** (John 10:17–18, 12:49; Titus 1:2).

Historical Development

The early church father Tertullian is believed to have been the first to use the word *Trinity*. In his treatise *Adversus Praxean*, Tertullian refers to the “*Trinitas unius Divinitatis, Pater et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*” (the Trinity of the One Divinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).

Tertullian provided the building blocks regarding the multiplicity of persons (Latin **personae**), but later fathers provided the essential vocabulary to understand and defend Trinitarian doctrine. **Athanasius** was the great defender of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son—i.e., that the Father and Son are the same in essence—after the Council of Nicaea, and the Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) drew the clear distinction between the meaning of **essence and person**. The Cappadocian Fathers were the determinative voices in the outcome of the Council of Constantinople, which built on the Council of Nicaea by clarifying the distinct personhood of the Holy Spirit in light of His unity of essence with the Father and the Son. **Nicholas Needham** explains, “The Cappadocians fashioned the language of Trinitarian orthodoxy that we still use today. In addition to the term *ousia* for the divine nature, they defined the term *hypostasis* to express the reality of the divine persons.”

In the early church, the deity of the Son was the central point of doctrinal contention. The Christian church’s definitive presentation of the core truths of the doctrine of the Trinity was established at the **Council of Nicaea** (AD 325) and at the **Council of Constantinople** (AD 381). In both councils, Christological error was refuted and doctrinal precision established. The essential elements of the deity of Christ and the doctrine of the Trinity were codified in the **Nicene Creed** (also known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, because it was refined and expanded at the Council of Constantinople).

After the Cappadocians, **Augustine** further refined established trinitarian distinctions. His *De Trinitatis* (On the Trinity) is one of the most significant theological works in church history. Herman Bavinck explained the importance of Augustine’s articulation of the Trinity:

[Augustine] does not derive the Trinity from the Father but from the unity of the divine essence, nor does he conceive of it as accidental but rather as an essential characteristic of the divine being. It belongs to God’s very essence to be triune. In that regard personhood is identical with God’s being

itself. . . . Each person . . . is identical with the entire being and equal to the other two or all three together. With created beings that is different. One person does not equal three but, says Augustine, “in God that is not so, for the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit together are not a greater being than the Father alone or the Son alone; but these three substances or persons, if they must be so called, are at one and the same time equal to each individually” (*De trin.*, VII, 6).

One particular phrase became controversial over the course of church history. In the eleventh century, the Western church added the word *filioque* (and the Son) to the Nicene Creed, in keeping with centuries of liturgical practice and the biblical testimony that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, not the Father alone. Eastern Orthodox churches rejected (and continue to reject) the *filioque* clause, which contributed to the break between the Eastern and Western churches in 1054.

The Reformed confessions and catechisms of the seventeenth century concur with the early and medieval church regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. The *Westminster Standards* summarize the Nicene doctrine of the Trinity. The Westminster Shorter Catechism states, “There are three persons in the Godhead; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory” (Q&A 5). The Westminster Larger Catechism notes that the members of the Godhead are “distinguished by their personal properties” (Q&A 9), which are defined in this way: “It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Ghost to proceed from the Father and the Son from all eternity” (Q&A). This distinction serves to delineate the order of existence among the members of the Godhead. The Father is commonly said to be the first person of the Godhead, the Son is the second person, and the Spirit is the third person. This does not suggest any subordination in the Godhead. Rather, it reflects the persons of the Godhead in their personal capacity and their order of operation. Salvation comes to us from the Father through the Son and by the Holy Spirit, and we return praise to God by the Holy Spirit through the Son unto the Father.

Quotes

The term ‘Trinity’ 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 unbiblical 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.

B.B. Warfield

“The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity”

*In the formula of the Trinity, the church bows to sacred Scripture, honoring both the unity of God and the distinctions among the persons of the Godhead. The formula made use of terms such as **person**, **subsistence**, **hypostasis**, in an attempt to get at the unity and the distinction within God Himself. In addition to affirming the deity of Jesus, without which deity it would be blasphemous for Him to be an object of worship in the church, the Holy Spirit is also described in the Scriptures in terms of divine attributes. He is omnipotent. He is omniscient. He is infinite. He is eternal. He is actively involved in the divine work of creation, and in conjunction with His being the author of life and human intelligence, He is active in empowering the work of Christ in redemption. We see in the Bible that the work of creation involves the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, just as the work of redemption includes the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three are testified to uniformly by the Scriptures as being divine. They are not three gods, because the unity of God remains axiomatic in the monarchianism of sacred Scripture. The church still declares that the Lord our God is one. He is one being, though we must distinguish within that one being the subsistences of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*

R.C. Sproul

“Triune Monarchy”

Tabletalk magazine