The Trinity
(Tri-unity) of God

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Biblical Studies Press
www.bible.org
1997

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The Trinity

Introduction

Because the word *trinity* is never found in the Bible some wonder about whether this is a biblical doctrine or not, but the absence of a term used to describe a doctrine does not necessarily mean the term is not biblical. The issue is, does the term accurately reflect what the Scripture teaches? In reality, due to the incomprehensible nature of the truth this term reflects, some believe it is a poor word to describe exactly what the Bible teaches us about this truth concerning God. When anyone studies a doctrine like this, reads about it in a theology book, or in an article like this one, it may appear that the writer is saying, "Here are the doctrines we believe, and this is what you must believe, so believe them!" But as Ryrie points out, "If that's the case it is only because you are looking at the results of someone's study, not the process"[1] that led to their position on a particular doctrine.

The goal is to investigate the facts of Scripture so one can see from the process of investigation presented in this study just what the Bible teaches us about how God exists. Historically, the church has believed that He exists in Holy Trinity or Triunity. The tri-personality of God is exclusively a Christian doctrine and a truth of Scripture. It is this doctrine that will be investigated in what follows. Our purpose, then, is to demonstrate that the doctrine of the trinity (triunity) of the Godhead is another biblical revelation that teaches us more about the nature of God or *how He exists*. The Bible teaches us that God not only exists as a personal Spirit being, but that He does so in Holy Trinity.

The Nature
of this Revelation About God

Before we investigate the facts of Scripture, I want to begin by pointing out that this is a doctrine beyond the scope of man's finite mind. It lies outside the realm of natural reason or human logic. The late Dr. Walter Martin points out:

> No man can fully explain the Trinity, though in every age scholars have propounded theories and advanced hypotheses to explore this mysterious Biblical teaching. But despite the worthy efforts of these scholars, the Trinity is still largely incomprehensible to the mind of man.

> Perhaps the chief reason for this is that the Trinity is a-logical, or beyond logic. It, therefore, cannot be made subject to human reason or logic. Because of this, opponents of the doctrine argue that the idea of the Trinity must be rejected as untenable. Such thinking, however, makes man's corrupted human reason the sole criterion for determining the truth of divine revelation.[2]

So what's the issue that faces us? The ultimate issue as always is, does the biblical evidence support the doctrine of the Trinity or tri-personality of God? If biblical evidence supports it, we can know it is true. Comprehending it is another matter. John Wesley said, "Bring me a worm that can comprehend a man, and then I will show you a man that can comprehend the triune God."[3]

We should not be bothered by this fact. Why? Because God's Word tells us that we should expect His revelation, the revelation of an infinite, omniscient, all-wise Creator, to contain an *infinite depth* that corresponds to His *infinite mind*. In Isaiah, God tells us about this and says:

> "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Neither are your ways My ways," declares the LORD. "For *as* the heavens are higher than the earth, So are My ways higher than your ways, And My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9).

Kenneth Boa has an excellent word here concerning the concept of God's thoughts being higher than ours:

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[1] Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, Moody Press, Chicago, 1972, p. 29.

[2] Walter Martin, *Essential Christianity*, Vision House, Santa Anna, 1975, p. 21

[3] *Encyclopedia of 7700 Illustrations*, Assurance Publishers, p. 504.

It follows from all this that we cannot and should not expect to understand the Bible exhaustively. If we could, the Bible would not be divine but limited to human intelligence. A very important idea comes out of this, something over which many non-Christians and even Christians stumble: *Since the Bible is an infinite revelation, it often brings the reader beyond the limit of his intelligence*.

As simple as the Bible is in its message of sin and of free salvation in Christ, an incredible subtlety and profundity underlies all its doctrines. Even a child can receive Christ as his Savior, thereby appropriating the free gift of eternal life. Yet no philosopher has more than scratched the surface regarding the things that happened at the Cross. The Bible forces any reader to crash into the ceiling of his own comprehension, beyond which he cannot go until he sees the Lord face-to-face.

Until a person recognizes that his own wisdom and intelligence are not enough, he is not ready to listen to God's greater wisdom. Jesus alluded to this when He said to God, "you have hidden these things from the wise and learned, and revealed them to little children" (Luke 10:21).[4]

God has communicated to men truly though not exhaustively. Moses expressed this to us in Deuteronomy 29:29, "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law."

An understanding of the way the Greek word *mystery* was used in the New Testament may help us here. It is the Greek word *musterion* and refers to what was previously hidden, but is now revealed to us through the revelation of the Word (1 Cor. 15:51; Eph. 3:3, 4, 9). Sometimes it is used simply of that which God makes known through His revelation to man which man could not know on his own (1 Cor. 2:7). But there is a sense in which some of God's truth, though clearly revealed in the Bible, remains a mystery. Though it is a truth revealed in Scripture, like the doctrine of the incarnation of the Son of God or the divine/human nature of Jesus Christ, the *Trinity* is a kind of mystery in that it goes beyond the boundaries of human comprehension. God hasn't explained all the mysteries of His revelation to us undoubtedly because we simply cannot yet grasp them.

The Apostle Paul wrote: "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I shall know fully just as I also have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

A city like Corinth, famous for its bronze mirrors, would have particularly appreciated Paul's final illustration. The perfection and imperfection mentioned in verse 10 were deftly likened to the contrasting images obtained by the indirect *reflection* of one's face viewed in a bronze mirror and the same face when viewed directly. Such, Paul said, was the contrast between the imperfect time in which he then wrote and the perfect time which awaited him and the church when the partial reflection of the present would give way to the splendor of perfect vision. Then Paul would *see* God (cf. 15:28; 1 John 3:2) as God now saw Paul. Then partial knowledge (cf. 1 Cor. 8:1-3) would be displaced by the perfect knowledge of God.[5]

Because of our limited capacity in this life, some of the revelations of God given to us in the Bible *defy explanation and illustration*. When seeking to explain those truths that fall into this category, our explanations and especially our attempts to illustrate them must of necessity fall short of our ability to clarify and comprehend them.

Does this mean a doctrine cannot be true simply because it defies our human imagination or ability to comprehend it? The answer is, of course not. It would be nothing short of human arrogance to say it was. The truth is, we must recognize our need to simply trust in God's special revelation to us, the Bible, and submit our minds to that teaching which is truly expressed in its pages. This does not mean we do not test the Scripture to make sure these things are truly taught, but once we are convinced that that is what the Bible says, we must lay hold of it by faith and wait on the eternal future for complete understanding.

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[4] Kenneth Boa, *Unraveling the Big Questions About God*, Lamplighter Books, p. 12.

[5] *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, NT*, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Editors, Victor Books, Electronic Media.

It would be the height of egotism for a person to say that because an idea in the Bible does not make sense (does not conform to his or her reasoning), it cannot be true and the Bible must be in error on this point.[6]

The doctrine of the trinity or triunity is part of God's revelation of One who is infinite to those who are finite. So again we must ask, doesn't it seem logical that in our study about God we are going to find things that are incomprehensible, mysterious, and super-rational to finite man's rational thinking capacity? So, let's understand from the beginning of this study, "God in His existence as the Three-in-One is beyond the limits of human comprehension."[7]

There is another important issue about the nature of this revelation in Scripture. We need to think a moment about the words, *explicit* and *implicit* for these two words are important to rightly understanding what Scripture teaches about this doctrine. *Explicit* means "fully and clearly expressed; leaving nothing implied; fully and clearly defined or formulated." *Implicit* means "implied or understood, though not directly expressed."

Ryrie writes:

Trinity is, of course, not a biblical word. Neither are triunity, trine, trinal, subsistence, nor essence. Yet we employ them, and often helpfully, in trying to express this doctrine which is so fraught with difficulties. Furthermore, this is a doctrine which in the New Testament is not explicit even though it is often said that it is implicit in the Old and explicit in the New. But explicit means "characterized by full, clear expression," an adjective hard to apply to this doctrine. Nevertheless, the doctrine grows out of the Scriptures, so it is a biblical teaching.[8]

Historical Background

Though the Bible taught truth of the Triunity of God implicitly in both Old and New Testaments, the development and delineation of this doctrine was brought about by the rise of heretical groups or teachers who either denied the deity of Christ or that of the Holy Spirit. This caused the early church to formally crystallize the doctrine of the Triunity. Actually, Tertullian in 215 A.D. was the first one to state this doctrine using the term, Trinity.[9] Concerning the struggle the early church went through, Walter Martin writes:

As the New Testament was completed toward the close of the first century, the infant church was struggling for its life against old foes—persecution and doctrinal error. On the one hand were the Roman empire, orthodox Judaism, and hostile pagan religions, and on the other hand were heresies and divisive doctrines. Early Christianity was indeed a perilous experiment.

Probably no doctrine was the subject of more controversy in the early church than that of the Trinity. Certainly the teaching of "one God in three Person" was accepted in the early church, but only as this teaching was challenged did a systematic doctrine of the Trinity emerge.

The Gnostic heresy, for instance, (which permeated Christendom in the lifetime of the apostles) drew strong condemnation in Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and John's First Epistle. Denying the deity of Christ, the Gnostics taught that he was inferior in nature to the Father, a type of super-angel of impersonal emanation from God.

Following the Gnostics came such speculative theologians as Origen, Lucian of Antioch, Paul of Samosota, Sabellius, and Arius of Alexandria. All of these propagated unbiblical views of the Trinity and of the divinity of our Lord.

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[6] Ibid., p. 16.

[7] Ibid., p. 42.

[8] Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, Victor Books, Wheaton, IL, 1987, electronic media.

[9] Earle E. Cairns, *Christianity Through the Centuries*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1967, p. 122.

But perhaps the most crucial test of Christian doctrine in the early church was the "Arian heresy." It was this heresy which stimulated the crystallization of thought regarding both the Trinity and the deity of Christ …

Today there are still remnants of the Gnostic heresy (Christian Science), the Arian heresy (Jehovah's Witnesses), and the Socinian heresy (Unitarianism) circulating in Christendom. All of these errors have one thing in common—they give Christ every title except the one which entitles Him to all the rest—the title of God and Savior.

But the Christian doctrine of the Trinity did not "begin" at the Council of Nicea, nor was it derived from "pagan influences." While Egyptian, Chaldean, Hindu, and other pagan religions do incorporate so-called "trinities," these have no resemblance to the Christian doctrine, which is unique and free from any heathen cultural vagaries … [10]

The point, then, is simply this: While the term *Trinity* is never specifically used nor the doctrine explicitly explained in Scripture, it is nevertheless implicitly stated. The church councils, in their fight against heresy, were forced to think through what the Bible says about how God exists. The result was the doctrine of the Triunity, but let it be emphasized, the development of this doctrine was based on a careful study of Scripture.

Cairns discusses this time of theological controversy in the early church and the extreme care given to this issue:

It was an era when the main dogmas of the Christian Church were developed. The unfavorable connotation conveyed by the word "dogma" in a day of doctrinal laxity, such as the present, should not obscure the value to the Church of dogma. The word "dogma" came through the Latin from the Greek word *dogma*, which was derived from the verb *dodeo*. This word meant to think. The dogmas or doctrines formulated in this period were the result of intense thought and searching of the soul in order to interpret correctly the meaning of the Scriptures on the disputed points and to avoid the erroneous opinions (*doxai*) of the philosophers.[11]

Finally, it should be said that,

… the doctrine of the Trinity is the distinctive mark of the Christian religion, setting it apart from all the other religions of the world. Working without the benefit of the revelations made in Scripture, men have, it is true, arrived at some limited truths concerning the nature and Person of God. The pagan religions, as well as all philosophical speculations, are based on natural religion and can, therefore, rise to no higher conception than that of the unity of God. In some systems we find monotheism with its belief in only one God. In others we find polytheism with its belief in many separate gods. But none of the pagan religions, nor any of the systems of speculative philosophy have ever arrived at a trinitarian conception of God. The fact of the matter is that apart from supernatural revelation there is nothing in human consciousness or experience which can give man the slightest clue to the distinctive God of the Christian faith, the triune, incarnate, redeeming, sanctifying God. Some of the pagan religions have set forth triads of divinities, such as, for instance, the Egyptian triad of Osiris, Isis and Horus, which is somewhat analogous to the human family with father, mother and child; or the Hindu triad of Brahma, Vishnu and Schiva, which in the cycle of pantheistic evolution personifies the creative, preservative and destructive power of nature; or the triad set forth by Plato, of goodness, intellect and will—which are not examples of true and proper tri-personality, not real persons who can be addressed and worshipped, but only personifications of the faculties or attributes of God. None of these systems have anything in common with the Christian doctrine of the Trinity except the notion of "threeness."[12]

Before we investigate the evidence for the Trinity, let's define it and then study the evidence.

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[10] Martin, pp. 22-23.

[11] Cairns, p. 141.

[12] Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1976, pp. 80-81.

Definition of the
Trinity (Triunity) of God

Trinity: Webster's dictionary gives the following definition of trinity: "The union of three divine persons (or hypostases), the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in one divinity, so that all the three are one God as to substance, but three Persons (or hypostases as to individuality)." Synonyms sometimes used are triunity, trine, triality. The term "trinity" is formed from "tri," three, and "nity," unity. Triunity is a better term than "trinity" because it better expresses the idea of three in one. God is three in one. Hypostases is the plural of *hypostasis* which means "the substance, the underlying reality, or essence."

Ryrie writes:

A definition of the Trinity is not easy to construct. Some are done by stating several propositions. Others err on the side either of oneness or threeness. One of the best is Warfield's: "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."[13]

Person: In speaking of the Triunity, the term "person" is not used in same way it is in ordinary usage in which it means *an identity completely distinct from other persons*. Actually the word *persons* tends to detract from the unity of the Trinity. According to the teaching of Scripture, the three Persons are inseparable, interdependent, and eternally united in one Divine Being.

It is evident that the word "person" is not ideal for the purpose. Orthodox writers have struggled over this term. Some have opted for the term *subsistence* (the mode or quality of existence), hence, "God has three substances." Most have continued to use *persons* because we have not been able to find a better term. "The word *substance* speaks of God's essential nature or being and *subsistence* describes His mode or quality of existence."[14]

Essence: In its theological usage, essence refers to "the intrinsic or indispensable, permanent, and inseparable qualities that characterize or identify the being of God." The words triunity and trinity are used to refer to the fact that the Bible speaks of one God, but attributes the characteristics of God to three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The doctrine of the trinity states that there is one God who is one in essence or substance, but three in personality. This does not mean three independent Gods existing as one, but three Persons who are co-equal, co-eternal, inseparable, interdependent, and eternally united in one absolute Divine Essence and Being.

Typically, the words *triunity* and *trinity* are used to help us express a doctrine that is scriptural, though replete with difficulties for the human mind. Again, it needs to be emphasized that this is a doctrine that is not explicitly stated either in the Old or New Testaments, but it is implicit in both. Note the following points:

(1) Evangelical Christianity has believed in the doctrine of the Trinity, Triunity, or the Triune Godhead because of the teaching of the Bible as a whole (Old and New Testaments) and not because of one or two particular passages. As will be shown below, the whole of Scripture gives testimony to this doctrine.

(2) There are many specific passages which teach us there are three distinct Persons who possess deity, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, but the Bible also teaches us with equal emphasis that there is but one true God or one Divine Essence or Substance and Being.

(3) Taking the whole of Scripture, one can see that there is stress on: (a) the unity of God, one Divine Being and Essence, and (b) on the diversity of God in this unity, three Persons identified as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It speaks of these Persons in such a way that it ascribes absolute undiminished deity and personality to each while stressing that there is but one God in divine substance. It is the doctrine of the trinity that harmonizes and explains these two thrusts of Scripture—oneness in three personalities.

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[13] Ryrie, electronic media quoting B.B. Warfield, "Trinity," *The International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia,* James Orr, ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930, 5:3012.

[14] Boa, p. 46.

When we see that the Bible teaches these three things: (a) there is but one God, (b) that the Father, Son, and Spirit are each God, and (c) that each is set forth as distinct Persons, we have enunciated the doctrine of the Triunity of God. In a chart, it can be expressed as follows:

Ancient Diagram of the Holy Trinity
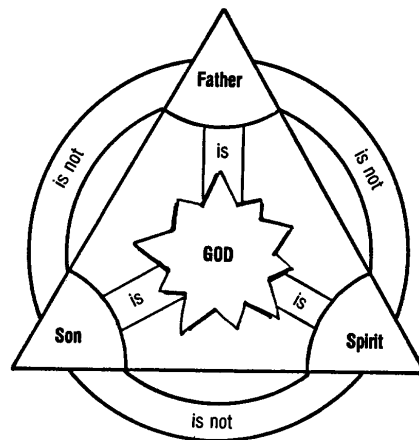
The three Persons are the same in substance, i.e., in essence or in their essential nature, but distinct in subsistence which describes God's mode or quality of existence in three Persons. By mode of existence we do not mean one God acting in three different ways, but one Divine Being existing in three distinct Persons within one Divine Substance or Essence. Again, this is not exactly three individuals as we think of three personal individuals, but one Divine Being who acts and thinks as one within a three-fold personality. This is incomprehensible to our finite and limited minds, but it is the teaching of the Scripture. "In the Being of God there are not three individuals, but only three personal self distinctions within the one Divine Essence."[15]

Recognizable and Important Distinctions

The New Bible Dictionary has an excellent summary of this point:

In the relationship between the Persons there are recognizable distinctions.

a. Unity in diversity

In most formularies the doctrine is stated by saying that God is One in his essential being, but that in his being there are three Persons, yet so as not to form separate and distinct individuals. They are three modes or forms in which the divine essence exists. 'Person' is, however, an imperfect expression of the truth inasmuch as the term denotes to us a separate rational and moral individual. *But in the being of God there are not three individuals, but three personal self-distinctions within the one divine essence* [italics mine]. Then again, personality in man implies independence of will, actions and feelings leading to behavior peculiar to the person. This cannot be thought of in connection with the Trinity. Each Person is self-conscious and self-directing, yet never acting independently or in opposition. When we say that God is a Unity we mean that, though God is in himself a threefold centre of life, his life is not split into three. He is one in essence, in personality and in will. When we say that God is a Trinity in Unity, we mean that there is a unity in diversity, and that the diversity manifests itself in Persons, in characteristics and in operations.

b. Equality in dignity

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[15] R. A. Finlayson, "Trinity," *The New Bible Dictionary*, Eerdmans, p. 1300.

There is perfect equality in nature, honour and dignity between the Persons. Fatherhood belongs to the very essence of the first Person and it was so from all eternity. It is a personal property of God 'from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named' (Eph. 3:15).

The Son is called the 'only begotten' perhaps to suggest uniqueness rather than derivation. Christ always claimed for himself a unique relationship to God as Father, and the Jews who listened to him apparently had no illusions about his claims. Indeed they sought to kill him because he 'called God his own Father, making himself equal with God' (Jn. 5:18).

The Spirit is revealed as the One who alone knows the depths of God's nature: 'For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God … No one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:10f.). This is saying that the Spirit is 'just God himself in the innermost essence of his being.'

This puts the seal of NT teaching upon the doctrine of the equality of the three Persons.

c. Diversity in operation

In the functions ascribed to each of the Persons in the Godhead, especially in man's redemption, it is clear that a certain degree of subordination is involved (in relation, though not in nature); the Father first, the Son second, the Spirit third. The Father works through the Son by the Spirit. Thus Christ can say: 'My Father is greater than I.' As the Son is sent by the Father, so the Spirit is sent by the Son. As it was the Son's office to reveal the Father, so it is the Spirit's office to reveal the Son, as Christ testified: 'He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you' (Jn. 16:14).

It has to be recognized that the doctrine arose as the spontaneous expression of the Christian experience. The early Christians knew themselves to be reconciled to God the Father, and that the reconciliation was secured for them by the atoning work of the Son, and that it was mediated to them as an experience by the Holy Spirit. Thus the Trinity was to them a fact before it became a doctrine, but in order to preserve it in the credal faith of the church the doctrine had to be formulated.[16]

Errors to Avoid
Concerning the Trinity

Tri-theism. This is the teaching that there are three Gods who are sometimes related, but only in a loose association. Such an approach, abandons the biblical oneness of God and the unity within the Trinity.

Sabellianism or Modalism. Sabellius (A.D. 200), the originator of this viewpoint, spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but he understood all three as no more than three manifestations of one God. This teaching came to be known as modalism because it views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Arianism. This doctrine had it roots in Tertullian, who made the Son subordinate to the Father. Origen took this further by teaching that the Son was subordinate to the Father "in respect to essence." The result was ultimately Arianism which denied the deity of Christ. Arius taught that only God was the uncreated One; because Christ was begotten of the Father it meant Christ was created by the Father. Arius believed there was a time when Christ did not exist. Arius and his teaching was condemned at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.[17]

Biblical Support for the Trinity

Since the Trinity involves the key aspects of oneness and threeness, support for this doctrine will be dependent on the discovery of these two aspects in Scripture as it reveals how God exists.

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[16] *The New Bible Dictionary*, Electronic Media, *Logos Bible Software*.

[17] Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, Moody Press, p. 199.

Scriptures on the Oneness of God

Old Testament Scriptures

(1) Deuteronomy 6:4 "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!"

Verse 4 is subject to various translations, though the statement is likely stressing the uniqueness of Yahweh and should be translated, "The LORD is our God, the LORD alone."

However, there is also a secondary emphasis—The Lord's indivisibility. This is apparent in most English translations. This confession clearly prepares the way for the later revelation of the Trinity, but how? "God" (*Elohim*) is a plural word, and the word *one* (the Hebrew, *echad*) refers to one in *a collective sense*. As such, it is used of the union of Adam and Eve (Gen. 2:24) to describe two persons in one flesh. Further, it is used in a *collective sense*, like one cluster of grapes rather than in an *absolute sense* as in Numbers 13:23 when the spies brought back a single cluster of grapes. Furthermore, the oneness of God is implied in those Old Testament passages that declare that there is no other God beside Yahweh, the God of Israel.

(2) Deuteronomy 4:35 "To you it was shown that you might know that the LORD, He is God; there is no other besides Him."

(3) Isaiah 46:9 "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; *I am* God, and there is no one like Me."

(4) Isaiah 43:10 "You are My witnesses," declares the LORD, "And My servant whom I have chosen, In order 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."

The New Testament is even more explicit:

(5) 1 Corinthians 8:4-6 "Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things, and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him."

(6) Ephesians 4:4-6 "*There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all."

(7) James 2:19 "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder."

Scriptures Demonstrating
God, Who is One, is Also Three

Old Testament Scriptures

While there is no explicit statement in the Old Testament affirming the Triunity, we can confidently say that the Old Testament not only allows for the Triunity, but also implies that God is a triune Being in a number of ways:

(1) The name *Elohim*, translated *God*, is the plural form of *El*. While this is what is called a plural of plenitude pointing to the power and majesty of God, it certainly allows for the New Testament revelation of the Triunity of God.

(2) There are many instances where God uses the plural pronoun to describe Himself (see Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8).

(3) In the creation account, both God the Father and God the Holy Spirit are seen in the work of creation. It is stated that God created heaven and earth (Gen. 1:1), but that it was the Holy Spirit who moved over the earth to infuse it with life in the sense of protecting and participating in the work of creation (Gen. 1:2).

(4) Writing about the Messiah, Isaiah reveals Him to be equal with God, calling Him the "Mighty God" and "Eternal Father" (Isa. 9:6).

(5) Several passages reveal a distinction of Persons within the Godhead.

- In Psalm 110:1, David demonstrates there is a distinction of Persons between "LORD," the one speaking, and the one addressed called by David, "my Lord." David was indicating the Messiah was no ordinary king, but his own Lord, *Adoni* (my Lord), one who was God Himself. So God the first Person addresses God the second Person. This is precisely Peter's point when He quotes this Psalm to show the resurrection of the Messiah was anticipated in the Old Testament.

- The Redeemer (who must be divine, Isa. 7:14; 9:6) is distinguished from the Lord (Isa. 59:20).

- The Lord is distinguished from the Lord in Hosea 1:6-7. The one speaking here is *Yahweh*, the Lord, yet, note the statement in verse 7, "I will have compassion … and deliver them by the Lord their God."

- The Spirit is distinguished from the Lord in a number of passages (Isa. 48:16; 59:21; 63:9-10).

(6) In the Messianic prophecy of Isaiah 7:14, God made it clear that the One who would be born of the virgin would also be Immanuel, God with us.

(7) Two other passages which imply the Trinity are Isaiah 48:16 and 61:1. In Isaiah 48:16 all three Persons are mentioned and yet seen as distinct from each other. See also Gen. 22:15-16.

New Testament Scriptures

The case for the Triunity of God is even stronger in the New Testament. Here it can be unequivocally demonstrated the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Furthermore, the New Testament teaches us that these three names are not synonymous, but speak of three distinct and equal Persons.

(1) **The Father is called God** (John 6:27; 20:17; 1 Cor. 8:6; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 4:6; Phil. 2:11; 1 Pet. 1:2).

(2) **Jesus Christ, the Son is declared to be God**. His deity is proven by the divine names given to Him, by His works that only God could do (upholding all things, Col. 1:17; creation, Col. 1:16, John 1:3; and future judgment, John 5:27), by His divine attributes (eternality, John 17:5; omnipresence, Matt. 28:20; omnipotence, Heb. 1:3; omniscience, Matt. 9:4), and by explicit statements declaring His deity (John 1:1; 20:28; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8).

(3) **The Holy Spirit is recognized as God**. By comparing Peter's comments in Acts 5:3 and 4, we see that in lying to the Holy Spirit (vs. 3), Ananias was lying to God (vs. 4). He has the attributes which only God can possess like omniscience (1 Cor. 2:10) and omnipresence (1 Cor. 6:19), and He regenerates people to new life (John 3:5-6, 8; Tit. 3:5), which must of necessity be a work of God for only God has the power of life. Finally, His deity is evident by the divine names used for the Spirit as "the Spirit of our God," (1 Cor. 6:11), which should be understood as "the Spirit, who is our God."

Ryrie writes: "Matthew 28:19 best states both the oneness and threeness by associating equally the three Persons and uniting them in *one singular name*. Other passages like Matthew 3:16-17 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 associate equally the three Persons but do not contain the strong emphasis on unity as does Matthew 28:19."[18]

The *New Bible Dictionary*, adds to this the following evidence:

The evidence of the NT writings, apart from the Gospels, is sufficient to show that Christ had instructed his disciples on this doctrine to a greater extent than is recorded by any of the four Evangelists. They whole-heartedly proclaim the doctrine of the Trinity as the threefold source of redemption. The outpouring of the Spirit at Pentecost brought the personality of the Spirit into greater prominence and at the same time shed light anew from the Spirit upon the Son. Peter, in explaining the phenomenon of Pentecost, represents it as the activity of the Trinity: 'This Jesus … being … exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear' (Acts 2:32-33). So the church of Pentecost was founded on the doctrine of the Trinity.

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[18] Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 53.

In 1 Cor. there is mention of the gifts of the Spirit, the varieties of service for the same Lord and the inspiration of the same God for the work (1 Cor. 12:4-6).

Peter traces salvation to the same triunal source: 'destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 1:2). The apostolic benediction: 'The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Cor. 13:14), not only sums up the apostolic teaching, but interprets the deeper meaning of the Trinity in Christian experience, the saving grace of the Son giving access to the love of the Father and to the communion of the Spirit.

What is amazing, however, is that this confession of God as One in Three took place without struggle and without controversy by a people indoctrinated for centuries in the faith of the one God, and that in entering the Christian church they were not conscious of any break with their ancient faith.[19]

From the above evidence, it should be clear that the Scripture teaches God is one and three.

Difficulties With the
Trinity Considered and Answered

The Meaning of "Only-begotten"

John 1:14 And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

John 1:18 No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained *Him*.

In John 1:18, the King James Version has *huios*, "Son," in place of *theos*, "God," and reads, "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared *him*."

Because to our mind the words "only begotten" suggest birth or beginning, some have tried to take the use of this designation of Jesus Christ to mean that Christ had a beginning, that He only *became* the Son of God. Such an understanding denies His eternality and also the concept of the trinity. So what does John mean by the term "only begotten?"

"Only begotten" is the Greek *monogenes*, a compound of *monos*, used as an adjective or adverb meaning "alone, only." Kittel writes: "In compounds with *genes*, adverbs describe the *nature* rather than the *source of derivation* (emphasis mine). Hence *monogenes* is used for the only child. More generally it means 'unique' or 'incomparable.'"[20] In the New Testament the term occurs only in Luke, John, and Hebrews, but an instructive use is found for us in Hebrews 11:17 where it is used of Isaac as the *monogenes* of Abraham. Isaac was not the only Son of the Patriarch, but he was the unique son of the promise of God. The emphasis is not on derivation but on his uniqueness and special place in the heart of Abraham.

Vine has an excellent summary of the use of *monogenes* in John 1:14 and 18:

With reference to Christ, the phrase "the only begotten from the Father," John 1:14, R.V. (see also the marg.), indicates that as the Son of God He was the sole representative of the Being and character of the One who sent Him. In the original the definite article is omitted both before "only begotten" and before "Father," and its absence in each case serves to lay stress upon the characteristics referred to in the terms used. The Apostle's object is to demonstrate what sort of glory it was that he and his fellow Apostles had seen. That he is not merely making a comparison

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[19] *The New Bible Dictionary*, Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1962, Electronic Media, Logos Bible Software.

[20] Kittel, Gerhard, and Friedrich, Gerhard, Editors, *The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Abridged in One Volume*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1985.

with earthly relationships is indicated by *para,* "from." The glory was that of a unique relationship and the word "begotten" does not imply a beginning of His Sonship. It suggests relationship indeed, but must be distinguished from generation as applied to man.

We can only rightly understand the term "the only begotten" when used of the Son, in the sense of unoriginated relationship. "The begetting is not an event of time, however remote, but a fact irrespective of time. The Christ did not *become,* but necessarily and eternally *is* the Son. He, a Person, possesses every attribute of pure Godhood. This necessitates eternity, absolute being; in this respect He is not 'after' the Father" (Moule).

In John 1:18 the clause "The Only Begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father," expresses both His eternal union with the Father in the Godhead and the ineffable intimacy and love between them, the Son sharing all the Father's counsels and enjoying all His affections. Another reading is *monogenes Theos,* 'God only-begotten.' In John 3:16 the statement, "God so loved the world that He gave His Only Begotten Son," must not be taken to mean that Christ became the Only Begotten Son by Incarnation. The value and the greatness of the gift lay in the Sonship of Him who was given. His Sonship was not the effect of His being given. In John 3:18 the phrase "the Name of the Only Begotten Son of God" lays stress upon the full revelation of God's character and will, His love and grace, as conveyed in the Name of One who, being in a unique relationship to Him, was provided by Him as the Object of faith. In 1 John 4:9 the statement "God hath sent His Only Begotten Son into the world" does not mean that God sent out into the world one who at His birth in Bethlehem had become His Son. Cp. the parallel statement, "God sent forth the Spirit of His Son," Gal. 4:6, R.V., which could not mean that God sent forth One who became His Spirit when He sent Him.[21]

The Meaning of "First-born"

Another term that has been misinterpreted by some as it is used of Christ is the term "firstborn." It is used of Christ in Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15, 18; Hebrews 1:6; and Revelation 1:5. Again, because of the thought of birth that this word denotes in our minds, this passage has been used to teach that Christ was not the eternal second Person of the Trinity because He had a beginning as the firstborn of God. "Firstborn" is the Greek *prototokos* (from *protos,* first, and *tikto,* to beget), but this word may mean (a) first in time, or (b) first in priority. The point and focus of the word must be taken from the context in which it is used.

In Colossians 1:15, as verse 16 makes clear, it refers to Christ's sovereignty expressing His priority to and pre-eminence over creation, not in the sense of time, the first to be born, but in the sense of (a) being the sovereign Creator, the One in Whom were the plans of creation as architect ("by Him all things were created" can also mean, "in Him …"), (b) by Whom all things were created as the builder ("all things were created by Him"), and (c) for Whom all things were created as the owner ("and for Him"). Colossians 1:15 is declaring Christ's sovereignty as the Creator. We can see this meaning of *prototokos* to express sovereignty or priority in the Septuagint's use of this word in Psalm 89:27 where the clause that follows explains the meaning of "firstborn" or *prototokos*. Psalm 89:27 reads, "I also shall make him *My* first-born, The highest of the kings of the earth." Who is the firstborn? He is "the highest of the kings of the earth," the sovereign Lord.

In the words of Colossians 1:18, "and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead," it means first in time, the first one to rise in an immortal and glorified body. But even here, He is the first-born of the dead so that He might come to be pre-eminent in all things as the head of the body, the church (vs. 18b). The point is that *prototokos* can mean either first in time or first in priority and it is the context which determines the meaning. As the second Person of the Trinity, Christ is God and sovereign, but as the God-Man who died for our sins and was raised from the dead, He is the pre-eminent head of the body of Christ, the church. In Colossians 2:9, the Apostle confirmed this meaning when he wrote, "For in Him all the fulness of deity dwells in bodily form."

The word for "Deity" is *theotetos,* a strong word (used only here in the NT) for Christ's essence as God. The full deity of Christ is nonetheless *in bodily form*—a full humanity (cf. Col. 1:22). Both

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[21] W. E. Vine, *Vine's Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1981, pp. 140-141.

Christ's deity and humanity were challenged by this early Gnostic-like heresy. Those heretics diminished Christ to an angel whose "body" was only apparent, not real. Paul affirmed here that Christ is both fully God and truly man (cf. 1 John 4:1-6).[22]

Practical Ramifications
of the Doctrine of Trinity

All doctrine is practical and has specific ramifications to life. This is no less true of the Triunity of the Godhead which draws our attention to the concept of the tri-fold personality of God. This communicates all the elements of personality—moral agency, intelligence, will, emotion, and communion that exists within the three Persons of the Godhead. What are some of the ramifications of this doctrine not only for theology, but for Christian experience and life?

(1) It teaches us that God is a God of revelation and communion.

Scripture teaches us that God is light, and one of the main functions of light is illumination. The act of revealing is as natural to God as it is for the sun. Before the creation of any being, angel or human, there was revelation and communication taking place within the Persons of the Holy Trinity, the Father to the Son, the Son to the Father, and so on with the Spirit. When, in the eternal decrees of God, He willed to create a universe with angelic and human beings, it was merely the expression of this very nature of God.

> So if God is a fellowship within himself he can let that fellowship go out to his creatures and communicate himself to them according to their capacity to receive. This is what happened supremely when he came to redeem men: he let his fellowship bend down to reach outcast man and lift him up. And so because God is a Trinity he has something to share: it is his own life and communion.[23]

(2) It means that the Trinity is the basis of all true fellowship in the world.

> Since God is within himself a fellowship, it means that his moral creatures who are made in his image find fullness of life only within a fellowship. This is reflected in marriage, in the home, in society and above all in the church whose *koinonia* is built upon the fellowship of the three Persons. Christian fellowship is, therefore, the divinest thing on earth, the earthly counterpart of the divine life, as Christ indeed prayed for his followers: 'That they may all be one; even as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be in us' (Jn. 17:21).[24]

(3) It gives variety to the life of the universe.

> There is … diversity in the life of God. God the Father designs, God the Son creates, God the Spirit quickens; a great diversity of life and operation and activity. For that reason we can realize that if the universe is a manifestation of God, we can expect a diversity of life within the whole of the created universe. We think that the so-called uniformity of nature is utterly untrue. All the wonders of creation, all the forms of life, all the movement in the universe, are a reflection, a mirroring, of the manifold life of God. There is no monotonous sameness, no large-scale uniformity of pattern, for nature reflects the many-sidedness of the nature and character of the living God.[25]

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[22] Norman L. Geisler, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament edition, John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Editors, Victor Books, p. 677.

[23] *The New Bible Dictionary*, Logos Research Systems, Electronic Media.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

What Are the
Choices Regarding the Trinity?

As in the case of God's sovereignty and man's volition (or the God-man mystery), there are three basic responses a person can make concerning the biblical concept of the Trinity. First, historically, men have either ignored it or rejected it as illogical and incompatible with human reason. Second, finding it incompatible with human reason, men have sought to solve the problem by reducing it to their own reason and in the process, they typically gravitated toward one extreme or another maintaining that God is one, or God is three, but He can't be both. Third, historically and for the most part, the church has accepted it completely by holding both truths (God is three in one, triune) in a proper balance. Based on all the data of the Bible, the church has accepted this doctrine by faith though it is incomprehensible to our finite minds.[26]

The Problem of the Two Extremes

Any time man elevates his own reason above the clear revelation of Scripture and he is faced with those truths in Scripture that defy his human logic, he usually goes in one of two extremes. For instance, when faced with two truths which seem to contradict each other (e.g., God's sovereignty and man's volition, or Christ's undiminished deity and true humanity in one Person, or God is One and Three), one of two things happens. In his attempt to make the truth harmonize with his reason, he will inevitably move to one extreme or the other. He will accept one (truth A, God is one) either to the neglect of the other or reject it completely (truth B, God a tri-personality), or he will swing to the other side and either minimize or reject truth A and emphasize truth B.

Kenneth Boa has some excellent comments on this issue:

In an effort to water down the doctrine of the triune God many have fallen into error. One such error is unitarianism. This view regards God as only one Person. Since, for most this Person is God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are stripped of their genuine deity. Jesus is reduced to a mere man ("the humble teacher from Nazareth"), and the Holy Spirit is turned into an impersonal force or fluid that emanates from God. The Unitarian-Universalist Church is an example of this extreme.

Jehovah's Witnesses are essentially unitarian because they deny the deity of Jesus Christ and view the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force (Walter Martin, *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1965, p. 47). This new Arianism repudiates the Trinity because it holds it to be unreasonable.

The second extreme is tritheism. This is a variation of polytheism because the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are regarded as three separate Gods. Sometimes this is carried a step further into the idea that there are many different gods, some perhaps associated with other worlds or realms. Mormonism is an example of tritheism, for it speaks of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as three distinct Gods (Ibid., p. 178). Mormonism is actually polytheistic since it indicates that there are other gods besides these three.

The only way to avoid these extremes is to accept all the biblical facts in a balanced way. The Trinity cannot be comprehended by the human mind because it is super-rational. Nevertheless, when anyone places his faith in God and the truth of His Word, he finds a satisfaction in this and other difficult areas of revealed truth. There is no need for a continual struggle.[27]

Conclusion

The doctrine of the trinity is truly beyond human comprehension or the limits of our finite minds, but it is nevertheless a vital truth of the Bible. It is a doctrine that is closely connected to other key doctrines like the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In fact, our salvation is rooted in the mysterious nature of the Godhead who coexists as

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[26] Boa, p. 50.

[27] Boa, pp. 50-51.

three distinct Persons all of whom are involved in our salvation in all its aspects, past, present, and future. It encompasses everything we know and practice as Christians—our sanctification, our fellowship, our prayer life, our Bible study, or our corporate worship. That this is true and a precious truth for us to rest in is evident in Paul's closing benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 and in Peter's salutation and doxology in 1 Peter 1:1-5.

2 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.

1 Peter 1:1-5. Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen 2 according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in fullest measure. 3 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to *obtain* an inheritance *which is* imperishable and undefiled and will not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, 5 who are protected by the power of God through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time.

May the Lord bless you in your study of His precious Word and in your walk with God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.