

The Triune Nature Of God

Intro: We turn our attention this morning to an investigation of the mystery of the Triune nature of the Godhead. An investigation into the Trinity, the threefold nature of the One God, is another mystery that can be explored only through biblical revelation. As noted last week, God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must do so in spirit and in truth. So it is with an investigation into God's Triune nature. In reality, due to the incomprehensible nature of God, we must come to this subject in a spirit of submission and reverence. A. W. Tozer says, "*The doctrine of the Trinity is truth for the heart. The spirit of man alone can enter through the veil and penetrate into the Holy of Holies. Love and faith are at home in the mystery of the Godhead. Let reason kneel in reverence outside*" (pg. 20). While the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, the concept is revealed from Genesis to Revelation. There is no question about it—the teaching of the Trinity is a divinely revealed biblical truth.

Before we investigate the biblical evidence for the Trinity, let's define it, look at the development of the term in the early church, and erroneous teachings to be avoided.

I. Definition Of The Trinity, Development In The Early Church, And Erroneous Teachings To Be Avoided

A. Definition of the Trinity (Triunity) of God

The term "trinity" is derived from the Latin word, *trinitas*, meaning three-ness. Christianity rests on the doctrine of the trinity, the three-ness or Tri-personality of God. In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity is unique to Christianity.

Webster's dictionary defines Trinity as: "The union of three divine persons (or *hypostases*), 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)." 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."

Charles Ryrie writes: A definition of the Trinity is not easy to construct. **One of the best is B. B. 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" (*Basic Theology*, 53).

Persons: In speaking of the Triunity that exists within the Godhead, the term "person" is not used in the 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.

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.

B. Illustrations of the Trinity

Many attempts have been made to illustrate the doctrine of the trinity: H₂O which can be either water, ice, or steam; an egg with its yolk, white, and outer shell; a three-leaf clover; the sun which embodies heat, light, and time; a man who is at one time a father, a son, and a brother. But in the final analysis every illustration breaks down. We cannot find any finite analogy which fully explains the doctrine of the Trinity. We simply believe it because God has revealed it. Our one God exists in three persons.

C. Development of the Trinity in the Early Church

The doctrine of the Trinity actually developed very early in the life of the Church. The Trinity arose as the spontaneous expression of the Christian

experience. The early Christians knew themselves to be reconciled to God the Father, through the atoning sacrifice of God's Son, Jesus Christ, and that it was mediated to them 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 creedal faith of the church the doctrine had to be formulated.

The official formulation of the Trinitarian doctrine actually came about in response to heretical teachers, who denied the deity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Orthodox leaders in the church denounced these false teachers, and put forward the doctrine of the Trinity. Tertullian in A.D. 215 was the first to state this doctrine using the term, Trinity. Athanasius was the first to formulate a Creed in which the equality of the three Persons of the Trinity is explicitly stated:

“We worship one God in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity; we distinguish among the persons, but we do not divide the substance.”
It goes on to say, “The entire three persons are coeternal and co-equal with one another, so that . . . we worship complete unity in Trinity and Trinity in unity.”

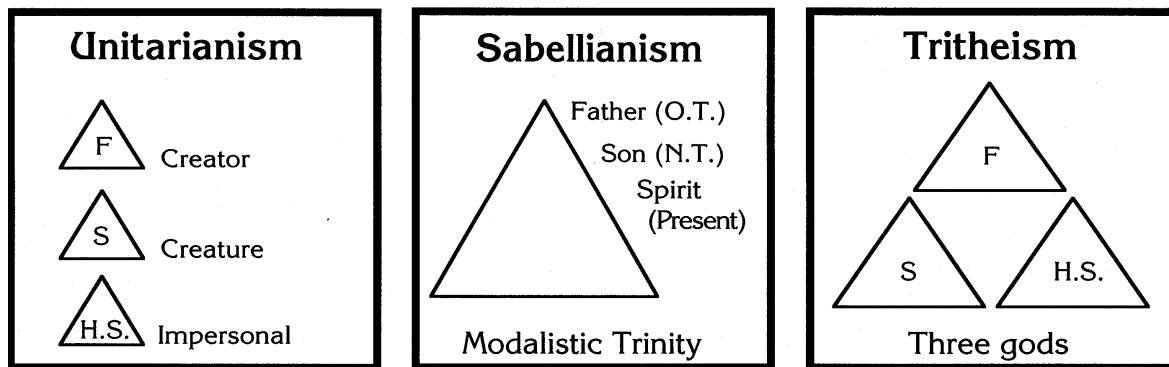
The doctrine of the Trinity, while embraced by believers in the early church, suffered relentless attacks by various heretical teachers.

D. Errors to avoid concerning the Trinity

Arianism/Unitarianism. This doctrine was developed by Arius, a priest from Alexandria, Egypt (A.D. 256–336), who 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. Jehovah's Witnesses are essentially Arian because they deny the deity of Jesus Christ and view the Holy Spirit as an impersonal force.

Sabellianism or Modalism. Sabellius (A.D. 200), the originator of this viewpoint, spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as no more than three manifestations of one true 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.

Tri-theism. This is the false 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.



II. Biblical Evidence For The Trinity

A. Old Testament development

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

In the creation account in Genesis 1:2 we read that the Spirit of God was “hovering over the face of the waters” at creation. The Spirit is elsewhere described as a Personal being, possessing the attributes of God, and yet He is distinct from Yahweh (Isa. 48:16; 61:1; 63:10).

The name *Elohim* used for God in Genesis 1:1, 2, 26 is a plural noun indicating plurality within the Godhead. In addition, God uses plural pronouns when referring to Himself, which implies a plurality of persons: “Then God said, ‘Let *Us* make man in *Our* image (Gen. 1:27); and in Genesis 11:7 God said, “Come, let *Us* go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.” In Isaiah 6:8 God said, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for *Us*?” Did you notice the shift from singular I to the plural *Us*? In each of the above examples we can clearly see the Triune nature of God-Three-in-One. The plural pronouns in all of these examples could not refer to angels because angels were not involved with God in His creative activity. Consequently, more than One Divine person was involved in creation.

As we move through the Old Testament it becomes progressively clear that the One God exists in a plurality of three persons. These three persons, described as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit share the same Divine nature, yet they differ in function. The Angel of the LORD represents Yahweh, while at the same time is Himself God. The Angel of the LORD is a reference to the preincarnate Christ, the second person of the Trinity. His numerous appearances in the Old Testament foreshadowed His coming in flesh in the New Testament.

One of the clearest declarations supporting the Triunity of God was recorded by the prophet **Isaiah in 48:12-13**. The LORD is speaking, the One who calls Himself the first and the last, the One who created the heavens and the earth here is what He says:

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 (verse 16).

Do you see the implication of that? The Lord said that the LORD God and His Spirit sent Him. It looks very much like our one God exists in three persons.

In light of the many and varied Old Testament references supporting the Trinity we can conclude with Louis Berkhof, “The Old Testament contains a clear anticipation of the fuller revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament” (*Systematic Theology*, 86).

B. New Testament revelation

“The Old Testament glimpses of God’s plurality blossom into the full revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament, where the deity and distinct personalities of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit function together in perfect unity and equality” (“God in Three Persons,” *ESV Study Bible*, 2514).

Perhaps one of the strongest evidence of a co-equal Trinity is seen at Jesus’ baptism, where the Son of God, Jesus Christ (John 1:18) is anointed for public ministry by the Holy Spirit, who descends as a dove and remains upon Him, while the voice of God the Father’s from heaven declares, “This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:13-17).

All three Persons of the Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are present, and each is doing something different.

On the night of His betrayal the Lord Jesus promised His disciples that He would ask the Father, and He would send forth another Comforter to take up residence in them, and He would teach them (John 14:16-17, 26).

Prior to His ascension back to the Father, Jesus issued His Great Commission in which He instructed His disciples to “Go and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name (singular) of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19-20). While name is singular, the plurality of the Godhead, is represented by three distinct but equal Persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Throughout the New Testament, assignment of spiritual gifts and prayers of blessing are ascribed to all the three Persons of the Trinity:

1 Corinthians 12:4-6—“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 And there are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all persons.”

2 Corinthians 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.”

The biblical record consistently ascribes different roles carried out by the three Persons of the Trinity. The uniform pattern of Scripture is that God the Father plans, directs, and sends; the Son is sent by the Father and is subject to the Father’s authority and obedient to the Father’s will; and both the Father and Son direct and send the Holy Spirit, who carries out the will of both.

The *New Bible Dictionary* provides a fitting conclusion:

“The evidence of the New Testament 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 wholeheartedly 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 Pente-

cost, 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.”

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 Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. In fact, our salvation is rooted in the mysterious nature of the Godhead who coexists as 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:

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

May the Lord bless you in your study of His precious Word and in your walk with God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. If you have never invited Jesus Christ to come into your life, we are going to give you an opportunity to receive Him as we close in prayer.

Prayer:

Closing Song: *When I Look Into Your Holiness*

Illustration of the Trinity

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