

WHY I BELIEVE

The Trinity

I. INTRODUCTION

- A. The word “trinity” does not occur in the Bible but is a theological term to explain the Biblical teaching of a triune God. The Trinity may be defined as:

There is only one God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three eternal and co-equal persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence. (C.C. Ryrie, Bible Doctrine I)

- B. Jews and Mohammedans and Unitarians accuse Christians of being polytheists (belief in many gods). No so, Christians are monotheists (one God) but see one God and three personalities within one Godhead. The concept of a triune God is found only in the Christian religion, which makes Christianity unique among the religions of the world.
- C. The Trinity has been under constant fire from the inception of the Christian religion. The liberal Harry Emerson Fosdick said, “The doctrine of the Trinity is a contradiction in arithmetic.” However, the doctrine of the Trinity is essential to the Christian Faith and without it there is no real Christianity.
- D. The Trinity is a great and sacred mystery, which could not be discerned or conceived by man, but is a divine revelation from God. Here is a deep truth, the Father God, the Son God, the Holy Spirit God; yet not three Gods, but one God. The three persons in the blessed Trinity are distinguished, but not divided. This is a divine riddle, where one makes three and three makes one. Our finite minds are totally incapable of understanding the Trinity completely. The mystery of the Trinity must be accepted on faith because the Bible teaches it. The plumb line of reason is too short to fathom this mystery, for the Trinity of persons in the Unity of essence is wholly supernatural. This sacred doctrine is not against reason but above it. NOTE: This mystery of the Trinity is the best reason to believe it because no human could have dreamed it up. It is not a human invention but a revelation of God.
- E. Christians believe the Trinity because the Word of God reveals it, not because we understand it all. There are some things that are still mysteries to the Bible-believing Christian (I Cor. 13:12). Yet, the Trinity is basic to our Christian Faith.

As one person said, “He who would try to understand the Trinity fully will lose his mind. But he who would deny the Trinity will lose his soul.”

II. GOD IS A UNITY (God is One)

- A. O.T.: “Here, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” (Deut. 6:4-5). This verse teaches us that God is one in unity (cf. Ex. 20:3; Deut. 5:7; Isa. 45:5-6, 14; 46:9).
- B. N.T.: “As concerning therefore the eating of those things that are offered in sacrifice unto idols, we know that an idol is nothing in the world, and that there is none other God but one. For though there be that are called gods, whether in heaven or in earth, (as there be gods many, and lords many,) but to us there is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we in him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we by him” (I Cor. 8:4-6). That God is one is a clear teaching of the New Testament (cf. Eph. 4:3-6).

III. GOD IS A TRINITY (Subsisting in three personalities)

A. Title of God

1. The Father is called God (Deut. 6:3-5; John 6:27).
2. The Son is called God (John 1:1; Heb. 1:8).
3. The Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3-9; II Cor. 3:17).

B. The Attributes of God

1. Eternal: Father (Psa. 90:2), Son (Mic. 5:2), Holy Spirit (Heb. 9:14).
2. All-powerful: Father (I Pet. 1:5), Son (II Cor. 12:9), Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:19).
3. All-knowing: Father (Jer. 17:10), Son (John 2:23-25), Holy Spirit (I Cor. 2:11).
4. Everywhere Present: Father (Jer. 23:24), Son (Matt. 18:20), Holy Spirit (Psa. 139:7).
5. Holy: Father (Rev. 15:4), Son (Acts 3:14), Holy Spirit (Isa. 6:3).

C. Words of God

1. Creation: Father (Psa. 102:25), Son (John 1:1-4), Holy Spirit (Job 26:13; Gen. 1:2).
2. Creation of Man: Father (Gen. 2:7), Son (Col. 1:16), Holy Spirit (Job 33:4).

D. Old Testament

1. Elohim: This name for God has a plural ending. This may be a plural of majesty in Hebrew but the plural in this word may contain the seed thoughts of a Trinity in the Godhead (Gen. 1:1).
2. Plurality of Persons: “And God said, Let us make man in our image.” (Gen. 1:26). It is not uncommon to find this plurality referring to God (cf. Gen. 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8).
3. Isa. 63:8-10: Distinguishes between the Son and the Holy Spirit.
4. Isa. 48:16; 44:6: Distinguishes between all three members of the Trinity.
5. Isa. 7:14: The Messiah to come is referred to as “God with us.”
6. Psa. 110:1: Distinction is made between Jehovah and Lord (Father and Son).
7. Jer. 23:5-6: Jehovah promises to send the Messiah and the Messiah’s name will be “Jehovah our righteousness.” This means that the Messiah whom Jehovah God sends will Himself be Jehovah God.
8. Isa. 9:6-7: The Messiah is actually called “Mighty God” (cf. Isa. 10:20-21).
9. Angel of Jehovah: The Angel of Jehovah was distinct from Jehovah, yet identical with Jehovah (Gen. 16:10, 13; Exo. 3:2, 4). The Angel of Jehovah was the pre-incarnate Christ.

E. New Testament

1. Matt. 28:19: The disciples were to baptize in the name (singular) of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. God has one name but three persons.
2. II. Cor. 13:14: In the apostolic benediction we read, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.” This is a reference to the Trinity.

3. Matt. 3:16-17: At Christ's baptism all three members of the Trinity were at work.
4. John 17:11, 21-23: Christ claims to be one with the Father, so there must be a plurality in the Godhead.

IV. THE TRINITY STATED THEOLOGICALLY

- A. Trinitarian Relationships: In the blessed Trinity, the Son is begotten of the Father, the Holy Spirit proceeds from both; yet though they are three distinct persons, they are but one God. Paul Little says,

The Father, as the fount of Deity, is first. He is said to originate. The Son, eternally begotten of the Father, is second. He is said to reveal. The Spirit, eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son, is third. He is said to execute . . . Thus we can say that creation is from the Father, through the Son, by the Holy Spirit. (Know What You Believe)

B. Theological Thoughts

1. One person of the Trinity is not more God than another.
2. The three persons are so united that one person is in another, and with another (John 17:21).
3. The first person is God the Father; He is first in order, not dignity. There is priority but not superiority. There is order but no degrees in the Godhead.
4. The second person is God the Son, who is begotten of the Father before all time. Jesus Christ is God's son by eternal generation (Prov. 8:23-25; Psa. 2:7).
5. The third person of the Trinity is God the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 15:23; Psa. 104:30; Gal. 4:6; Rom. 8:9; John 16:7).
6. The Son and the Spirit are said to be subordinate to the Father, but this does not mean inferiority but subordination. Subordination is a matter of relationship.

V. THE TRINITY IN HISTORY

A. Heresies

1. Sabellianism: Sabellius taught modalism which states that there is only one person of the Godhead who appears at different times in three different modes, sometimes as the Holy Spirit, sometimes as the Son, and sometimes as the Father. God assumed different modes of manifestation to achieve His purpose. Sabellius accepted the deity of Christ but denied any distinction in the Godhead. This is the position of many modern day neo-orthodox theologians. OBJECTION: When Christ was praying His high priestly prayer in John 17, He was not only praying to God the Father, but He was also speaking objectively of the Father and the Holy Spirit.

2. Arianism: Arius (3rd century) denied the deity of Christ because he said Christ was created and not eternal. He denied the eternal sonship of Christ. He admitted that Christ existed before the foundation of the world but denied He was co-eternal with the Father. Christ was the first created being and from Him all other things came into being. Arianism also teaches that the Son brought the Holy Spirit into existence; thus they deny the deity of the Holy Spirit. This is essentially the same position as modern day Jehovah Witnesses and Mormons. OBJECTION: This view denies the clear teaching of the Bible on the deity of Christ.

B. Orthodox Creedal Statements

1. Thirty-nine Articles (Anglican): “There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body, parts, or passions; of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the Maker, and Preserver of all things both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there be three Persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

2. Westminster Confession of Faith (Presbyterian): “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.”

3. Philadelphia Confession of Faith (Baptist): “We believe the Scriptures teach that there is one, and only one, living and true God, and infinite, intelligent Spirit, whose name is Jehovah, the Maker and Supreme Ruler of heaven and earth; inexpressibly glorious in holiness, and worthy of all possible honor, confidence, and love; that in the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost, equal in every divine perfection, and executing distinct but harmonious offices in the great work of redemption.”

VI. ILLUSTRATING THE TRINITY

- A. There is no illustration that completely demonstrates the Trinity. Illustrations can be helpful, especially in teaching children, but they can be very dangerous if carried to their logical conclusions. For instance, some have compared the Trinity to a solid, liquid and gas (ice, water, steam). All are the same substance but take different forms. Actually this illustration is more modalistic than it is Trinitarian.
- B. The Sun: In the body of the sun, there are the substance of the sun, the beams, and the heat; the beams are begotten of the sun, the heat proceeds both from the sun and the beams; but these three, though different, are not divided; they all three make but one sun.
- C. Arithmetic: 1 plus 1 plus 1 equals 3; but 1 times 1 times 1 equals 1, which explains the Trinity.
- D. Egg: An egg is shell, white and yolk but it is still one.
- E. Light: Light is made up of three rays: Actinic (Father): neither seen or felt. Luminiferous (Son): seen but not felt. Calorific (Holy Spirit): Felt but not seen.
- F. Person: a person is body, soul and spirit but all one person.
- G. Time: Time is past, present and future but one in essence.
- H. Sugar: Sugar is made up of calcium, carbon and oxygen but one in substance.

VII. IMPORTANCE OF THE TRINITY

- A. All three members of the Trinity are to be equally adored and worshiped, for the Father is not more God than the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- B. All three members of the Trinity are to be equally obeyed.
- C. All three members of the Trinity are essential to our salvation. Take away the Trinity and we overthrow the Biblical concept of salvation. The Father plans and elects (Eph. 1:4), the Son redeems and secures (Eph. 1:7), and the Holy Spirit regenerates and applies (Tit. 3:5). These acts can only be done by one who is God. If we deny the Trinity, then we deny the deity of Christ. If Christ is not God, then we have no salvation at all, for only one who is God can deliver us from our sins (cf. I Pet. 1:2; Eph. 2:18).