

God: Divine Attributes and Trinitarianism
Part One

We must never forget that our *knowledge of God is a gift, not a given*. What I mean by this is that we all too often presume that what we know of God is either something we gained by self-exertion, dedication, and study, or it is something we deserve, perhaps something that is our by right or entitlement. We should never treat the knowledge of God as a given. It is something he gives, and he does not give it universally. This is nowhere better seen in our Lord's words in Matthew 11.

At that time Jesus declared, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and revealed them to little children; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will. All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matthew 11:25-27)

Three incredible claims are made here by Jesus.

1. *Jesus claims to have absolute and universal authority* (v. 27a).
2. *Jesus claims to have a special and altogether unique relationship with God the Father* (v. 27b). See John 5:18; 10:30-31. To "know" is more than mental acquaintance; it is intimate relationship and deep spiritual communion.
3. *Jesus claims that he alone can reveal the Father to others* (v. 27c). "Just as the Son praises the Father for revealing and concealing according to his good pleasure (v. 26), so the Father has authorized the Son to reveal or not according to *his will*" (Carson, 277). Evidently, one of the "things" the Father has given to the Son is the authority to decide to whom the Father shall be revealed!

When the Father finally makes sense to us, when we come to know him truly, to the degree that we grasp something of his nature and will and ways, it is because the Son has graciously stooped to reveal him to us. Our knowledge of God does not come naturally. Neither is it ultimately the product of meticulous research or study. It certainly isn't because we deserve it. It's a gift from his Son. He and he alone is the mediator of the knowledge of God to mankind. If one is to know the Son the Father must reveal him. If one is to know the Father the Son must reveal him. *It takes God to know God!*

God as Triune

The concept of the *one* God as a *trinity* of co-equal, yet distinct, persons is the most intellectually taxing and baffling doctrine in Scripture. It is a mystery that is beyond reason yet not contrary to it. Probably the most famous definition of the doctrine of the Trinity is that of St. Augustine (4th-5th century a.d.):

"There are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and each is God, and at the same time all are one God; and each of them is a full substance, and at the same time all are one substance. The Father is neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit; the Son is neither the Father nor the Holy Spirit; the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son. But the Father is the Father uniquely; the Son is the Son uniquely; and the Holy Spirit is the Holy Spirit uniquely. All three have the same eternity, the same immutability, the same majesty, and the same power" (*On Christian Doctrine*, transl. By D. W. Robertson, Jr. [Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958, p. 10]).

Throughout the course of church history, people have asserted that this concept of God is incoherent and logically contradictory. The doctrine of the Trinity, they argue, is irrational, hardly worthy of intelligent belief. As a result, certain heretical concepts of the Godhead have emerged, the two most notable of which are variants of what was known as **Monarchianism** (also known as *Sabellianism* after one of their leaders, Sabellius [early 3rd century]). In

accordance with their name (*monarchy* = single principle, Gk.), the monarchians stressed divine **unity** to the exclusion of any personal distinctions in the Godhead. Monarchians opted for one of two explanations concerning the Son and Holy Spirit.

Dynamic Monarchianism (first advocated by Theodotus, a learned Byzantine leather merchant) conceives of Jesus prior to his baptism as wholly human (the natural born son of Joseph and Mary). As a reward for his exceptional moral virtue, Jesus was *adopted* as God's Son and empowered by the Spirit through which he subsequently performed his miracles. Jesus was "divine" not because of any equality in essence with the Father but by virtue of a received power (*dunamis*). His "divinity", therefore, is *functional* or *ethical*, not *ontological*. This view, also called **Adoptionism**, did not flourish as well as did its sister view.

The most influential spokesman for this view was Paul of Samosata, Metropolitan of Antioch in Syria, who was finally condemned at the synod of Antioch in 268.

Modalistic Monarchianism believed in both the unity of the Godhead and the deity of Christ. The only viable way to maintain both, so they argued, was to identify the Son (and the Spirit) with the Father. There is only one God who, depending on the circumstances, need, and work in which he is engaged, will variously manifest himself either as Father or Son or Spirit. These names do not stand for eternally distinct persons in the Godhead but were simply different functional expressions for the same God. Jesus is one of several *modes* or *phases* or *roles* whereby the one God reveals himself. Thus "Father, Son and Spirit are distinctions that pertain to God in relation to us. The modalists could affirm the economic trinity (a threefoldness in God in relation to the world) but not the ontological or essential trinity (a threefoldness in the inner being of God)" (Bloesch, *God the Almighty*, 172).

[Cf. the so-called *Oneness Pentecostals* or *Jesus only Pentecostals*; the UPC.] The Monarchians were also called **Patripassians** by their opponents, because they taught that the Father (Latin, *pater*) suffered (Latin, *passus*) as the Son. Consider these statements by Noetus of Smyrna, one of its most outspoken advocates: "When the Father had not yet been born, He was rightly called the Father; but when it had pleased him to submit to birth, having been born, He became the Son, He of Himself and not of another" (quoted by Hippolytus in *Refutations*, IX,10). Again, "Christ is himself the Father, and . . . the Father himself was born, He suffered and died" (Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*, 1).

A. **Uniting the Three**

Does the doctrine of Trinitarianism demand that the Christian perform some sort of special spiritual arithmetic? After all, how can $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$? To answer this, we begin by giving full weight to three lines of evidence in the Bible.

1. **Monotheism** - That there is but one God is an assertion at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition. "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). The apostle Paul is unequivocal in his monotheism: "We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (1 Cor. 8:4b; see also 8:5-6). Again, he insists that "there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim. 2:5). See also Exod. 3:13-15; 15:11; 20:2-3; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 45:5-6; 45:14,18,21-22; 46:9; Zech. 14:9; John 17:3; James 2:19; Rom. 3:30. In summary, *there is but one and one God only*.

2. **The Deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit** - We have a problem. There is only one God. But the Father is God. So also is the Son; likewise, the Holy Spirit. How can three be God and yet God be one? There is no escaping the fact that the biblical authors assert both truths. Clearly the Godhead is not an undifferentiated solitary oneness, but a oneness that subsists in multiplicity.

- The Deity of the Father
- The Deity of the Son
- The Deity of the Holy Spirit

3. **Triunity** - Alongside of the biblical testimony that God is one and that three are God is the multitude of texts which in some fashion *unite* the *three* who are God, hence our term *triunity*.

- a. Matthew 28:19 - Jesus does not say "baptizing them in the names" (plural), as if there were three Gods, but "in the name" (singular). Neither does he say "in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," as if there were one being passing himself off under a threefold name. Rather, the definite article is repeated before each: *the* Father, and *the* Son, and *the* Holy Spirit. Thus, while Jesus distinguishes the three, with equal care he unites them under one name.
- b. 2 Corinthians 13:14
- c. Ephesians 4:4-6
- d. On several occasions the Father, Son, and HS are mentioned together in united activity or purpose relating to the life and ministry of Jesus: at his conception (Lk. 1:35), baptism (Mt. 3:16-17; John 1:33-34), miracles (Mt. 12:28), and ascension (Lk. 24:49).
- e. On several occasions the Three are portrayed as united in the work of revelation and redemption: Acts 2:38-39; Rom. 14:17-18; 15:16,30; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Gal. 4:6; Eph. 2:18-22; 3:14-19; Col. 1:6-8; 2 Thess. 2:13-14; Titus 3:4-6; Heb. 10:29; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 4:2,13-14; Jude 20-21; Rev. 1:4-5.

Therefore, God is one and three are God – Trinity! None of these three lines of evidence can be dismissed nor any one elevated above another. We must embrace them all. But how can they be reconciled?

Although the concept of the Trinity is not explicit in the OT, there are texts in the OT that may allude to the idea of plurality in the Godhead. (1) The standard word for God is *elohim* (plural). (2) Often a plural verb is used with *elohim*. See Gen. 20:13; 35:7; 2 Sam. 7:23. (3) There are also texts where plural pronouns are used of God. See Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8. (4) A few OT texts appear to speak of Yahweh having a "son". See Prov. 30 and Psalm 2. (5) Also relevant are texts that refer to the Messiah. See Isa. 9:6-7; Jer. 32:5-6; Micah 5:2. (6) There are numerous texts which speak about the "Spirit" of God. See Gen. 1:1-2; 6:3; Exod. 31:2-3; Num. 24:2; 27:18; Ps. 51; 139:7. These are but a few of the countless texts mentioning the Spirit. (7) There are a few passages where either the name of God or the concept of deity is applied to more than one person. See Isa. 48:16; 61:1; 63:7-14; Haggai 2:4-7.

B. Unity of Essence, Trinity of Personhood

There are only three possible ways to respond to this evidence.

1. ***The first alternative is to stress the unity of the one God to the exclusion of the full and co-equal deity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.*** This is the doctrine of *Monarchianism* described above. It exists today in two somewhat differing forms:
 - a. *Unitarianism* - a liberal perspective that denies the deity of Jesus and the Spirit (the Unity School espouses this view).
 - b. *Oneness Pentecostalism* (the United Pentecostal Church) - a conservative perspective that argues for the deity of Jesus. Indeed, Jesus "only" is God. Or again, there is only one person in the Godhead and his name is Jesus. The "Father" and "Spirit" are only different names appropriate for different manifestations of the one God, Jesus.
2. ***The second alternative is to stress the distinctiveness of the Father, Son, and Spirit to such a degree that the result is Tritheism, a form of Polytheism.*** The only link among the three is that they share a common purpose or will. Stress is placed on the *personhood* of each, the essence of which is autonomy and independent self-consciousness. Few embrace this view.
3. ***The third and, I believe, only legitimate alternative is to accept without alteration both the oneness of God and the full deity of Father, Son, and Spirit. This is done by saying that God is one in essence and three in person.*** Historic trinitarianism does not assert that God is one and three in the same sense. Rather,

that in respect to which God is one is *essence* (or substance), and that in respect to which God is three is *person*. In affirming triunity in God we are saying that God is one in a sense different from the sense in which he is three. We may thus speak about Father, Son, and Spirit both in terms of what is common to all (essence) and what is proper or peculiar to each (person). The Father is the same *God* as the Son and Spirit but not the same *person*. The Son is the same God as the Father and Spirit but not the same person. The Spirit is the same God as the Father and Son but not the same person. Or again, relative to deity, Father, Son, and Spirit are the same. Relative to person, they are distinct.

Be it noted, however, that divine “threeness” is not merely a matter of our perception or experience of God. Threeness belongs to the eternal essence of God no less than divine oneness.

Thus whereas all three persons are God, none of the three has its own essence (*ousia*) separate from or independent of the other two. Rather, each person shares equally the numerically one divine substance or essence (*ousia*). Numerically speaking there is only one divine essence and each of the three divine persons co-inhere in that one nature. There is, therefore, no ontological subordination within the Godhead. The Father, Son, and Spirit are coequally God in terms of the divine essence. Each person is as fully God as the other. From this, and as a corrective to modalism, John Feinberg concludes that:

“the three persons (*hypostaseis* / *prosopoi*) coinhering in the one divine nature (*ousia*) exist simultaneously with one another as distinct subsistences or persons. This means that the divine essence is not at one time entirely manifest as the Father (but not in or as the Son or Spirit), and then at another moment manifest exclusively as the Son, and yet again at another time solely as the Spirit. Rather, all three persons . . . exist simultaneously” (*No One Like Him* [Crossway, 2001], 488).

Thus, the Trinitarian relationships as conceived in the western church may be summarized as follows:

- ***The Father begets the Son and is He from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds. But, the Father is neither begotten nor does He proceed.***
- ***The Son is begotten and is He from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds. But, He neither begets nor proceeds.***
- ***The Holy Spirit proceeds from both Father and Son. But, He neither begets nor is He one from whom any proceed.***

Another way of expressing the same thought:

- ***The Father is not God from God. The Father is God from whom God exists.***
- ***The Son is God from God. The Son is God from whom God exists.***
- ***The Spirit is God from God. The Spirit is not God from whom God exists.***

C. The Search for Analogies

Several different analogies have been put forth as descriptive of the Trinity. Herman Bavinck mentions a few:

"the three dimensions of space; the three measurements of time; the three kingdoms of nature: matter, spirit, and the union of the two in man; the solid, fluid, and gaseous state; the power of attraction, repulsion, and equilibrium; the three functions of the human soul: reasoning, feeling, and desiring; the three capacities of the soul: mind, will, and moral nature; the three factors that constitute a family: husband, wife, and child; the three classes in society: teachers, soldiery, and peasantry . . . the three tones in music: key-tone, tierce-tone, and quint-tone; the rainbow and its many colors; the sun with its quickening, illumining, and warming energy; the three basic colors: yellow, red, and blue, etc." (*The Doctrine of God*, 323).

As someone once said of the doctrine of the Trinity: "Try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind. But try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul!"

Conclusion

What we are saying, then, is that there is a sense in which God is one (essence) and a sense in which God is three (person). The one God exists eternally in three distinct but not independent persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity is neither logically contradictory nor inconsistent with Scripture.

Addendum The *Filioque* Controversy

The Nicene Creed of 325 closes rather abruptly with the phrase, "And (we believe) in the Holy Spirit." In the enlarged form of the creed, traceable to the Council of Constantinople in 381, there is the additional phrase, "the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father." This form of the creed was adopted at Chalcedon in 451. The controversy arose when some in the west (most likely in Spain) began inserting the phrase "and from the Son" (*a patre **FILIOQUE** procedens*). [They believed this reinforced the Deity of the Son against Arian threats.] It was ratified at the Council of Toledo in 589 and spread rapidly into France, Germany, and was eventually endorsed by Charlemagne.

Orthodox believers regarded this as a violation of the finality and authority of the early ecumenical councils and the wisdom of the Fathers. They also regarded it as theologically untrue and a threat to the doctrine of the Trinity, in at least one of two ways:

(1) On the one hand, it tends to obscure the distinctive characteristics of each person of the Trinity, for whereas both the Son and the Spirit have their source in the Father, the Son alone is begotten of Him and the Spirit alone proceeds from Him. In other words, would not the assertion that the Spirit proceeds from *both* Father and Son tend to fuse the two persons into one and thus resemble modalism? Again, if the Spirit proceeds equally from both, what remains to differentiate the Father from the Son in relation to the Spirit?

(2) On the other hand, it could also point in the opposite direction to ditheism, for it would imply two independent sources (Father and Son) in the Godhead. Only by insisting that the Spirit proceeds alone from the Father (and, at most, *through* the Son) is the proper view of the Trinity maintained.

Part of the rift was pride and politics as much as theological conviction, for the Eastern/Greek church was offended that the Western/Latin church would alter or add to an ecumenical creed without their consent. Whatever the primary cause of the dispute, by the 9th century the *Filioque* was a permanent part of the Western church's creed and has served as a divisive factor between East and West ever since.

Discussion Questions

(1) If a person were to charge you with believing something that is inherently and logically contradictory, namely, the idea that in some sense God is both three and one, how would you respond?

(2) How would you respond to someone who objected to the doctrine of the Trinity based on the fact that the word "Trinity" nowhere appears in the Bible?

(3) Some Christians tend to think of God more as one, while others tend to think of him more as three. In other words, some stress the unity of God's nature while others put emphasis on the distinction among the three persons. Is this dangerous? Where do you land on this?

(4) Are modalists Christians? Are those in the United Pentecostal Church, who affirm the deity of Jesus, Christians? Again, can someone who is a Unitarian be a Christian? Give reasons for your answer.

(5) Are there any helpful analogies to illustrate the truth of the Trinity? If so, what are they?