

The Doctrine of God

The Tri-unity of God (1)

God in Three Persons, Blessed Trinity
- Reginald Heber

God is the wealth of men's souls.
- Augustine

The doctrine of the Trinity brings together two necessary doctrines concerning God which seem to be mutually exclusive. On the one hand God is one. He is a unity. On the other hand the Bible speaks of God as a plurality. So, according to the Bible there is only one God. And yet the Bible teaches that at the same time there are three Persons worthy of the name God. Namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who are all equally and inseparably God. And yet Scripture reveals that these three Persons exist as an inseparable essence of One.



Certainly there is a great mystery to the doctrine of the Trinity. There is nothing else in all creation like the tri-unity of God. This is one of the reasons we must avoid trying to illustrate the Trinity. For instance, we cannot say, "The Trinity is like thus and such..." because in actuality He is not. God's tri-unity is not like an egg, water, a father, wife, and child, or anything else.

It must also be acknowledged that the word "Trinity" is never once used in the Bible. Various cults and other false religionists seize upon that fact to deny that the Bible teaches the doctrine of the Trinity. But this is a case of the "Word / Concept Fallacy." The absence of a word does not negate the presence of the concept. The word "Trinity" was coined by the early church fathers to give a simple expression to what the Scriptures progressively reveal about the Triune nature of God.

I. The Disclosure of the Trinity in the Old Testament

There is no single passage in the Old Testament which fully reveals the triune nature of God. However, the Old Testament repeatedly intimates plurality in God's personality. Of major concern in the Old Testament is to establish that there is only one God. When God inspired Moses to compose the first five books of the Bible the world had been inundated with polytheistic religions. As John Calvin observed, "the heart of man is a veritable factory of idols." By the time of Moses the world was given over to the worship of many gods.

One of the reasons behind pagan polytheism is that the people felt a need for many gods. Their gods were quite limited. There were gods who governed the sky, the storms, and the stars. There were gods who governed the various bodies of water throughout the world. Various gods had charge over mountains and plains. On and on it went. There were angry gods and gods who provided physical pleasures. There were gods of storms and plagues. There were gods of sex, romance and procreation.

It was against this background that Moses, under the Holy Spirit's inspiration, wrote the Pentateuch (the first five books of the Bible) wherein God introduces Himself, his covenant, and his law to His people. The Bible opens with a magnificent statement so out of keeping with the religions of the world: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." So the Bible opens with a profoundly anti-polytheistic statement. There is only one God and he alone is responsible for the existence of cosmos and all that is in it.

A. God's Plural Name

- The standard Old Testament name for God is the Hebrew *Elohim*. *Elohim* is a plural noun. The singular form of the word is *El*, but this is rarely used. And this is where it gets really interesting. Though *Elohim* is a plural noun, it takes a singular form of the verb and also of related adjectives. Imagine a sentence that read, "A mans is in the room." In the case of *Elohim* what we see in the Old Testament is "Gods is," or "Gods does."
- While this grammatical anomaly is not a clear proclamation of the Three in One it is nevertheless a curiosity which must be considered. The plural name for God is to be taken together with the other "hints" early on in Scripture which will eventually come to full flower in the continuing revelations of God's triune nature.

B. God's Interpersonal Communion

- Genesis 1:26 – "Let us make man in our own image."
- Here again we see that there is plurality within God. This time it goes beyond the grammatical feature of His name to a revelation of God's interpersonal communion. And it should not be lost on us that this particular revelation occurs in the opening passage of Scripture. Hints at the "Threeness" of God are not put off until the New Testament. It is something announced, though veiled, in the earliest portions of Scripture.
- The "us" here cannot be a reference to angelic beings since men and women are not made in the image of God and angels. And so like the plural *Elohim*, Genesis 1:26 is a grammatical anomaly which hints to a great mystery.
- Genesis 11:6, 7 – "Let us make man in our own image."
- Isaiah 6:8 – "...who will go for us?"

C. The Deity of God's Messenger

- Several times in the Pentateuch are examples of *theophany*. A theophany is a surprising or unexpected appearance of God. Specifically there are references to the "Angel of the Lord." There are records of the Angel of the Lord appearing to Abraham and Jacob. Once again the grammatical form is precise. There is a recognized Hebrew construction that could have said *an* angel of the Lord. But the text of Scripture uses a different form. It speaks of "*the* Angel of the Lord."
- In both Hebrew and Greek the word angel refers to a messenger. Sometimes the messenger is human. At other times the messenger, or angel, is a spiritual being that we more typically associate with angels. But the remarkable thing about this one known as "the angel of the Lord" is that he is identified as being sent from God and at the same time identical with God. He can speak of Himself as God; and yet He can speak of someone else who is also God. He is the Lord and yet He speaks of the Lord in the third person.
- Genesis 16:10
- Genesis 22:15-16
- Genesis 31:11, 13
- Judges 13:20-23
- Again, this is not a fully developed revelation of the Trinity. For many good reasons God had judged His people as not ready to receive such clear declaration of God's triune nature.

Nevertheless God was careful to speak of himself in ways that hinted at a mysterious plurality without sacrificing his oneness.

D. The Deity of God's Messiah

- The Old Testament repeatedly presents the coming Messiah as a Divine figure. This divine man is prophesied very early in the Scriptures. God promised that "the seed of the woman," would crush the serpent (3:15). Later it is revealed that the coming Messiah would be none other than God himself. For example Psalm 96 and 98 declare: "Be glad before the Lord because He comes" (96:13; 98:9). The prophet Malachi describes the forerunner of the Messiah as the forerunner of *the Lord* (3:1). In Psalm 45 the Messiah is addressed as "God." Isaiah describes the Messiah as "the Mighty God" (9:6).

E. The Distinct Personality of the Holy Spirit

- The Holy Spirit is written of in terms of personhood. He is not an *it* or an impersonal force. The Holy Spirit broods over creation. The Holy Spirit is the agent of the Son's incarnation. He anoints, descends, comforts, convicts of sin and truth, gives assurance of salvation, glorifies the Son, fills God's people, and speaks through the prophets and apostles. It is also possible to grieve, sin against, and blaspheme the Holy Spirit.
- Genesis 1:3
- 2 Samuel 23:2
- Isaiah 61:1; 63:10
- Zechariah 7:12
- Haggai 2:4-5
- Matthew 1:18-20; 3:11; 28:19
- Mark 3:29; 12:36; 13:11
- Luke 1:15, 32, 35, 41, 67; 2:25-26; 3:22; 4:1; 11:13; 12:10-12
- John 14:26; 20:22
- Acts 1:1-16; 2:1ff; 7:51; 9:31; 13:1ff; 21:11; 28:25
- Romans 5:5; 9:1
- 2 Corinthians 13:14
- Ephesians 4:30
- Hebrews 2:4
- 2 Peter 1:21

II. The Disclosure of the Trinity in the New Testament.

The revelation of the Trinity becomes more explicit in the New Testament. If the Trinity is something of a riddle in the Old Testament, it is in the New Testament where the answer comes. With the incarnation of Christ, His ministry, and the sending of the Holy Spirit God makes clear the mystery of his nature as the Almighty Three-in-One.

A. The Son sent from the Father

The Triune nature of God is displayed through the events connected to the incarnation, baptism, teaching and prayers of God the Son.

1. The annunciation of God the Son

- Luke 1:26-38 – "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the Holy One to be born will be called the Son of God" (vs. 35). At the

annunciation the Most High, the Holy Spirit, and the Son of God are all identified in the same announcement.

2. The incarnation of God the Son

- Foundational to our understanding of the Trinity is that the Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Spirit or any other variation of that equation. There are clear distinctions between the Persons of the Godhead. And so we are told that the Son, not the Father, was conceived by the Holy Spirit. A distinction between all three Persons is assumed in the incarnation. God the Son became flesh, not the Father or the Spirit. Jesus, the eternal Word, was “with God,” and “was God,” simultaneously. That captures a state of being that is not found anywhere else in all creation. The Father is the *One* God as is the Son and Spirit. And yet the Son, as well as the Spirit, is also “with God.”
- John 1:1-3; 14
- Echoing the opening words of Genesis, John’s Gospel reminds us that God who made all things, exists in a plurality of Persons. In the creation account there is God, the Word of God and the Spirit of God. In John we see once again that God is accompanied by his eternal Word. That John does not mention the Spirit in his opening section should not be construed as neglect. Later in John’s Gospel Jesus gives the fullest description of the Holy Spirit’s ministry in all the Scriptures.

3. The baptism of God the Son

- At Jesus’ baptism the Father spoke audibly and the Spirit descended visibly. All three Persons of the eternal Godhead are present and distinct. And yet at no time are we to understand that they constitute different beings.
- Luke 3:21-22

4. The teaching of God the Son

There are at least 5 key teachings from Jesus wherein he discloses the Triune nature of God.

- Matthew 28:19
- Luke 12:10
- John 3:17
- John 5:23, 37
- John 14:8-10

5. The prayer of God the Son

- John 17:1-5 – “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed (vs. 5).
- During his ministry the incarnate Son repeatedly referenced his communion with the Father. In his “High Priestly Prayer,” Jesus points out that the communion shared by the Father and the Son is an eternal communion. There was no time at which it began for God has existed eternally as the Three In One.

6. A benediction from Paul

- 2 Corinthians 13:14 – “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.”
- Remember that Paul had been raised a strict Jew and therefore was steeped in the monotheism unique to God’s people. He once persecuted Christians for their belief in the deity of Jesus Christ. He most certainly would have considered Christians to have been guilty of worshipping more than one God. But now we see a man transformed. He is entirely at home with the revolutionary Trinitarian theology of Christianity.