

Studies in the Scriptures

On The Only Holy Trinity

The reason the doctrine of the Trinity is so important to Christian living is simple, because God has revealed this about Himself. However, its importance does not make it any easier to understand. Within the understanding of the Tri-personal existence of God many run into the difficulty of the finite human mind attempting to grasp the infinite truths of God. Although, Scripture does not contain within it the word Trinity; this term is not unbiblical. Rather, it is the expression of what is understood in the fact that the Bible teaches that there is one God and the Bible also teaches that there are three persons who are God. The Bible clearly does not teach Tri-theism, a form or polytheism, nor does it teach Unitarianism, also known as modalism, a belief rejected by the Church that claimed God was like an actor simply putting on different masks and performing different roles; therefore, the Trinity is the way in which Christianity accounts for what is taught with equal clarity in the Scriptures. The Trinity, "...is a doctrine which we would not have known, nor be able to maintain with any degree of confidence, on the basis of experience alone, and which is brought to our knowledge only by God's special self-revelation. Therefore it is of the utmost importance that we gather the Scriptural proofs for it" (Berkhof, 85). The study of the Trinity directs the worship, supplications, and roles in the Christian life, because this is how we understand who God is and how He created the human aspects of creation as a way to mirror His infinite glory as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Doctrine

God is One in Essence

The study of the Trinity while being filled with mystery does not make this understanding impossible when texts of Scripture are systematized for our understanding. The first thing to examine is that the Bible teaches that God is one. John Owen lends us a hand with a quick definition of the Oneness of the Tri-Personal God. The Trinity is "namely, *how God is one*, in respect of his *nature, substance, essence*, Godhead, or divine being; how, being Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, he subsists in these three distinct persons or *hypostases*; and what are their mutual respects to each other, by which, as their peculiar properties, giving them the manner of their subsistence, they are distinguished one from another" (Owen, 378). When we speak of the oneness of God we are talking about those characteristics which make God, God. Those necessary attributes which all the Persons of the Godhead hold equally without any distinction. These attributes or qualities are known as the Essence of God, which is what makes up His very Being or His Identity. These characteristics will not be examined at length here, but they are what is Essential to God for example His Holiness, Sovereignty, Justice, Compassion...ect. This is the One God as the Bible clearly teaches, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (Deut. 6:4). There is only one God, "Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: 'I am the first and I am the last, And there is no God besides Me'" (Isaiah 44:6). The Oneness of God is saturated throughout the Old Testament and this is hardly questioned (Gen. 1:1, Deut. 4:35, 1 Kings 8:60...ect.). However, the New Testament, which speaks most clearly of the Three Persons of the Godhead, clearly speaks of God as one. This can be seen in James 2:19, "You believe that God is one, You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder." (John 17:3, 1 Cor. 8:6, 1 Tim. 2:5...ect). Ultimately there is only One God in Existence, there are not a plurality of God's but only one, for, "Those things which belong absolutely to God as an essence are spoken of the Trinity in the singular, not in the plural" (Augustine 92).

God is Three in Person

Along with the Bible clearly teaching that there is one Being and one alone who is God, the Bible clearly teaches that there are three persons who are God. Now this is where the Doctrine of the Trinity begins to become harder to understand, simply because when we think of one being, according to human understanding and experience, we know that there is one separate person for each being. This, however, is not the case with God and has become known as complex monotheism. Therefore, "The unity of the Godhead is affirmed in terms of essence or being, while the diversity of the Godhead is expressed in terms of person" (Sproul, 35). The New Testament is instrumental in this understanding. While there were glimpses of the distinct persons of the Godhead in the Old Testament, this was not made clear or revealed until the New Testament. For, "As we stand before the Father in the Son, we enjoy a knowledge of God's intra-Trinitarian fellowship that was not available to the Old Testament saints" (Frame, 620). The Father, Son, and Spirit are God, distinct in person yet numerically one.

The Son is God, "And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3). Christ throughout the New Testament claims and is stated to hold the identical Essential Characteristics as God

1 Cor. 8:6, “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.” and, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1) also most clearly, Hebrews 1:3, “And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” Within these texts we see Christ is said to be one with God, containing the exact same characteristics as Creator and the same in terms of His existence and representation of God (John 17:3, 8:58; Heb. 1:2, 6, 8; 2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15, 17...ect).

The Spirit is God. In Acts 5:3-4 we see clearly the Holy Spirit is likewise regarded as God, “But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? “While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.” (1 Cor. 2:10-11; 3:16; Heb. 9:14). God’s Special Revelation makes clear to us that there are three distinct persons whom we are to worship, all of whom are God equally and simultaneously. The wholeness of the Divine essence is not divided amongst three persons, but is contained by all three persons. Augustine helps labor the point, “For, in truth, as the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father, and the Holy Spirit who is called the gift of God is not the Father or the Son, certainly they are three...Yet when the question is asked what three? Human language labors under great poverty of speech. The answer, however, is given, three ‘persons’” (Augustine, 92). These three persons are all called God throughout the New Testament one example is in Matthew 28:19, “Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,” (2 Cor. 13:14, Eph. 1:1-14, Matt. 3:16-18, 1 Peter 1:2, ect...).

Three Persons Explained

The Three Persons of the Godhead do not exist separate from one another, but subsist equally in existence as God. The distinctions made within the Trinity are clarified by Personal attributes based and revealed through various roles. These Personal attributes are not essential to God’s existence, and are not held by all three persons of the Trinity, they may be held by one or more members but not all three members hold these Personal attributes. This gives us a glimpse into the inter relations of the Godhead and reveals the true glory of God as He is in and of Himself. Within the relationship of the Godhead there are roles which are based on the Personal attributes of each person; this is what makes them distinct. This distinction is not subordination, but distinction in Personal attributes, which is expressed in a distinction of roles and action. These distinctions are not just true in regards to the Economic Trinity (Relationship between God and Creation) but in a different way they are true distinctions in the Emanate Trinity (Relationship between members of the Godhead).

Roles in the Godhead Briefly Examined

The Father is Supreme among the persons of the Godhead, He is the one whose role is to ordain, decree, predestine, and purpose all that comes to pass. It is the Father who begets the Son (PS. 2:9-7), the Father’s will which is to be done (Matt. 6:9-10), authority over the Son as the Son is subjected under Him (1 Cor. 15:28), and it is the Father who exalts the Son to the praise of His glory (Phil. 2:9-11). The Son in relation to the Father can be seen in three relations with the Father as the Eternal Son (before His incarnation), Incarnate Son (after He is conjoined to the human nature), and Exalted Son (after His resurrection). However, in these three instances Christ still displays His Personal attribute of obedience. It is the Personal role of the Son to accomplish, redeem, and rule as the Father has planned. The Son was in submission to the Father in eternity past as seen in His being sent in John 6:38, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (John 1:3; 3:16-17; 8:42; 1-:36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:1-3; Eph. 1:9-11; 1 Cor. 15:25-28). The Father has the authority in His role to send the Son and the Son obeys Him. The origin of the plan of God in eternity past comes from the initiative of the Father through the means of the obedient submission of the Son. It is the purpose of the Father that all things would be summed up in Christ (Rev. 5:1-5, 8-9). And then the Personal role of the Spirit is to Empower, Apply, and Preserve the work of the hands of the Son. In the act of salvation we are promised the sealing work of the Spirit as purchased by the Son and ordained by the Father, Ephesians 1:13 summarizes it for us, “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation--having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Luke 1:35; 2:40, 52; 4:1-2, 14, 16-21; Matt. 12:28; Acts 1:1-2; 10:38).

Implications of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Personally Directed Worship

This truth is vital to Christian living because it directs the worship, supplication, and roles of the believer in their daily lives and within the community of the church. The way in which the doctrine of the Trinity directs worship is primarily based on heightening the believer’s knowledge of the one whom he worships. When God reveals Himself through the Scriptures He is making a declaration about Himself, most importantly God has revealed Himself as a Redeemer. Understanding the way in

which a soul is saved drastically changes how a convert looks at the world especially in the area of worship. Knowing that the Father before the foundations of the World predestined certain individuals to be saved through the work of His Son, that the Son took on human nature and suffered the brutal death on the cross for those individuals, and that the Holy Spirit caused us to reap the benefits of that atonement through our conversion makes His wondrous acts all the more praise worthy. The Triune God is praised, not just in general or in an impersonal way, but specifically and personally. It becomes a personal worship because the particular members of the Godhead are praised for their distinct roles in our redemption. The Father is personally worshiped for such a gloriously plan that mercifully included the particular sinners who benefited from His plan. The Son is personally worshiped for His particular role in becoming a curse, serving a damnable people, and obeying the Father. The Spirit is likewise worshiped for His effectual work in bringing the birthright purchased on our behalf by Christ to bear on our hearts and minds. This understanding of the Trinity makes worship personal, and even more so in that it was done with specific people in mind. It is no longer a nebulous people purchased, but a dear and special people in the eyes of God whom He knows by name. Worship becomes personal when proper understandings of the persons of the Trinity are understood.

Proper Personal Supplication

The Second way in which a proper understanding of the Trinity impacts a believer's life is in prayer of supplication. When a person goes to pray, they are no longer praying to a vague understanding of God, but once again the personal aspect of God is brought to bear on the heart and minds of those who go before God with supplications. Prayer properly done is oriented to the Father as Christ demonstrated in Matthew 6:9-13, "Pray, then, in this way: 'Our Father who is in heaven, Hallowed be Your name. 'Your kingdom come Your will be done. On earth as it is in heaven. 'Give us this day our daily bread. 'And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors. 'And do not lead us into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.'" Here we clearly see that supplication is oriented to the Father. He is the chief designer, ordainer, and has sovereign right to do His will amongst the inhabitants of the earth. When we pray to the Father we are acknowledging His role as supreme authority amongst the members of the Godhead. When we pray likewise we must realize and acknowledge the other persons of the Godhead and their roles when making supplication. The one through which we make plights to the Father is always and only through the Son. For as spoken in the word of God in 1 Timothy 2:5, "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus", and Hebrews 7:25, "Therefore He is able also to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them". Christ is the only eternal High Priest who without fail intercedes for those who belong to Him. So prayer is to the Father, through the Son, and by means of the Holy Spirit. When the believer's prayers fall short, or when we as believers struggle for the words with which to make our supplication it is the Holy Spirit, who knows the mind of God, who takes these prayers on our behalf, through the Son, to the Father. Hebrews 8:26-27 makes it clear, "In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words; and He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He intercedes for the saints according to the will of God", and therein lies the Trinitarian involvement in the prayers of the saints, which personalizes prayer and brings a greater sense of satisfaction to our souls as we know the functioning work of the members of the Godhead in prayer.

Mirrored in Relationships

Thirdly, the trinity drastically effects how people live in the relationship of a family, a community, and a church. Dr. Bruce Ware lends us a hand in how this is crucially practical to the life of the believer, "...the relationships in the Trinity call for and call forth a created community of persons...small groups are one key way in which we can establish, in our churches, communities of interconnection and independence. Surely this is also one of the main reasons that the Spirit assigns gifts to each believer in the body of Christ, so that we will both give to one another and depend on one another in our growing in Christ" (Ware, 135). Just as how there are different members for different roles and different gifts given to different members of the body which causes it to function, "For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (Romans 12:4-5) and most importantly we are in need of one another, like the members of the Trinity none are subordinate, but all function together to do what none of us could do alone. 1 Cor. 12:21 so clearly states, "And the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you"; or again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." Man does not always realize this, but that is because we do not naturally understand the Triune nature which we were meant to imitate. Man would have never understood that it was not good for Him to be alone if God had not revealed it to Him (Gen. 2:18). The reason why it is not good for man to be alone today, just as God made him in the Garden, is because man in and of himself cannot reflect the image of God. No one man can reflect the roles of the Godhead, the functions of the community of believers and marriages are necessary for reflection to take place. Marriage is another institution of God by which He displays the great glory of His tri-personal self. The roles of male and female in the marriage bond directly reflect and give a tangible way in which believers can have a deeper appreciation for

and understanding of the Trinity. Through marriage men and women are able to reflect the image of Christ in a way in which they never could have outside this great unison in God. Ephesians 5:22-26 reads, "Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself being the Saviour of the body. But as the church is subject to Christ, so also the wives ought to be to their husbands in everything. Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up (died) for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word." The marriage relationship gives a way in which each member of the relationship can reflect the Personal attribute of Christ as they submit to one another, just as Christ humbles and submits in service to the Church and His Father. The wife submits and honors her husband and the husband sacrificially nourishes her with the Word and dies for her daily these images of submission greatly enhance our eyes to the sacrificial obedience of Christ to the point of death on the cross.

Concluding Remarks

Therefore, a proper understanding of the Trinity, that God is one on essence and three in person, makes a major impact on how a Christian perceives the world and their role in it. It changes drastically how a believer not only looks at the world, but how he acts amongst the community of believers as well. God has not left His people in the dark and without the ability and the knowledge to worship Him as who He is, but He has given us His word and revealed Himself as the One Triune God who deserves proper adoration, honor, and praise. For He is God alone, and there is none like Him full of marvel and wonder, let all who worship God worship Him rightly recognizing what He has laid before us; all the to praise of the glory of His name!

Soli Deo Gloria,

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I pray you are encouraged by what you just read. If there is any way my wife and myself can be more of an encouragement for you, please feel free to contact us. If you have any questions regarding the letter or those to come, feel free to email me at the email address shown above. Gabrielle and I would like to pray for you, you can email us your prayer requests or write them in the space provided. Thank you for your support, through prayer and fellowship. This letter is now a part of your personal ministry, feel free to copy and spread it as much as you would need to, but please do not alter its content. If you know of someone who would like to be added to this free tri annual letter send their address to my email. Thank you again, and may God be exalted as head above all things in your life!