

The unfolding of your words gives light.

God in Three Persons

The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity

Introduction

The inspired history in the biblical story of Judges 12 records an obscure battle event that effectively illustrates an important controversy in our day. Jephthah was a military man gifted by God's Spirit to lead Israel's armies against her Ammonite oppressors in Gilead, east of the Jordan. Israel's men of Ephraim (located just west of the Jordan) did not initially respond to Jephthah's invitation to participate in the battle. Later, seeing Jephthah's victory, the jealous Ephraimites attacked Gilead. They fled when they saw they could not stand up to Jephthah's army. Controlling the point where the Ephraimites had to cross the river, Jephthah's sentries gave every river-crosser a two-part exam: The first was "Are you an Ephraimite?" If the crosser said no the sentry presented a pronunciation test: "Say 'Shibboleth'." The regional inability to pronounce the name (they said "Sibboleth") identified the man as an Ephraimite aggressor and he was executed.

I decided to use this illustration here after a reference to it in an essay by R.C. Sproul about the Trinity. There is much discussion in our day about this important doctrine. One very popular author and pastor of a large church in Texas has failed to make it clear whether his position about the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is orthodox ("There is one God, Creator of all things, infinitely perfect, and eternally existing in three manifestations: Father, Son and Holy Spirit^a."). A successful trio of music performers and pastors (whose songs we sing in church) represent a denomination and individual congregations that vigorously deny the Trinity^b. Even those who do hold fast to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity are divided over what kind of association they ought to have with those who do not.

All that leaves many people outside Christian academic circles wondering if such theological hairsplitting is necessary as long as the people in question love Jesus. Without wishing to create a division between "clergy" and "laity," I will say that I believe this sentiment is the reason you need Christian leaders wrestling with issues like this. Great music and clever communication should never be our criteria for measuring whether or not someone is in the faith. People who have abandoned foundation biblical truths and lifestyles through history have also claimed to love Jesus. Ours is to identify good doctrine and then clarify where there is biblical "wiggle room" and where you must be willing to go to the mat.

It is our task to contend for the faith and identify the biblical boundaries of Christian belief and behavior. Not every person who claims the name "Christian" should be allowed to cross the Jordan. I am not arguing for the death penalty for heretics, but I am arguing that the confession of the Trinity is a worthy Shibboleth. There is a line that people cross that removes them from what theologians since the apostles considered the boundaries of Christian fellowship. First John is one place that directs us to this exclusivity.

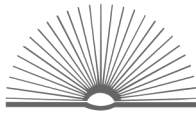
The word "Trinity" comes from a Latin word (*trinitas*) which means *threeness*. Doubters argue that the doctrine is impossible to defend because it is impossible to comprehend. Here are two historical responses to that charge:

It is not easy; but it is true. —A.H. Strong, *Concise Theology*

The following dissertation concerning the Trinity, as the reader ought to be informed, has been written in order to guard against the sophistries of those who disdain to begin with faith, and are deceived by a crude and perverse love of reason. —Aurelius Augustine

^a From the "Belief Statement" of The Potter's House church, Bishop T.D. Jakes, <http://www.thepottershouse.org/Local/About-Us/Belief-Statement.aspx>, accessed 4-17-2012.

^b From an article in the Alpha & Omega Ministries website about Phillips, Craig and Dean, <http://vintage.aomin.org/PCD.html>, accessed 4-17-2012.



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Definition

There is one eternal being of God - indivisible, infinite. This one being of God is shared by three co-equal, co-eternal persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

-James White

Straight up statements from the Bible with which we must deal:

The Bible teaches that there is one God and that He is a unity:

Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. Deuteronomy 6:4-5

For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, 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. 1 Corinthians 8:5-6

In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ would be to the praise of His glory. 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, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of *God's own* possession, to the praise of His glory. Ephesians 1:10-14

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

The Bible uses language that points to the complexity of God's unity:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 1:1

In the year of King Uzziah's death I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, lofty and exalted, with the train of His robe filling the temple. Seraphim stood above Him, each having six wings: with two he covered his face, and with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one called out to another and said, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory"... Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Then I said, "Here am I. Send me!" Isaiah 6:1-3, 8

The Bible teaches that the Father is God:

Pray, then, in this way: "Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your name." Matthew 6:9

The Bible teaches that the Son is God:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. John 1:1

Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am." John 8:58

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is God:

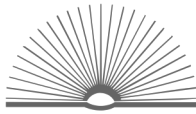
But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back some of the price of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God." Acts 5:3-4

The Bible teaches that the three Persons belong together. While the doctrine of the Trinity is not spelled out per se in the Old Testament, texts such as Isaiah 61:1 name the proper name of God (*YHWH*), the Spirit of God and the Lord (*Adonai*). The word "Trinity" is never used in the New Testament, but three coequal, distinct persons associate together repeatedly in fellowship and ministry:

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the afflicted; He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and freedom to prisoners. Isaiah 61:1

The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. Luke 1:35

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove *and* lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased." Matthew 3:16-17



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Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Matthew 28:19

I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you. John 14:16-17

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. 2 Corinthians 13:14

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14

Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To those who reside as aliens, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, who are chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure. 1 Peter 1:1-2

John to the seven churches that are in Asia: Grace to you and peace, from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth To Him who loves us and released us from our sins by His blood-- Revelation 1:4-5

Helpful illustrations:

The egg has three parts (yolk, white, shell), but any of them are identified as “egg.”

The sun is a ball of gas, light and heat. You call the star itself “the sun,” the warmth it gives “the sun and the light it gives “the sun.”

The Supreme Court is a single unit but is composed of multiple members.

Electricity, light and magnetism interrelate in a similar fashion to the persons of the Trinity. In 1862, Cambridge University scientist James Clerk Maxwell approached a complex scientific problem with the faith of a creationist. Christian apologist Will Little records:

In the mid-19th century, there was a raging debate over the nature of light, magnetism, and electricity. Scientists knew magnetism and electricity had a relationship (they'd observed compass needles moving near electric fields), but it wasn't until Maxwell calculated the speed of electrons to be near the speed of light in 1862 that things started to get interesting. In addition to studying the components from a reductionist viewpoint (i.e. reducing complex systems to elementary parts), Maxwell's theological convictions of the nature of God the Father, God the Holy Spirit, and Jesus (i.e. the Trinity) led him to consider how light, magnetism, and electricity could be a unified field as well. As God manifests himself as three persons with perfect harmony, resonance, and oneness, where each part complements the others with perfect equality and distinct roles, Maxwell suspected that light, magnetism, and electricity might behave similarly. He hypothesized that since “the heavens declare the glory of God” (Psalm 19:1), he would observe aspects of creation such as electromagnetism to reflect God's Triune nature. –Will Little (<http://theresurgence.com/2012/04/03/thank-the-trinity-for-your-radio-tv-and-cell-phone>, accessed 4-17-2012)

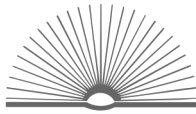
Creation itself included three things: time, space and matter, according to my friend Dr. Jim Bearss. Time is measured in past, present and future. Space is measured in length, width and height. Matter exists in three states: solid, liquid and gas.

The holy place of the tabernacle contained the altar of incense (we pray to the Father), the table of shewbread (Jesus called Himself the bread of life) and the seven-pronged candelabra (Revelation 1:4 speaks of the “sevenfold” Spirit).

Heresies and Church Councils

Sabellianism and Arianism were two groups from the third and fourth centuries who denied the apostolic teachings about the Trinity. Their heretical teachings about the nature of God were condemned by the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

The Sabellians had taken the position that God does not exist in three persons. They believed that God merely shows up as only one of these persons at a time. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit are the same person according to the Sabellians (also know as monarchians or modalists).



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A modern derivative of modalism is the “Jesus Only” movement among Pentecostals. They believe that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are God, but that God *manifests* Himself as one of these persons at a time.

Arianism was also condemned at Nicea. Arius of Alexandria called the Trinitarians Sabellians, but went to opposite direction and denied the deity of Christ. Arianism has reappeared in recent centuries in the widely divergent Jehovah’s Witnesses and modern Unitarians. They believe that there is one God and that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are less than God—even de-personifying the Spirit.

Nicea defined the Trinity in this creed (Presbyterian Church in America):

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God,
begotten of his Father before all worlds,
God of God, Light of Light,
very God of very God,
begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
by whom all things were made;
who for us and for our salvation
came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,
and was made man;
and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate;
he suffered and was buried,
and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father;
and he shall come again, with glory, to judge both the living and the dead;
whose kingdom shall have no end.
And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of Life,
who proceeds from the Father and the Son;
who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
who spoke by the prophets;
and we believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church;
we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins;
and we look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

How can we explain the death of Christ without the biblical doctrine of the Trinity? In order for God to save His people, an incarnation was necessary. The Father sent the Son. The Son bore the Father’s wrath. The Spirit applies the gospel and draws people into relationship with the triune God.

Why the doctrine of the Trinity is a big deal and makes a difference in your life:

1. This means your God is relational. God existed in relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit even before there were people. He comes to you. He is not silent. He reveals Himself. He can be approached. Pleas for mercy and provision are welcome.
2. This means your God is acts for your benefit. He is no passive disinterested deity. The Father, Son and Spirit created everything and sustain creation personally. Creation was designed by God with men in mind. He even allows His enemies to thrive here.
3. This means your God is greater than your imagination. The difficulty of this truth forces us to stand in awe of the God Whose mysteries we have no capacity to unravel. The difficulty of this truth humbles us at knowing the frailty of our intellects.
4. This means your God invites investigation. The difficulty of this truth gives students of the Bible a reason to continue probing the deep things of God. He has invited us to investigate His word.



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