

God's Triune Existence

The Concept of a Trinity

One of the orthodox teachings of Christianity is that there is only one God. This teaching rests on the solid foundation of doctrine revealed to Israel, God's special people, and recorded in the pages of the Bible's Old Testament. Yet, as we have suggested, we who are Christian, though believing in only one God, are not monotheistic. Monotheism holds that there is only one person who is God. Because of the revelation recorded in the Bible's New Testament, Christians believe that three persons are God. Even so, Christians are not tri-theistic. A person who is tri-theistic would believe in gods plural, namely that there are three personal Gods.¹ Christians believe the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God while at the same time believing there is only one God. We are Trinitarian. We believe that God is triune. The Christian's God is "three-in-one."²

This doctrine that God is triune is uniquely Christian. No other of the world's religions believes in such a God. Those religions are atheistic (no god), monotheistic (one god), or some variety of polytheistic (more than one god). In fact, non-Christians often look at this Christian doctrine and ridicule it as nonsense. However, regardless of what others might think, this Christian doctrine is consistent with an understanding of God's revelation contained in the Bible, both Old and New Testaments, and is therefore completely rational.

In his book *Studies in Theology* Loraine Boettner says that the doctrine of the trinity is "perhaps the most mysterious and difficult doctrine" in the Scripture.³ Even though the doctrine of the Hypostatic Union may really be "the most," all would likely agree that the doctrine of the trinity really is "mysterious and difficult."

So Boettner was correct in stating that the triunity of God is a difficult and mysterious doctrine. And I would venture that all Christians, at least to some degree, have problems relating to God as triune. There are likely several reasons to explain this.

¹ That a person is tri-theistic would be true even if he also held that there is perfect and complete oneness or agreement or harmony among the three persons. A tri-theist sees three divine beings that are ontologically distinct.

² This phrase, "three-in-one," is commonly used to refer to the triunity of the Godhead. As we will see, I think there is another three-word phrase that helps us better understand the distinction between the threeness and the oneness of God's being.

³ Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, p. 79.

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First, there is nothing in our experience with which to compare the Trinity. The conclusion that God is triune does not arise from our observations of what has been created. Other than God, there is no known triune being. The only known triunity is God. From everything we observe, whether through nature or revelation, among the creatures God has chosen to make, none are triune. As human beings we are "one-in-one" not "three-in-one." From the study of Scripture it appears that angelic (spiritual) beings of all types are like humans in that respect. All personal beings we know are mono-personal. Our natural inclination would be to assume that God is likewise mono-personal. Apart from what we infer from Scripture, we would have no reason to think that God is triune. But we do have God's revelation of himself. From that revelation we conclude that God is unique in this respect. "The tri-personality of God is exclusively a truth of revelation, and one which lies outside the realm of natural reason."⁴

It should be noted that Scripture never directly says that God is triune. Words like *trinity*, *triune*, and *triunity* are never found there. And the writers never sought to demonstrate that God's exists in this way.⁵ The conclusion that God is triune comes from our attempt to consistently understand the statements of Scripture. If we take those statements for what they say and allow them to lead us where they will, we must conclude that God is triune. Thus, we believe that there is only one God while at the same time affirming that three distinct persons are God. God must be triune if his revelation of himself is to make any sense at all. Yes, the doctrine is mysterious and difficult. But it is not nonsense. It is just different.

So, God's triunity is unique. In this regard the Godhead is nothing like what our experience would lead us to think. This uniqueness leads to a second reason Christians find the doctrine to be mysterious and difficult. Confusing analogies are sometimes offered to explain the trinity. These analogies are usually based on triads, where three make up one. However, as we will see, these triadic analogies are not comparable to the Trinity. Therefore, they only serve to confuse rather than enlighten. Such illustrations are faulty and only lead away from the truth. I will have more to say about analogies later, once we have a better understand of the nature of God's triunity.

⁴ Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, p. 79.

⁵ Why might it be that nowhere in Scripture, particularly in the New Testament, do we find a "defense" God's triunity? Perhaps the best explanation is that by the time the New Testament was written the doctrine was widely known and accepted by believers. Thus, this doctrine is not "revealed" in the New Testament as such, but is "overheard" there. The Trinity was "revealed" at the time of the Incarnation when the roles of the three persons of the Godhead came to be more clearly seen in the distinctive working of the Son and the Spirit.

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A third reason for believing that the doctrine of the trinity is mysterious and difficult is that teachers and students of the Scripture have not been careful to make the distinctions that Scripture makes. We have confused ourselves because we have not been alert and consistent in handling the Word of God. In a sense, we have made the doctrine more difficult than it really is. We may never remove all the mystery and some difficulty may always remain, but we can do better. Perhaps it is primarily a case of carelessness. Or, perhaps students of Scripture have not been as alert as they should. In the end, we have been sloppy in our thinking. We have failed to follow through on what has long been understood.

As demonstrated above, the teaching that the Godhead is composed of three distinct persons sharing one divine nature is not new. It is clear that for centuries men have known that when speaking of God as "three-in-one" the three is talking about one aspect of God's being and the one about an entirely different aspect that being. Over the centuries the terms used to describe the trinity may have varied. But the basic ideas have remained consistent. Given such a long history, why is it so confusing to the average layperson or, for that matter, the average clergyman?

Unfortunately, it seems most Christians remain confused. Some are monotheist in their thinking. They believe there is only one God. They believe that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are God. And they say they believe God is "triune." But they are inconsistent in their thinking because they have not thought carefully about what they say they believe. An obvious place to observe this is when listening to sermons or to public prayers. For example, it is not unusual to hear someone who is leading in public prayer begin his prayer addressing God the Father. But, before too long and with no apparent change in who is being addressed, the speaker appears to thank that same person, the Father, for coming and dying for us. In so doing, this person is confusing the persons of the Godhead. Such prayer may indicate that the speaker has no clear concept that the Godhead has three distinct persons. In a sense such a person is effectively modalistic, thinking of God as one person who manifests himself in three different roles (as the Father, the Son, or the Spirit).

A final reason for a lack in understanding this doctrine is that many believers just give up. They have been told that the doctrine of the Trinity is difficult to understand and that it is a mystery. So they reason that it is too difficult for them. Granted the trinity is different, unlike anything else we know. Because of this, it is difficult to understand. But it is not impossible to understand, at least conceptually. We are capable of learning new truths, new concepts. Even though this doctrine is different, it is certainly logical. One would expect that if it were too difficult or too confusing for us to deal with, then God would not have chosen to reveal it to us in our present state. But he has! We need to make God's triunity more "practical" with regard to

our day-to-day perception of God. God has revealed to us what he is like. Therefore it must be important. The Godhead is revealed as a trinity. God wants us to act and treat him as such.

Of course, we do not fully understand the Trinity. And, no matter how much we come to understand, as noted, some mystery will no doubt always remain. After all, as creatures, how much about our great creator God do we or will we ever fully understand. At least we have a hint of how the Godhead exists. And what we know certainly does not offend our sensibilities. Because of God's revelation we know enough that we can treat God accordingly. Furthermore, even if we do not understand completely, we need to work to make the distinctions that Scripture makes. God cannot be pleased when we attribute the clearly revealed work of one member of the Godhead to another. Granted, man is frail. But God has provided the truth that he is triune and he expects us to think and act accordingly. Even if it is difficult, it is not beyond our rational ability. And in the end, some mystery may be good. It will leave us with a sense of awe.

As we move through this section, we have two basic, related goals. First, we want to make the idea that God is triune somewhat less difficult. God has revealed himself as triune. We should assume then that at least at some level we can understand it. And second, we want to help remove some of the mystery. There are certain things we can learn about God by looking at human beings. After all, we are created in God's image and the Incarnation did unite God with man. There is some correspondence. So, to some degree, with the help of Scripture, we should be able to look at ourselves as human beings and be able to learn a bit about God, the divine being.⁶

There is no doubt that this doctrine of the trinity raises many questions. What do Christians mean when they say God is triune? What does "three-in-one" mean? To what do the *three* and the *one* refer? Is it consistent to say that there is only one God and then turn around and say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are each God? These, of course, are all legitimate questions that must be answered in a manner consistent with God's revelation. Hopefully we can discover the answers to these questions. Perhaps approaching this doctrine from a slightly different perspective than we may have in the past will help. In so doing we may be able to remove some of the difficulty.

⁶ In doing this we must be careful not to bring down the being of God or elevate that of Man. There is no attempt to create God in our own image. We must keep in mind that even though humans have been created in God's image with the result that there are correspondences (i.e., "communicable attributes"), there always have been and will be vast differences between the two.

How will we proceed? We will start some basic terminology, then proceed to a demonstration, and finally touch on some implications that flow from the fact that God is triune. So first, we will clarify some words used in reference to the Trinity and then explore the Biblical concept of the Trinity in a way that will hopefully simplify the idea, making it somewhat easier to conceptualize. Second, that having been completed, we will seek to demonstrate from Scripture that the God revealed therein is, in the sense defined, triune. We want to show that such a concept is clearly consistent with the teaching of Scripture. And third, given the fact that God is triune, we want to consider some implications of that fact, particularly as the three persons of the Godhead relate to one another. However, before commencing, we will take a brief look at what the Trinity is not.

What the Trinity is Not

Before moving, on a few comments are in order to clarify what the Trinity is not. Many of the mistaken ideas of what constitutes the trinity are attempts to reconcile the three-in-oneness of God. However, over emphasis of either the one or the three leads to error. There must be a balance between these two extremes. Understanding what the Trinity is not may also, in the end, help us understand what it is.

Over Emphasis on the One

The trinity is not one personal being carrying out three roles, at times as the Father, at times as the Son, and at times as the Spirit. Such a view is a form of *modalism*. "Modalism is the theological doctrine that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not three distinct Persons, but rather three modes or forms of activity under which God manifests Himself."⁷ This is not consistent with Scripture. Such an arrangement is a form of monotheism that accommodates itself to the fact that three "persons" appear to be called God. Although role-playing is something to which we can relate, this view does not represent the structure of the Godhead.

Unfortunately, there are times Scriptures might seem to teach such an arrangement. For example, there are verses that seem to attribute the same work to different members of the Godhead. As a result one might conclude that these verses present different designations for the same person. For example, the act of creation is attributed to more than one person. In his gospel, John stated that everything that was made was made through the Word of God. "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:3). In verse 12 John made it clear that this Word about whom he was writing is "the only Son

⁷ <https://contendingforthefaith.org/en/modalism-tritheism-or-the-pure-revelation-of-the-triune-god>. Accessed 12/28/2020.

from the Father." So in this instance the Son is the creator. But, in Hebrews 1:1-2 the writer attributes creation to God, namely the Father. "He created the world." In this context the subject of the verb *create* is God the Father. So the Father is the creator. If one does not rightly understand how both can be true, he might argue that the Son and the Father are one and the same person. In this case we are helped by the writer of Hebrews. He recorded that it was "through [the Son]" that the Father created. So in an ultimate sense the Father created the world, but he did this by "commissioning" the Son to actually do the creating. Another example is Jesus's statement, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). A cursory look seems to say the Son and the Father are the same person. But the "one" here does not refer to their oneness as a person.⁸ All the instances where there seems to be an identification of two persons as one can be understood in a way that is consistent with the doctrine of God's triunity. There is no Scriptural basis for understanding the Godhead in a modalistic way.

Over Emphasis on the Three

The trinity is not three personal beings having nothing in common except that they are each divine. Such an arrangement would be *tritheism*. "As a sharp contrast to modalism, tritheism is the belief in three Gods, especially in the doctrine that the three Persons of the Trinity are three distinct Gods. According to tritheism, the Father, Son, and Spirit are three separate Gods."⁹

The idea of three separate beings is something to which we can relate. It makes sense to us. In fact, some may feel that Scripture teaches this. Three persons are mentioned in the pages of the Scripture each of whom is identified as God. These three are involved in separate and diverse activities. It would be natural to completely separate them.

Furthermore, there are indications that inequalities exist among these persons. The Son seems to be subservient to the Father, and it would appear that the Spirit is beneath them both.¹⁰ This observation could easily lead to the conclusion that there are three distinct beings that are each divine in some sense. Nevertheless, just as over emphasis on the one can be explained, so too here. Over emphasis on the three seems to

⁸ "The phrase *ἐν ἑσμεν* (*hen esmen*) is a significant assertion with trinitarian implications. *ἐν* is neuter, not masculine, so the assertion is not that Jesus and the Father are one person, but one "thing." Identity of the two persons is not what is asserted, but essential unity (unity of essence). (NETB translation note on John 10:30.)

⁹ <https://contendingforthefaith.org/en/modalism-tritheism-or-the-pure-revelation-of-the-triune-god>. Accessed 12/28/2020.

¹⁰ We will address this ordering of the three persons in the section *God's Vocational Existence*.

suggest that there are three Gods. But these facts can be understood in a way that is consistent with the doctrine of God's triunity.

A Proper Balance Between the One and the Three

Neither modalism nor tritheism is correct. It is wrong to over emphasize either the oneness or the threeness of the Godhead. To represent what we find in Scripture a right balance is necessary.

As the church Fathers discussed the inner nature of the Trinity, they attempted to avoid the extreme of modalism on the one hand and the extreme of tritheism on the other. As they sought to formulate an adequate definition of the Trinity, they themselves were often accused of being either modalists or tritheists, depending upon their emphasis, at any given time, of one aspect of truth at the expense of the other. Their difficulty lay in trying to avoid sounding modalistic while speaking of the fact that we have one unique God, and to avoid sounding tritheistic while speaking of the three Persons and Their economy.¹¹

Unfortunately, as indicated here, the balance is often hard to maintain. In part this is due to "deficiencies" in our language. One of the difficulties in speaking about a triune God is that our language does not well accommodate itself to such a being. In one sense God is singular. In another sense God is plural. When speaking of God, which number should we use? Sometimes it makes sense to think in singular terms, either of God as a singular being, of the persons of the Godhead considered collectively, or of one particular person of the Godhead as opposed to the other two. But at other times, the plural forms are more appropriate. Plurals are used in Scripture with reference to God when the persons are being distinguished. For example God speaks using plurals; "Let us make man in our image" (Gen 1:26). Here the idea seems to be of one person of the Godhead speaking on behalf of the other two persons. Some basic terminology, to which we now turn, may help us with this balancing.

¹¹ <https://contendingforthefait.org/en/modalism-tritheism-or-the-pure-revelation-of-the-triune-god>. Accessed 12/28/2020.