

God's Triune Existence

Introduction

"There exists one God who has revealed himself in the canon of Scripture." Given this basic assumption we now turn to the subject of how this God exists. As we study Scripture what we find regarding God's existence is somewhat perplexing. On the one hand we find clear teaching in Scripture that there is only one God. But on the other hand we find in that same Scripture, also clearly, that three persons are identified as God. How can this be? If we rightly understand Scripture's characterization of God's existence as one God yet also understand that three persons are identified as God, then we find ourselves at a place of trying to solve a dilemma that seems somewhat incoherent to us. How do we resolve the fact that the God revealed in Scripture is represented as both one and three?

The understanding of God as both one and three and the problems that this presented were recognized early in Church history. The solution was the concept of a trinity. However, even though Tertullian (ca. 165-220) was the first to use the word *Trinity*¹, "No theologian in the first three Christian centuries was a trinitarian in the sense of a believing that the one God is tripersonal, containing equally divine 'persons,' Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."² In these early centuries of Christianity there were crucial differences of opinion that needed to be settled. These differences were addressed as the church grappled with issues regarding the deity of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit and their relationships to one another. In the fourth century in an attempt to resolve the Arian controversy³ and provide unity in the organized church, the Council of Nicaea issued (in 325) the Nicene Creed, a creed clarifying the relationship between the Father and the Son. Using the word *homoousios*, it adopted the position that the Son was "consubstantial with the Father."⁴ Over time this view became the orthodox position of the church. However, the Nicene Creed said little regarding the Spirit.

Later in the fourth century (in 381) the council of Constantinople convened and issued an updated version of the Nicene Creed. There was a

¹ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 64.

² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/trinity-history.html>. Accessed 12/28/2020.

³ This controversy was concerned with differing views regarding the relationship between God the Father and God the Son.

⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicene_Creed. Accessed 12/28/2020.

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desire to clarify and expand what the earlier creed had stated and to be more inclusive of the Spirit.

By the time of the council of Constantinople ... *homoousios* was understood as asserting the Father and Son to not merely be similar beings, but in some sense one being. While it stopped short of saying that the Holy Spirit was *homoousios* with the Father and Son, the council did say that the Holy Spirit "is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son" Over the ensuing period the same sorts of arguments used to promote the divinity of the Son, were reapplied to the Holy Spirit, and eventually inhibitions to applying *homoousios* to the Holy Spirit evaporated.⁵

Around this same time three men, known as the Cappadocian Fathers, "standardized" the terminology used for the Trinity, "namely using *hypostasis* or *prosopon* for what God is three of, and *ousia* (along with *physis*) for what God is one of."⁶ So, by the end of the fourth century, the accepted position of the church was that there are three divine persons yet there is only one God.

But the formulations needed to continue. It was recognized that somehow the deity and humanity of the Son, Christ Jesus, needed to be understood. In 451 the Chalcedon Creed was formulated to include the two natures of Christ.

Finally, the so-called Athanasian Creed, written around the year 500, advanced the statements made in the earlier Nicene and other creeds. "It is the first creed in which the equality of the three persons of the Trinity is explicitly stated."⁷ It includes the following statements regarding the triunity of God.

And the catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost.⁸

With this basic understanding, the doctrine of the triunity of God has come to be the orthodox position of the church. Essentially, the oneness of God refers to God's nature and the threeness of God refers to the persons who share that nature. In what follows we will consider what this means and what conclusions can be drawn from it. God exists as triune. As we develop God's triune existence we will consider three areas.

⁵ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/trinity-history.html>. Accessed 12/28/2020.

⁶ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/trinity-history.html>. Accessed 12/28/2020.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athanasian_Creed. Accessed 12/28/2020.

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First, we will investigate just what we mean when we speak of God as triune. Given what we know about the words used, both in Scripture as God has revealed himself and in history by those probing this subject, just what is the Trinity?

Second, we will attempt to demonstrate that the concept of the Trinity, as we understand it, is consistent with the revelation of Scripture. It was derived based on God's revelation in Scripture. So we will seek to show the biblical evidence used to support this idea.

And third, we will consider what God's triunity means to us? What are the implications of the fact that God is triune? This is an important question. Knowledge of God's triunity is not just good information. God has chosen to reveal this fact to us. Should not that make a difference as we approach him? Christianity is not monotheistic, as was Judaism; it is Trinitarian. God expects us not only recognize this truth, but also to live in light of this truth. Hopefully, as we explore, understanding how God's triunity affects us will become more evident.

As we undertake our exploration of God's triunity I think we will come to conclude what Boettner wrote many years ago. "The doctrine of the Trinity is above reason, and could never have been discovered by man apart from divine revelation; yet it cannot be proved contrary to reason, nor inconsistent with any other truth we know about God."⁹ God revealed this triune existence because he wanted us to know. And he must want us to know for a reason. This truth is not irrational. It is a revelation of how God exists. And it is not to be ignored. Let us not simply treat lightly this truth about our God. Let it become incorporated into our everyday thinking about our God.

⁹ Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, p. 125.