

The Trinity

By

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The doctrine of the Trinity is a fundamental teaching in the Scriptures, yet it is beyond human comprehension. The doctrine is “one of the greatest mysteries,” yet the Trinity is an indisputable fact of divine revelation.¹ The Scripture declares that God is one (Deut. 6:4, Mk. 12:29), yet the Bible clearly states, “For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.” (1 John 5:7) Charles Ryrie defines the Trinity as: “In the one living and true God there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in existence.”² Many historical confessions of faith, such as the Nicene Creed, and the Augsburg and Westminster confessions of faith, unabashedly declare the Trinity.

Briefly stated, the doctrine is three persons “representing one Essence.”³ The divine Essence⁴ has all the attributes of divinity revealed in the plenary, inerrant, preserved, inspired words of God. Some of the attributes are non-moral such as omnipotence, omnipresence, omniscience, and immutability, and some are moral such as holiness, love, and grace.⁵ All the attributes of God revealed are unmistakably and undoubtedly found in each person of the Trinity; (1) God the Father, the First Person; (2) God the Son, the Second Person; and (3) God the Holy Spirit, the Third Person. The three members do *not* loosely hold “certain ideals and principles” in cooperation with one another, which would be an error called tritheism (three Gods operating independently), but rather, there is One God existing as three persons who agree completely in thought, will, personality, intelligence, character, and any perfect holy quality attributed to God by revelation. Polytheistic considerations attributed to the Trinity by some are groundless.

Although the word Trinity is not used in the Scriptures, the progressive revelation of God plainly intimates the truth of the Trinity from the first verse, Gen 1:1, where Elohim (Hebrew), a plural noun, is used. The concept of three persons operating as one essence is further attested by the use of plural pronouns (Gen 1:26, 3:22, 11:7, Isa 6:8) and plural verbs (Gen 1:26, 11:7).⁶ In the New Testament the Trinity is clearly stated in 1 John 5:7 and seen in Mat. 3:16-17, 28:19, and John 14:16. Therefore, God is One operating as three persons, totally equal, and “there is no thought of subordination of essence,”⁷ of one to the other. There is not any thought of “inequality, priority of time, or degrees of dignity.”⁸ They are *eternally* coexistent equal beings (Gen. 1:1-2, Ps. 90:2, Micah 5:2, John 1:1-2, Col. 1:15-19). Charles Ryrie gives an excellent illustration of the Trinity (although no illustration is perfect) when he compares the existence of water at the “triple point” of coexistence as liquid, ice, and vapor at the same time, a “three-in-one” illustration. They are all water “yet distinct from each other.”⁹

Any deviation from this concept of the Trinity results in heresies such as Arianism, Socinianism, and Unitarianism. Understanding heresy helps a person understand the Trinity. There are many “variations” or branches of these heresies. Only the broad definition is presented here. Arianism falsely declares that the Second Person of the Trinity is a created being who subsequently created the Holy Spirit. Socinianism denies the preexistence of the eternal God the Son, and declares that His origin occurred at His birth. A corollary and outcome from this heretical view is Adoptionism, which declares the Lord Jesus Christ was “adopted” as God the Son at His baptism. The Jehovah Witnesses assert Jesus is not eternal and deny the Trinity. Unitarians proclaim that God is One, not three. The derivative of this belief is the error of modalism. They avow that *one* God manifests himself in three modes or manners. As seen from the above heresies, the terms Father and Son confuse many people. The confusion can be helped

by considering that the terms are an expression of a *relationship* of operation which is intimate and not an expression of *origin* in time.

May believers strive for the relationship with God that the Trinity demonstrates between themselves and, incredibly, desires with us! The relationship desired may be found in the Lord Jesus Christ's high priestly prayer when He said "...that they may be one, even as we are one" and "...that *the love* wherewith thou hast *loved* me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:22b, 26b). [My emphasis, HDW]

Endnotes:

¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, D.D., Litt.D., Th.D.; Systematic Theology; vol. 1 (Kregel Publications, Grand Rapids, MI) 1976; 25

² Charles C. Ryrie, Basic Theology (Moody Press, Chicago, IL; 1999; Database WordSearch) Definitions.

³ Lewis Sperry Chafer, Op. Cit., 272

⁴ Dr. Roy Wallace, Studies in Systematic Theology (Printers, LinWell, Shreveport, LA) 2001, 20. Dr. Wallace quotes Henry C. Thiessen who defines essence as "the properties or attributes by means of which something can be placed in its proper class or identified as being what it is."

⁵ Ibid. pp. 25-31

⁶ Charles C. Ryrie, Op. Cit., "The Trinity of God, I. Contribution of the Old Testament, Plural Words"

⁷ Ibid. The Trinity of God, III. Some Considerations for a Definition.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Charles Ryrie, Basic Theology (Victor Books, Wheaton. IL) 1988, 53-54