

# The Doctrine of the Trinity

"There is but One God, the Father." — 1 Corinthians 8:6

All who consider the issue agree that the doctrine of the Trinity is incomprehensible. Its most ardent proponents suppose this to be a strength — that as we cannot comprehend the majesty and glory of the infinite Creator, so we cannot fathom His nature and being. Not so. The Creator has explicitly revealed Himself through His Word as a mighty, unitary being, the great first cause of all things, having no equal, no predecessor and no successor. He is Jehovah by name and God by title.

For 4000 years those who worshipped Him and trusted Him had no hint, no surmise, no suggestion that He was other than the single, unitary God He declared Himself to be. "Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God is One" (*Deut. 6:4*). "Know and believe me, and understand that I am he: before me there was no God formed, neither shall there be after me. I, even I, am the LORD" (*Isaiah 43:10, 11*).

## Christ — The Long Awaited Messiah!

The Jews were aware that God would send a Messiah (*Hebrew*) or Christ (*Greek*) — one anointed by God as His prophet, His servant. Moses told them "The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken" (*Deuteronomy 18:15*). Isaiah said "Behold my servant, whom I uphold; mine elect, in whom my soul delighteth; I have put my spirit upon him" (*Isaiah 42:1*).

These prophecies — and many more like them — consistently describe Messiah as a highly honored subordinate of God Almighty. Jesus was that promised Messiah. He was no ordinary messenger. He was in fact the very son of God, so termed 47 times in the New Testament. Jesus performed every duty faithfully, and has now been exalted to the "right hand of the majesty on high" (*Hebrews 1:3*). "God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows" (*Hebrews 1:9*). Jesus, always an obedient son to his Heavenly Father, now exalted above all others, is still a devoted son and subordinate of the Heavenly Father.

He does not assume his honor, glory or service on his own. On the contrary, he receives them all at the hand of his Father and superior, God himself. "No man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God ... So also Christ glorified not himself to be made a high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son" (*Hebrews 5:4, 5*). "The Son of man came ... to the Ancient of days ... and there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom" (*Daniel 7:13, 14*).

## What is the Trinity?

It is a doctrine formulated in the 4th century to describe the view of some leading churchmen

concerning the nature and relationship of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. It was enunciated in a series of creeds: The Nicene Creed (325 ad), The Nicaeno-Constantinopolitan Creed (381 ad), and the Athanasian Creed (ca. 5th century ad). It took various forms and used multitudes of words so complex and enigmatic it is incomprehensible.

Some Christians consider "trinity" simply to imply belief in God, Jesus and the holy Spirit — a broad platform all Christians can endorse. Differently, but still quite simply, the first use of this word in early Christian writings referred merely to the existence of "God, His Word, and His Wisdom" (*Theophilus of Antioch, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume 2, page 201*). But as the doctrine evolved in the 4th-6th centuries, it became much more mysterious. It asserted that God is actually composed of three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, all co-equal and co-eternal.

The Scriptural truth, on the other hand, is neither mysterious nor incomprehensible: God is one person, His son Jesus is a second person, and the holy Spirit is not a person at all. It is the spirit, power and influence of God. Jesus is subordinate to his Heavenly Father. God existed from eternity, but there was a time before the creation of His son Jesus when God was alone. However, let us examine four essential components of the Trinitarian view, closely, against the scriptures.

### **(1) Who is God?**

It is customary in Trinitarian language to speak of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. These are assumed to be proper titles, and used extensively. Yet in the Scriptures only one of these appears, "God the Father," and that not as a title, but an expression denoting that God is the Father. "There is but one God, the Father, of whom are all things ... and one Lord Jesus Christ, by whom are all things" (*1 Corinthians 8:6*). The term appears 11 times in the New Testament. By contrast, the terms "God the Son" and "God the Holy Spirit" appear zero times.

The word "God" appears about 1200 times in the New Testament. Nearly all of these refer — no surprise — to God Himself. Not even one time does this word refer to the holy Spirit.

However, as a word, "god" has a variety of applications. For example the Old Testament Hebrew word "elohim" (*god*) can describe any high dignitary (*e.g. Abraham, Genesis 23:6*). In the King James translation it is rendered variously: angels, God, gods, great, mighty, judges. Its Greek counterpart "theos" likewise has a broad usage. Strong's Concordance defines it as: "a deity, especially ... the supreme Divinity; fig. a magistrate." If this word can describe a magistrate, then it can certainly describe Jesus, and it is so used six times in the New Testament (*John 1:1, 18, 20:28, Titus 2:13, Hebrews 1:8, 2 Peter 1:1*). It is used in John 10:35 of the worshippers of Jehovah. Once it even refers to Satan (*2 Corinthians 4:4*).

None of these uses should confuse us about who is really the one and only supreme God of the universe, the one both Jews and Christians naturally and freely term "God" — Jehovah, the Almighty God of all. However two texts, frequently cited in support of the trinity, deserve

special attention: John 1:1 (*discussed separately later*), and John 20:28. The latter text records the startled exclamation of praise and adoration by Thomas on seeing the resurrected Christ: "My Lord and my God." Does this mean Christ was verily great Jehovah Himself? Of course not. Theos (*god, magistrate*) is the term of great respect, awe and worship Thomas attributed to his Lord and Master. Indeed, in the very same chapter, Jesus explained to Mary Magdalene that he had not yet ascended "unto my Father, and your Father; and to my God, and your God" (*John 20:17*). Clearly Jesus recognized Almighty God as distinct from, and superior to, himself. God is, as Paul declared, "the Father." No scripture uses the expressions "God the Son" or "God the Holy Spirit"!

## **(2) Are Jesus and God Co-Equal?**

According to the Scriptures, they clearly are NOT equal. In every case, where God and Jesus are referred to in one context, Jesus is subordinate, and the Father is superior. Here are a handful of the many texts on this issue:

"Why callest thou me good? None is good, save one, that is, God." (*Luke 18:19*)

"My Father is Greater than I" (*John 14:28*)

"The Head of Christ is God" (*1 Corinthians 11:3*)

"[Jesus] sat down on the right hand of God" (*Hebrews 10:12*)

"Then shall the Son also himself be subject ... that God may be all in all" (*1 Corinthians 15:28*)

Perhaps most telling of all is that Jesus recognizes God as his own God — his superior, to whom he renders adoration, worship and praise (*Matthew 27:46, John 20:17, Ephesians 1:17, Revelation 1:6*). No scripture says Jesus is co-equal!

## **(3) Are Jesus and God Co-Eternal?**

In the sense that both will always exist, yes. But that is true of angels and saints and all the obedient. The intent of Co-Eternal is that they always existed eternally from ages past, neither preceding the other. This is not true of Jesus. The Scriptures affirm that Jesus was "the beginning of the Creation of God" (*Revelation 3:14*), and the "firstborn of every creature" (*Colossians 1:15*). Therefore he had a beginning. There was a time before that when God was alone. Proverbs 8:22 says of Jesus, "The LORD created me the first of his works long ago, before all else that he made. I was formed in earliest times, at the beginning, before earth itself" (*Proverbs 8:22, 23, NRSV*). No scripture says Jesus was co-eternal!

## **(4) Is the Holy Spirit a Person?**

Ordinarily there would be no question about this. The Holy Spirit of God anointed Jesus at Jordan, who received it not "by measure" (*John 3:34*). It is "poured out" and "shed" on others (*Acts 10:45, Acts 2:17, 33, Joel 2:28, Zechariah 12:10*). Persons are not "poured," "shed" or "measured," but the spirit, power and influence of God is properly described this way.

The Holy Spirit of God is variously described in Scripture as the Spirit of Truth, Holiness, Life, Faith, Wisdom, Grace, and Glory. The Scriptures also speak of an opposite spirit of Jealousy, Judgment, Burning, Heaviness, Whoredoms, Infirmity, Divination, Bondage, Slumber, Fear, Antichrist and Error. Do we suppose these are persons?

The Scriptures speak of the spirit of Jacob, Elijah, Tiglath-Pileser, the Philistines, Cyrus, Princes, the Medes, Zerubbabel, and Joshua. Are these spirits all persons?

Why, then, would any suppose the "Holy Spirit of God" (*Ephesians 4:30*) to be a separate being? Actually no one would (*and no one did*) until the time mysteries and philosophies began to enter Christian dogma. (*More of that later.*) But today, centuries later, some suppose a support for the personhood of the Holy Spirit because of the pronouns used for it in the New Testament. For example, "When he, the Spirit of truth, is come, he will guide you into all truth ..." (*John 16:13*). And of the Comforter Jesus said "I will send him unto you" (*verse 7*). It sounds like a person because of the pronouns "he" and "him."

But a little examination into the Greek explains the issue. When "comforter" is meant the pronoun is masculine, but when "spirit" is intended the pronoun is neuter. Literally it could be translated "it will guide you ..." It is simply a matter of grammar, not of personality. The Greek word for "comforter" is a masculine noun, and that for "spirit" is a neuter noun. Therefore the pronouns necessarily follow the gender of the noun. (*Actually the genders in verse 13 are supplied by the Greek verbs rather than by explicit pronouns, but you get the idea.*) No scripture says the Holy Spirit of God is a person!

### **John 1:1**

The only passage which even comes close to teaching the Trinity is 1 John 5:7, 8. But today it is common knowledge that the essential parts of this passage were not original scripture. The words at issue are an embellishment added to the text by an over-zealous scribe centuries after John died, and no reputable modern version even includes them.

For this reason the focus of attention has turned to John 1:1. Clearly this does not teach the Trinity per se, because it does not even mention the Holy Spirit, and one cannot have a "trinity" without three parties. But it does say "the Word was God" (*King James translation*), and this is close enough to one of the pieces of the Trinity to cause interest. What did John mean by this?

There are three popular views:

(1) He meant Jesus really was "God Himself"

(2) He meant Jesus was "God-like"

(3) He meant Jesus was "a god."

Trinitarians are naturally drawn to the first view. But (*other than all we have said above*), this view is in danger of proving TOO MUCH — that Jesus and God are the same person. Indeed, many Trinitarians assert this without recognizing this is more like the heresy of Sabellius than the orthodox trinity.

The problem becomes apparent when one compares John 1:1 with 1 John 1:2. Both texts are from the same author, about the same time, and express the same thoughts. John 1:1 says the Word was "with God," 1 John 1:2 says the Word was "with the Father." Clearly John intends that "God" was "the Father." Thus if John intends that the Word was "God Himself," he must mean the Word was "the Father" — a conclusion no orthodox Trinitarian can embrace. For this reason the majority of translators, including Trinitarian translators, do not hold view one!

Thus view 2. "When John said that the Word was God he was not saying that Jesus is identical with God; he was saying that Jesus is so perfectly the same as God in mind, in heart, in being, that in Jesus we perfectly see what God is like" (*William Barclay, The Gospel of John, Vol. 1, page 17*). In this camp of thought are the following: William Barclay, Martin Vincent, J.P. Lange, Robert Young, Brook Foss Westcott, Kenneth Wuest, George Turner, Julius Mantey, H.E. Dana, Moulton and Moffat. Typical of this view is the REB translation: "The Word was in God's presence, and what God was, the Word was."

It is possible that this was John's point. However, View Three actually fits the context still better. As many Bible students are aware, the words "a" and "an" (*called indefinite articles*) do not exist in the Greek language. If one wished to say "I saw a tree," in Greek it would be "I saw tree" and everyone would know the intent is "a" tree. Therefore a translator would automatically supply it. This is done everywhere in the New Testament where the English word "a" or "an" appears.

So in John 1:1. The text actually says "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with the God, and the Word was [a?] God." Should the translator supply the intended "a" or not? That is the question. Contrary to many vocal claims on this issue, it is a sound and reasonable thing to do. C. H. Dodd, driving force of the NEB, acknowledges "As a word-for-word translation it cannot be faulted." (*Technical Papers for the Bible Translator, 28, Jan. 1977, page 101ff, cited from James Parkinson, "The Herald," Sept-Oct 1966, page 23*). Notice that the translators of the King James Version had no hesitation in using "a god" in Acts 28:6 where the context makes it obvious. (*It also belongs in John 10:33, as the logic of Jesus' reply shows.*)

A very good reason for adding "a" in John 1:1 is John 1:18, but the point is hidden in the King James Version. Today it is generally acknowledged that the better, earlier Greek manuscripts of

this verse refer to Jesus as "the only begotten god" (*see the NASB for example*). John there says no one has ever seen "God," but "the only begotten god, which is in the bosom of the Father," has appeared to declare what God is about. First it is clear that by "God" John means "the Father." Second it is clear that John has two gods in mind — God Himself, the unseen, and the son of God, Jesus, who in his own right is also a mighty being, "a god." Since John 1:18 distinguishes two mighty beings, it is apparent that John 1:1 also distinguishes two mighty beings.

### **Whence, Then, The Trinity?**

Where did this doctrine come from? When did it come? For what Reason? How did it take hold? Probably it developed as an over-zealous response to the vital Gnostic heresies which began to surface even in John's day, and afflicted the church for about two centuries. Gnostics proposed that Jesus was not actually the Messiah — some say he was an apparition, or a materialization, others a simple man possessed for a time by the Christ — but all agreed that the Anointed, the Messiah, the Christ, did not suffer and die on the cross.

This fundamentally undercuts the Truth of Christianity, and against such views were John's strong warnings in 1 John 1:22, 23; 4:1-3, 2 John 7. Indeed, these epistles of John and even the Gospel of John, read with the backdrop of these heresies in mind, take on a fresh and deeper meaning than ever before. It is for this reason that John was forceful in affirming that the very Jesus "which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled" (*1 John 1:1*) was the very Word of life who existed from ages before with the Father, the reason for all the Father's creative work from the beginning. This very one did indeed suffer and die on the cross for our sins. John was there when it happened, a first-hand witness. "And he that saw it bare record and his record is true: and he knoweth that he saith true, that ye might believe" (*John 19:35*).

As John passed from the scene the Gnostic heresies grew in strength, causing a severe pressure within the early Christian community. In combating this error, and in emphasizing the significance, uniqueness and importance of Jesus, the very Son of God himself, it was natural to attach more and more weight to him, even over-emphasizing his office and majesty beyond that allowed in the scriptures. Little by little a greater and greater image of him was put forward, resulting in such erroneous views as Sabellius put forward in the 3rd century, claiming that Jesus was but an expression of the one God, and not a lesser though glorious separate being. This was generally rejected, but in the end a sad compromise was reached which left distorted the real verities regarding Christ, the highly honored Son of the Most High God.

The early affirmation of the Church fathers that Christ was both created and subordinate gave way to new theories, until the old adherents were moved to a staunch defense. The great Arian controversy erupted as a result, philosophy was argued in the name of Christian doctrine, and a great rift formed in the fledgling body of Christ.

## The Nicene Creed

About this time, in the early 4th century AD, Constantine came to power, first of the so-called Christian Emperors. The foment and dissension was so apparent, and so divisive to his empire, he insisted the breach be healed, by force if necessary. Under his influence hordes of former pagans were becoming "Christian" in name, and there was an urgency to resolve these issues in a way conducive to the growth and tranquility of his domain.

With this backdrop a Council was convened at Nice, and through much tumult was forged the highly ambiguous and strangely worded Nicene Creed, which has been an enigma ever since. No wonder. The language used to "settle" the debate was drawn not from scripture, but from the very pagan sources the emperor wished to make comfortable with their newly acquired "faith."

## The Historical Buildup

To grasp the enormity and significance of what occurred at Nice, we need to review some of the historical FACTS regarding the Trinity.

**Fact One** — The word "Trinity" is nowhere found in the scriptures.

**Fact Two** — Not one of the Apostolic Fathers (*Clement, Barnabas, Ignatius, Mathetes, Polycarp, Papias, Justin Martyr*) mentioned this doctrine in any of the 1200 pages of text they left us.

**Fact Three** — When the word "Trinity" first appeared in Christian writings it meant nothing like it does today. It simply implied the existence of God, His Word, and Wisdom.

**Fact Four** — Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, Origen, Novatian, Arnobius and Lactantius (*all early and revered Christian writers*) explicitly affirmed that the Heavenly Father alone is the supreme God and that Jesus is subordinate to His will and authority (*The Lord our God is one Lord, Bible Students Congregation of New Brunswick, page 2*). "During the first three centuries ... almost all of the early church Fathers ... admitted the inferiority of the Son to the Father" (*Alvan Lamson, Church of the First Three Centuries*).

**Fact Five** — The early formal statement of Christian belief never mentions the word "Trinity" or any of its concepts. It is termed the "Apostles' Creed" (*though not composed by the apostles*). It was used extensively in the 2nd and 3rd centuries of the Christian era. As regards God and Jesus, it affirms exactly what we affirm. It says simply:

"I believe in God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. And in Jesus Christ, his only son our Lord: who was conceived by the holy spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried; he descended into hell; the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of God, the Father

Almighty: From thence he shall come to judge the quick and the dead. I believe in the holy spirit; the holy catholic Church; the communion of saints; the forgiveness of sins; the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting. Amen"

### **Language Lifted from Heathen Sources**

Now compare that simple statement of belief, so clear and brief, to the Creed produced from the Council at Nice in 325 AD. (*Our comments in Bold Italic.*)

"We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God begotten of the Father, Only-begotten, (*so far so good, the language is mostly from the Apostles Creed. But now follows the strange new terminology*) that is of the substance of the Father; God of God; Light of Light; very God of very God; begotten, not made; of the same substance with the Father; (*end of mystical language, back to scriptural language*) by whom all things were made, both things in heaven and things in earth; who for us men and our salvation descended and became flesh, was made man, suffered, and rose again the third day. He ascended into heaven; he cometh to judge the quick and dead. And in the Holy Spirit. (*Now resume the new concepts, full of bitterness to dissenters.*) But those that say there was a time when he was not; or that he was not before he was begotten; or that he was made from that which had no being; or whom affirm the Son of God to be of any other substance or essence, or created, (*despite three clear scriptures!*) or variable, or mutable, such persons doth the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematize."

Note these strange, philosophical, mystical expressions — "one substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God." Such strange words, foreign alike to the word and sense of any Scripture. Where, oh where do these come from? Who invented them? Whence their source? The answer is both startling, and chilling. John Newton, in *Origin of Triads and Trinities*, wrote:

"With the first glimpse of a distinct religion and worship among the most ancient races, we find them grouping their gods in triads. ... [*now citing Professor Sayce from Gifford Lectures and Hibbert Lectures*] 'The indebtedness of Christian theological theory to ancient Egyptian dogma is nowhere more striking than in the doctrine of the Trinity. The very same terms used of it by Christian theologians meet us again in the inscriptions and papyri of Egypt.' [*Newton continues*] And now we see some meaning in the strange phrases that have puzzled so many generations in the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, such as 'Light of Light, Very God of Very God, Begotten not Made, Being of one Substance with the Father.' These are all understandable enough if translated into the language of the Solar Trinity [*worshipped in ancient Egypt*], but without this clue to their meaning, they become sheer nonsense or contradictions ... The simplicity and symmetry of the old Sun Trinities were utterly lost in forming these new Christian Creeds on the old Pagan models. ... The [*pagan*] trinities had all the prestige of a vast antiquity and universal adoption, and could not be ignored. The gentile converts therefore eagerly accepted the Trinity compromise, and the Church baptized it. Now at length we know its origin." (*John*



*Newton, Origin of Triads and Trinities, Liverpool, 1909, pp. 20-21, 25-27).*

Will Durant, the popular Catholic historian of our day, wrote: "Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it ... pagan cultures contributed to the syncretist results. From Egypt came the ideas of a divine trinity ..." (*Caesar and Christ, page 595*) (*Lamson, Newton & Durant cited from Charles Redeker, To Us there is One God, June 1978*).

No wonder the confusion. No wonder the controversy. No wonder the debate. No wonder that all Christendom was torn by disputes about the Trinity.

### **Why is this Important?**

Because it is a travesty upon the Truth, one which has endured for centuries. Like the doctrine of Purgatory, it took hold upon the church as the Dark Ages began to creep over Europe. But as the lingering mists of mystery and confusion fade, the simple Truths of the Scripture sparkle the brighter. How clear the scriptural statements. Jesus, God's chief agent from all creation, the one who was a treasure to his heart, "daily his delight," God sent to be the redeemer of men.

He was made flesh, dwelt among us, and gave his life in death so that Adam and his race could be freed. He gave the Ransom with his own flesh. In due course he will introduce his Kingdom among men, Satan shall be thoroughly bound, and the Millennial Kingdom of righteousness be established in all the world. Even now a transition of the ages is upon us which will yield this blessed result.

Meanwhile we have the special privilege of a personal walk with the Master, to receive if "faithful unto death" a crown of life divine, immortal, in the heavenly courts. We shall have the honor of reigning with Christ in glory. At that time we shall assist our master in delivering the whole world out of bondage, and into faith, until "the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea" (*Revelation 2:10, 20:6, Isaiah 11:9*). "Hallelujah, What a Savior!"

David Rice