

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Copyright © 2004 by Richard Hoot
All rights reserved

Introduction

In the second and third centuries, various teachers proposed unorthodox answers to the question of God's nature. Monarchians taught that Jesus was a man who received special power by the Holy Spirit at His baptism (adoptionism) or that the Father became incarnated as the Son (modalism). Arians taught that God generated the Son who, in turn, created the Holy Spirit.¹

In the fourth century, the church decisively rejected these heresies in favor of the doctrine of the Trinity. In later centuries, Socinianism, Unitarianism, and Mormonism also challenged the doctrine of the Trinity.

This on-going debate requires Christians to consider the testimony of Scripture because the Trinity is not found in natural theology but in revelation.² The purpose of this paper is to discuss the biblical evidence for the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Unity of God

The Bible teaches that there is only one God. This is made equally clear in the Old Testament (Deut 4:35, Isa 43:10) and in the New Testament (Jas 2:19, Gal 3:20). He is called Yahweh in the Old Testament and is the same God as the one revealed in the New Testament. He is the only true God (Jer 10:10, John 17:3). All other "gods" are simply false gods (Deut 32:21, 1 Cor 8:4) or demons (Deut 32:17, 1 Cor 10:20).³

The plural Hebrew noun *Elohim* does not disprove the unity of God. *Elohim* often appears as a title for Yahweh; however, it takes a singular verb when referring to the true God indicating that He is one being. The plural form of *Elohim* also does not prove the Trinity because individual false gods (e.g., Baalzebub) were also called *elohim*. Hebrew nouns were often "pluralized" to intensify them (i.e., a plural of amplitude).⁴

Erickson asserts that the Shema (Deut 6:4) is probably the clearest and most direct affirmation of the unity of God.⁵ Ryrie correctly observes, however, that the Shema stresses the uniqueness of God more than unity, but it implies unity because it rules out polytheism.⁶

The Bible reveals that God is a perfectly unique and infinite Being.⁷ Thiessen concludes, "There can only be one infinite and perfect being. To postulate two or more infinite beings is illogical and inconceivable."⁸

The Threefold Nature of God

The Bible teaches that the Father is God (1 Cor 15:24, 1 Pet 1:2). Jesus used "God" and "Father" interchangeably (Matt 6:26-30) and plainly identified God as the Father (John 6:27).⁹

¹ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986), 56.

² Henry C. Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology* Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 89-90.

³ Robert M. Bowman, Jr., *Outlines on Systematic Theology* 2nd ed. (Lithonia: Luther Rice Seminary, 1997), 33.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁵ Millard J. Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 18.

⁶ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 56.

⁷ Bowman, *Outlines on Systematic Theology*, 33.

⁸ Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 89.

⁹ Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 19.

Other biblical authors are equally clear (2 John 1:3, Jude 1:1). Bowman notes that antitrinitarians rarely deny the deity of the Father.¹⁰

The Bible teaches that the Son is God. In the Old Testament, the Messiah is described as “Mighty God” (Isa 9:6). In the New Testament, Thomas addressed Jesus as both Lord and God (John 20:28). Paul refers to “our great God and Savior Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13).¹¹ Sharp’s rule indicates that the two personal nouns (i.e., God and Savior) both refer to Jesus.¹²

John 1:1, in particular, ascribes true and full deity to the Word (Christ). Consistent exegesis forbids the Jehovah's Witnesses' suggestion that the Word was "a god" because it would be the only time in John's gospel that the indefinite form was used.¹³

The Bible also teaches that the Son is distinct from the Father (Rom 1:7, 2 Pet 1:17). The Word (Son) was “with God” in the beginning (John 1:1, 17:5). The Father and Christ have a relationship (Matt 3:17, Luke 10:22). The Father sent the Son to do His will (John 3:16-17, 5:30).¹⁴

The Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is God. Peter equated “lying to the Holy Spirit” with “lying to God” (Act 5:3-4). Paul also equated “God’s temple” with “a temple of the Holy Spirit” (1 Cor 3:16-17, 6:19-20). The Spirit is omniscient (1 Cor 2:10-11) and eternal (Heb 9:14), which are divine attributes. Scripture was inspired by the Holy Spirit and is also God-breathed (2 Pet 1:21, 2 Tim 3:16)¹⁵

The Bible also teaches that the Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son. He is not simply another name or mode of the Father or Christ. He was sent by the Father (John 14:16, 15:26) and intercedes with the Father for the saints (Rom 8:26-27). The Spirit was sent by Jesus (John 14:16, 16:7) as “another Comforter” to replace Jesus after His ascension (cf. 1 John 2:1).¹⁶

The Triunity of God

The fact that there is one God does not necessarily mean that God is a solitary person, and to assert otherwise merely assumes that the Trinity is false.¹⁷ In the Shema, the Hebrew word for “one” (*echad*) can refer to a union or composite unity (e.g. Gen 2:24), which fits well with the idea that this “one” is actually a union of three.¹⁸

The Bible never says that God is one person. The King James Version does translate *hypostasis* as "person" when referring to God (Heb 1:3), but in the first century, this term meant something more like "essence" or "substance" (cf. Heb 11:1). By the fourth century, however, *hypostasis* was synonymous with the Latin *persona*.¹⁹

¹⁰ Bowman, *Outlines on Systematic Theology*, 57.

¹¹ New King James Version used throughout.

¹² Bowman, *Outlines on Systematic Theology*, 38.

¹³ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 53.

¹⁴ Bowman, *Outlines on Systematic Theology*, 57.

¹⁵ Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 26-29.

¹⁶ Bowman, *Outlines on Systematic Theology*, 54.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 56.

¹⁸ Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 33.

¹⁹ Bowman, *Outlines on Systematic Theology*, 56.

The foregoing facts lead to the conclusion that God is triune. The unity of God allows for the existence of personal distinctions while recognizing that the divine nature is numerically and eternally one. The Bible reveals that there are three divine persons in one essence.²⁰

This deduction is supported by numerous triadic references in the New Testament (Act 20:28, Eph 3:14-16, 1 Pet 1:2). While three persons are listed in Matthew's baptismal formula, the term "name" is singular (Matt 28:19). Paul's triadic benediction (2 Cor 13:14) and appeal to unity (1 Cor 12:4-6) also suggests an equal status among the three. The Old Testament is less direct on this point as is the case with other prominent New Testament doctrines like the Incarnation.²¹

The Trinity is a mystery, but Christians must accept the biblical witness as true even if it goes beyond human understanding.²² The term "Trinity" may not appear in the Bible, but the same is true of the term "Bible." While the Trinity is not formally taught in Scripture, it faithfully correlates with the teaching of the Bible, which cannot be said about the nontrinitarian alternatives.²³

Conclusion

Over the centuries, the nature of God has been the source of considerable debate. Some have denied the deity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in an effort to defend the unity of God. Others have suggested that there are actually two or three Gods. In the end, the Christian church rejected these positions as unbiblical.

The Bible reveals the simultaneous existence of three equally divine persons but also teaches that there is only one God. The deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is stated or inferred throughout Scripture, yet they are consubstantial (i.e., of one essence).

While biblical authors do not explicitly teach the doctrine of the Trinity, the available biblical evidence clearly supports this position. The Trinity is a mystery grounded in the infinite and unfathomable nature of the great Creator God. Until the return of Christ and the glorification of the body, Christians will simply have to exercise faith in adhering to the truth about God's nature.

²⁰Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, 89, 98.

²¹Erickson, *Making Sense of the Trinity*, 31-37.

²²Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 55.

²³Bowman, *Outlines on Systematic Theology*, 57.

Bibliography

Bowman, Jr. Robert M. *Outlines on Systematic Theology*. 2nd ed. Lithonia: Luther Rice Seminary, 1997.

Erickson, Millard J. *Making Sense of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000.

Ryrie, Charles C. *Basic Theology*. Wheaton: Victor Books, 1986.

Thiessen, Henry C. *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997.