

Introduction to the Doctrine of the Trinity.

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The doctrine of the Trinity is the foundational Christian doctrine and thus the most important doctrine. It is nothing less than our distinctive doctrine of God. Because the doctrine of the Trinity is foundational if we get this wrong, our other doctrinal teaching is bound to be flawed.

It is also the most illuminative doctrine in showing how doctrine/systematic theology is “done”, by drawing on scripture, tradition and reason.

This doctrine tells us that:

1. Jesus and the Spirit are “co-equal” God.
2. Jesus can save because he is God and thus omnipotent.
3. In Jesus we see and hear God because he is God.
4. We rightly worship and pray to Jesus because he is God.
5. The Holy Spirit is God at work in the world and God in the life of the Christian believer.

Appeal to the Bible is not as simple as we might first imagine.

The New Testament unquestionably depicts God as one and three. He is one (Deut 6:4, Mk 12:29-32, Jn 17:22, Rom. 8:6, Eph. 4:6, James 2:19 – 28 verses say this explicitly), yet Father, Son and Spirit are all described and called God. The Gospel writers speak of Jesus, the Son of God, doing the things only God can do (forgiving sins, offering salvation, giving life, creating, raising the dead, etc.) and John the evangelist declares him to be God (Jn 1:1; 20:28). About forty times three persons are mentioned in the one text. See Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor. 13:13.

None can deny NT speaks of a Tri-une God.

However, the question remains how is he triune? True the NT speaks of the Son as God but it also speaks of him as the incarnate Jesus of Nazareth lying in a cradle, growing as a man, learning, subject to hunger, tiredness, sorrow, ignorance and finally death (Lk 2:7; 2:40; Mk 2:15; 13:32; 14:33; 15:34, Jn 11:35). He is said to be “sent” by the Father, and shown as dependent on the Father and praying to the Father.

The early theologians had to solve this problem.

How can God be three and one? The theological challenge.

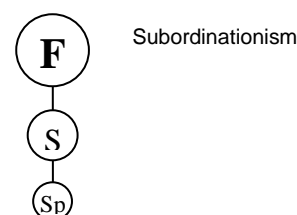
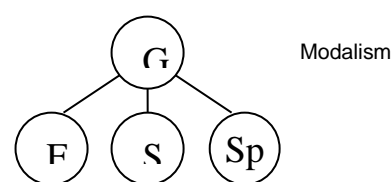
Three very simple early but inadequate and wrong answers

- God is one – just appears in three ways – *modalism*.
- God is three – *tritheism*
- The Father is true God the Son and Spirit lesser God’s, subordinated God - *subordinationism*. (Arianism one form of this error.)

The Bible excludes these three simple answers.

Modalism safeguards absolutely divine unity but denies the eternal differentiation of the divine “persons.”

Tritheism affirms absolutely three divine “persons” but denies divine unity.



Subordinationism makes Jesus and the Spirit lesser God's in one way or another.

Modalism was a constant worry in the early church but the main attack on the developing doctrine of one God in three persons came in the form of subordinationism. On this view God the father alone was true God and somehow the Son and the Spirit were not quite the same standing as the Father.

Incipient form of this error seen in some early theologians such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, but the in full blown form first seen in Arius and then in various forms in those who were called "fourth century Arians". In all expressions of "Arianism" the argument is made that the Father, the Son and the Spirit are ordered hierarchically.

Subordinationism is the perennial error – appeared in almost every century in one form or another, and surprisingly among conservative evangelicals in the late 20th century in support of the subordination of women. God the Father represents men, he has the ruling "role", women have the subordinate "role," – to obey

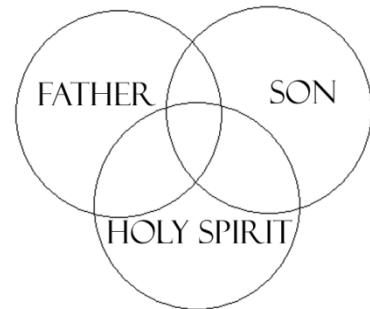
What we learn from historical doctrine is that often the first answers given on nay complex doctrinal question are inadequate but inadequate answers prepare the way for better answers.

The better answer; the best explanation of how God can be one and three.

In this critical hour, *Athanasius* (296-373 AD) stepped forward, definitely one of the truly great theologians of all times. He argued that:

1. God is a "triad" or Trinity for all eternity.
2. Without the Son there could be no Father and vice versa. The two titles are correlatives.
3. To read the Bible rightly, the Bible's own hermeneutical guideline given in Phil 2:4-11 needs to be followed. This disclosed "a double account" of the Son in Scripture, one as eternal God, one as God in the flesh. Much of his work in reply to Arius is exegetical following this rule.
4. Language used of God should not be understood literally. Thus, he rejected Arius argument that the title son indicated he was less than the Father in being or power. Indeed, turned the argument around. Sons have the same being as their father.
5. For him, oneness in being necessitated oneness in power or authority. For Arius because the Son was not one in being with the father he was not one in power and authority. Because for Athanasius the Father and the Son were one in being they were one in power and authority.
6. Also, because the Father and the Son are one, they work as one. Oneness in being implies oneness in work.

Athanasius excludes completely any suggestion that the divine persons are ordered hierarchically, specifically that, the Son is *eternally* subordinated to the Father and must eternally obey him.



The Biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity in more detail.

1. The three divine persons are often spoken of in close proximity as if they are equals. Matt. 28:19, 2 Cor.13:13—in about fifty places the divine three are closely related in the NT. No one “order” in how the persons are mentioned is found in the NT. (i.e., in 2 Cor 13:13 Jesus is mentioned first.)
2. Jesus is called God about 10 times and Lord over 200 times (the title for God in the LXX). Lordship implies absolute rule/authority (Jesus *is* Lord).
3. The language of “sending” in Jewish circles indicated that he who is sent bears the same authority of the sender.
4. The title “Son” when used of Jesus speaks of royal rule, intimacy and sometimes suffering. It does not indicate subordination or subservience.
5. Jesus *functions* as God, offering salvation, healing, raising the dead, and pronouncing judgment, and he is said to have shared in the creation of the world. (In other words, the NT teaches the Son’s *functional equality* with the Father, not functional subordination). *Must conclude, he functions as God because he is God.*
6. He and the Father not only work as one, they have one will. The Son expresses the Father’s will. (Jn 4:34, 5:30, 6:38)
7. Each divine person is nevertheless clearly identified and differentiated. Although they function as one, they each have distinctive work. E.g. the Father sends the Son, the Son “comes” and dies on the cross, the Spirit empowers the believer etc. What is more, they consistently work in an orderly pattern, not randomly.
8. The Son reveals the Father. What we know of God the Father is seen in God the Son. Even the Son’s subordination and suffering tells us something about the Father. Jesus said, “Those who have seen me have seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). The Father and the Son (and the Spirit) are to be distinguished as distinct divine persons but not *divided or separated in any way*.
9. The Son gladly and freely chooses subordination for our salvation, but it is only in the incarnation. It is a voluntary and temporal subordination. (Orthodoxy holds that the Son is eternally one with the Father in being and authority, yet he freely subordinated himself temporally in the incarnation *for our salvation*)
10. The comments in Paul and Hebrews about the Son’s *obedience* (Rom 5:19, Heb 5:7-9) refer to his work on the cross as man – “in the days of his flesh”. As the second Adam he is perfectly obedient and wins our salvation.
11. In heaven the Son continues as God and man but his humanity is glorified and exalted (1 Cor 15:42-43). He reigns as God and man, one person, in all majesty and power.
12. Theological exegesis explains (harmonizes) the seemingly contradictory comments, such as found in Jn 14:28, 1 Cor.11:3 and 1 Cor.15:24-28, so that they do not contradict the overall teaching of the Scriptures. (With every doctrine there are texts that seem to be in conflict with the overall teaching of the Scriptures. A key responsibility of the orthodox theologian is to find a meaning for these few texts so that the Bible speaks with one voice.)

The Cappadocian Fathers

Following Athanasius’ death, his allies, the *Cappadocian Fathers*, took up the pro-Nicene cause. Their main opponent was Eunomius, the leader of the so called a neo-Arians. He and his followers had his own distinctive radical subordinationist teaching. He too agreed that Jesus was God yet, like Arius, he could not allow he was equal or true God. He insisted that the Son was lesser in divinity *and power*. He made much of the idea that the Son had to do as the Father directed. He was under the “authority” of the Father.

Distinctively the Cappadocians taught that

1. The one triune God is a community of persons. Divine unity is relational.
2. The Father is the origin of the Son (the *monarche*) in his eternal begetting, but in distinction to Origen they insisted that this does not imply any diminution whatsoever. In other words they changed Origen's hierarchical order to a horizontal order. They were emphatic: the three persons are *homoousios* – one in being.
3. Oneness of being necessitates oneness in divinity *and in power* and that the divine three work as one (inseparable operations).

From this time on orthodox theologians with one voice have followed this logic. *Given that the divine three are one in being they are one in divinity, one in power/authority, and work as one notwithstanding their eternal differentiation and distinctive work.* On this basis orthodoxy consistently holds that to subordinate the Son in being, work, or authority is to fall into heresy by making the Son in some way less than the Father. Thus the novel post 1970s distinctly evangelical doctrine of the Trinity is clearly outside the bounds of historic orthodoxy. Eternal subordination in function/authority apart from subordination in being is inconceivable, like a round square.

The time of exile

From the time of Aquinas for Roman Catholics, and from the time of Calvin for Protestants, the doctrine of the Trinity “went into exile.” It was thought there was nothing more to say. Its foundational importance for theo-ology was forgotten. Not surprisingly in these centuries the doctrine of the Trinity was often misunderstood or erroneously expounded. Nowhere was this truer than in evangelical circles. Writing in 2004, the conservative Reformed scholar, Robert Letham, is still bemoaning this fact and is sadly still in error on the matter of the eternal subordination of the Son, a doctrine he holds to ensure the ontological subordination of women.

Entering the promised land

It is generally held that Karl Barth initiated the twentieth revival in trinitarian theology. For Roman Catholics, Karl Rahner initiated this renewal in the 1970s. Both men emphasized divine unity in accord with the so-called Western theological tradition.

Rahner is best known for his “rule:” *the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and vice versa*. If he means by this rule that all we know of the eternal triune God apart from history (the immanent Trinity) is revealed in history and Scripture (the economic Trinity) then this his rule should be endorsed without equivocation. If however he is suggesting (as some would have us believe) that what is revealed tells us completely what God is like, or that there is nothing other than what is revealed, or that what happens in history causes God to change, then we should dissent.

In Barth's later writings he moves to a more “plural” view of God by giving emphasis to the distinctive work of each divine person. He also breaks with the tradition by transferring the “double account” of the saviour back into the realm of the eternal. For him the Son is always at one and the same time both Lord and servant. This dialectical understanding of the Son characterizes Barth's Christology.

Building on these ideas and others in vogue, many contemporary trinitarian theologians have stressed the threeness in God, rather than unity. This is called the “social doctrine” of the Trinity. Moltmann is perhaps the most radical in this direction. Pannenberg is not far behind. Among evangelicals, Erickson and Plantinga have followed this trend. In this model of the

Trinity the divine three are depicted as three coequal persons bound together in love, subordinating themselves to one another. No subordination is allowed. Indeed the Trinity is often seen as a charter for human liberation. (See especially on this L Boff, *The Trinity and Society*.) The danger of social trinitarianism is that it can easily fall into tritheism

Rather than giving any support whatsoever to the idea that the Son is eternally subordinated to the Father, the major theological voices of our age suggest that the Trinity gives a model, even prescribes, loving, self-giving, coequal relationships.

The “doing” of theology

The goal of theology/doctrine is to work out what God wants his people to believe and to do in the situation in which they find themselves. Like preaching, it speaks to the present. Exegesis in contrast seeks to give the historical meaning of texts: what the words meant to the original hearers.

So-called “sources” of theology

1. The Scriptures (For evangelicals and Pentecostals our supreme authority.)
2. Tradition
3. Reason
4. Experience

Each term needs unpacking.

- *Scripture* means the whole of scripture, not just proof texts.
- *Tradition* refers to what the best of theologians in the past have concluded is the teaching of the whole of scripture. It is the wisdom of the past, how best to understand scripture on doctrinal issues, **not** a separate “source” of revelation, let alone standing over the Bible. The Creeds and our denominational confessions tell us what the best of theologians have concluded is the overall teaching of Scripture *and its implication for the questions they are addressing*. They settle the debate on what Christians should believe and do. Most conservative systematic theologies are simply summaries of what has been concluded, often telling how this agreement was achieved.
- *Reason* refers to critical thinking, helpful facts and creative “paradigm” constructions.
- *Experience* refers to what we believe. We believe and worship Jesus Christ as God and know the Spirit to be God in our life. Theology seeks to explain our subjective beliefs and inform them. Our experience can be wrong. I.e., I am an unworthy person bound for hell. The Bible says, you are of infinite worth and if you believe in Christ you can go to heaven.

The necessity of theology. Theology needs to be “done” in every age. New questions demand the “doing” of theology. Invariably doing theology involves conflict and division, and often the first answers are inadequate. When “the church” is predominantly in agreement, we have theology/doctrine.

Evangelicals and Pentecostals generally have not been good at “doing” theology. Their slogan, “All we believe comes directly from the Bible” is the main problem. This conceals the true nature of theology/doctrine. It is first of all the fruit of centuries of debate and conflict as to what is the primary teaching of the scriptures on any given matter and then often the attempt to see how this teaching applies to a question or questions not directly addressed by the Scriptures. Nowhere is this truer than the doctrine of the Trinity.

Language about God

All theology is predicated on an understanding of language, especially as it is used of God. Thomas Aquinas argued three possibilities. Language used of God is: *univocal* (literally one for one in meaning); *equivocal* (without human meaning); *analogical* (true but not comprehensive). We should endorse the last. Thus the titles “Father” and “Son,” to use key terms in this debate, reveal accurate information about the two persons and their relationship, but this is not defined by appeal to how we humans use these terms. Rather what is revealed of the divine persons tells us something about our human titles and human relationships.

What we learn from all this is that while the Bible is 100% trinitarian, *the doctrine of the Trinity* was worked out in history by theologians.