

The Essence of God – the Trinity

I have said that when we consider God's essence, we are dealing with things far outside human experience. We find little or no way of illustrating or understanding the truths that God is self-existent, infinite and spirit. The same is true for this fourth description of His essence: God in His essence exists in tri-unity. God is a tri-une Being.

You'll find some people who will tell you that the reason they don't believe in the existence of the Trinity is that the word *trinity* is not found in the Bible. Now that is a pretty dangerous, and I have to add, childish way of doing theology. If we had to apply the same standard, we should not believe in the Bible, because you won't find the word *Bible* in the Bible either. So what? We do not do our theology based upon whether or not we find certain English theological terms in our English translations of the Bible.

We do our theology by examining texts in context for their meaning. This is exactly how we arrived at the doctrine of the Trinity. In fact, you can probably understand better the doctrine of the Trinity if I relate it to you as a story of unfolding understanding.

When Israel was established as a nation they knew that their God was the only God.

Deuteronomy 4:35 *"To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD Himself is God; there is none other besides Him.*

Deuteronomy 4:39 *"Therefore know this day, and consider it in your heart, that the LORD Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other.*

Deuteronomy 32:39 *'Now see that I, even I, am He, And there is no God besides Me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; Nor is there any who can deliver from My hand.*

Isaiah 45:5 *I am the LORD, and there is no other; There is no God besides Me. I will gird you, though you have not known Me,*

Isaiah 46:9 *Remember the former things of old, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like Me,*

Israel rejoiced in the solitariness and transcendent supremacy of Yahweh. The genius of the religion of the Israel was that Yahweh was not merely the loftiest of all the gods, but that no other gods beside Him existed.

Psalms 135:15 *The idols of the nations are silver and gold, The work of men's hands.*

Habakkuk 2:19 ¹⁹ *Woe to him who says to wood, 'Awake!' To silent stone, 'Arise! It shall teach!' Behold, it is overlaid with gold and silver, Yet in it there is no breath at all.*

Psalms 96:5 *For all the gods of the peoples are idols, But the LORD made the heavens.*

The Old Testament Scriptures were not interested in the question of how many persons might there be in God. The Scriptures referenced are concerned with 'godness' -how many beings are there who qualify to be called Elohim? The Bible's answer is that there is only one such being: Yahweh.

The doctrine of God's oneness is not primarily an enumeration of persons, as much as it is an enumeration of god-beings. The unity of God magnifies God's sole status as God, more than it suggests anything about the nature of God's essence. The truth that there is only one Being who is God is taught in the New Testament as well.

John 17:3 *"And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.*

1 Corinthians 8:4 ¶ *Therefore concerning the eating of things offered to idols, we know that an idol is*

nothing in the world, and that there is no other God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as there are many gods and many lords), yet for us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things, and we for Him; and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things, and through whom we live.

1 Timothy 2:5 *For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,*

The testimony of Scripture is unequivocal: only one God exists. No other beings are qualified to be called God.

But the fact that there is only one Being who is God does not mean that that being might not exist in the form of more than one person. The Old Testament never says that explicitly, but it allows for it.

There are already hints in the Old Testament that the essence of God exists in more than a merely singular form. After all, we have a number of statements where God speaks of Himself in the plural.

Genesis 1:26 *Then God said, "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth"*

Genesis 11:7 *Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."*

Isaiah 48:16 *Come near to Me, hear this: I have not spoken in secret from the beginning; From the time that it was, I was there. And now the Lord GOD and His Spirit Have sent Me."*

There is something else in the Old Testament that becomes a bit puzzling. You have this Angel of the LORD, the Angel of Yahweh, who appears to various people. The thing about the angel of Yahweh is that sometimes He speaks on behalf of Yahweh, and sometimes, He speaks as Yahweh. Sometimes, He is relaying what God wants, while in the next moment, He is spoken of as being God.

Judges 13:8-22 Then Manoah prayed to the LORD, and said, "O my Lord, please let the Man of God whom You sent come to us again and teach us what we shall do for the child who will be born." And God listened to the voice of Manoah, and the Angel of God came to the woman again as she was sitting in the field; but Manoah her husband was not with her. Then the woman ran in haste and told her husband, and said to him, "Look, the Man who came to me the other day has just now appeared to me!" So Manoah arose and followed his wife. When he came to the Man, he said to Him, "Are You the Man who spoke to this woman?" And He said, "I am." Manoah said, "Now let Your words come to pass! What will be the boy's rule of life, and his work?" So the Angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Of all that I said to the woman let her be careful. "She may not eat anything that comes from the vine, nor may she drink wine or similar drink, nor eat anything unclean. All that I commanded her let her observe." ¶ Then Manoah said to the Angel of the LORD, "Please let us detain You, and we will prepare a young goat for You." And the Angel of the LORD said to Manoah, "Though you detain Me, I will not eat your food. But if you offer a burnt offering, you must offer it to the LORD." (For Manoah did not know He was the Angel of the LORD.) Then Manoah said to the Angel of the LORD, "What is Your name, that when Your words come to pass we may honor You?" And the Angel of the LORD said to him, "Why do you ask My name, seeing it is wonderful?" So Manoah took the young goat with the grain offering, and offered it upon the rock to the LORD. And He did a wondrous thing while Manoah and his wife looked on -- it happened as the flame went up toward heaven from the altar -- the Angel of the LORD ascended in the flame of the altar! When Manoah and his wife saw this, they fell on their faces to the ground. ¶ When the Angel of the LORD appeared no more to Manoah and his wife, then Manoah knew that He was the Angel of the LORD. And Manoah said to his wife, "We shall surely die, because we have seen God!"

On top of this, there are prophecies about Messiah, who will be born, but at the same time, will be the eternal God.

Micah 5:2 *But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting."*

Isaiah 9:6 *For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon His shoulder. And His name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.*

In other words, there are already hints in the Old Testament that God's being, His essence, may be something more than one person. But until the coming of Christ, these truths were seen through a glass darkly. However, with the coming of Christ, what was implied is now stated directly. Jesus tells us that His Father is God, He tells us that He is God, and He tells us that the Spirit is God.

John 14:8-9 *Philip said to Him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is sufficient for us." ⁹ Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; so how can you say, 'Show us the Father'?"*

John 14:16-17 *And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever -- "the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.*

John 14:26 *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.*

John 15:26 *" But when the Helper comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify of Me.*

Jesus speaks of three persons: His Father, Himself and the Spirit. When He gives the great commission, He says we are to baptise in the name of each one.

Matthew 28:19 *Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,*

Each of these persons is spoken of as God. The Father is taken for granted as being God. Jesus Christ is said to be God.

John 1:1 *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

Furthermore, the Spirit is clearly said to be God.

Acts 5:3-4 *But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and keep back part of the price of the land for yourself? "While it remained, was it not your own? And after it was sold, was it not in your own control? Why have you conceived this thing in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God."*

So now, not only do we have the Old Testament truth that there is only one God, we also have the truth that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. And yet, the Father, the Son and the Spirit are distinguished. All three are seen at Jesus' baptism. The Father sends the Son. The Spirit drives the Son into the wilderness to be tempted. The Father says, "this is my beloved Son' on two occasions. The Son prays to the Father. In Gethsemane, the Son says, 'not my will, but thine be done' The Father is pleased to bruise the Son on the cross. The Son says, "My God, my God why have you forsaken Me" as He offers Himself up to the Father. The Father and the Son send the Spirit.

So now we have seven propositions, all of which are found in Scripture which we have to

harmonise.

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Spirit is God.
4. The Father is not the Son.
5. The Son is not the Spirit.
6. The Spirit is not the Father.
7. There is one God.

One God - three persons who are each said to be God. They are not the same person. This was the information that the church had, and still has, when the New Testament was completed.

Now the church did not immediately write out a doctrine of the Trinity. Why not? Well, for one, the apostolic teaching was still known in the first two centuries, so you didn't need written affirmation, you could just go to one of the churches planted by the apostles and see what they were teaching there.

Two, persecution was abounding. When the church is in the heat of persecution, it does not have the time and freedom to write out extended defences. It simply knows what it believes, and sings it while being fed to the lions.

Three, it was heresies that pushed the church to define what it did not believe. You see, when everyone agrees on a doctrine, it is taken for granted. There is no need to draw borders around it and say, 'Don't cross'. But when heretics begin appearing, that is when you have to say, "No, we don't believe *that*" or "You can say it *this* way, but not *that* way."

Now you will find some people telling you that the doctrine of the Trinity was only developed in the third or fourth century. That's untrue. The doctrine was *believed* from the time of the apostles; the doctrine was only *defended* using technical language after the third century, because by then, the various heresies had been assaulting the church.

The heresies were an attempt to explain those seven propositions, but they did so by denying one or more of them. And once you deny a biblical truth to explain another biblical truth, you are a heretic.

The first was something called Adoptionism. This said that God the Father crowned the man Jesus with special status at His baptism. So, in this way, God was one, Jesus was not God, but exalted to a special status by God. By the early 200s, the church was saying, "No, that is not true. Jesus did not become God. Jesus was always God." Today you will find modern believers in this in the Mormons, with some variations.

The most famous was developed by a man named Arius. Arius felt that the only way to preserve the truth that there is only one God is to say that the Father is God, but the Son was the creation of God. Therefore, the Son is not one with God in essence; He is not eternal and self-existent. He was made by the Father. Arius took texts which speak of the weakness of Jesus in His humanity, and tried to prove that Jesus was not one with God in His essence; He must be a creature. Today you will find the descendants of Arius in the Jehovah's Witnesses. They will even tell you that Arius was right, and it was purely by a lot of political manipulation that Constantine forced the doctrine of the Trinity to prevail. The truth is, the church condemned Arianism in 325, and again in 381. The church resoundingly answered, Jesus is of the same essence as the Father. The Father, the Son and the Spirit are each God from eternity past.

Probably the most creative solution was something known as Sabellianism, or Modalism. This said, there is only one God, but He has manifested Himself in different ways. Sometimes, He took the mode of the Father. Other times, he took the mode or the role of the Son. Other times, He took the mode or the role of the Spirit. So, in this way, they explained that the threeness of God is really just an appearance. God is one, and one Person, who manifests Himself differently. Today, you will find the descendant of Sabellianism in groups like the Oneness Pentecostals. But this teaching was again condemned by the Council of Nicea and at Constantinople. The church rightly said if this is true, then did the Father suffer on the cross? Was Jesus praying to Himself in the garden? The church said, “No, you cannot say that God is three, only in the sense that He has three roles, or three faces. He is three in essence.

These heresies tried to preserve God's oneness, but failed to properly preserve His threeness.

So this is then how the church came to understand those seven statements about God. There is only one Being who is God. There is only one Being who is spirit, and self-existent and infinite. However, this one Being has always existed in three Persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They are not three eternals, or three infinities, or three self-existents. Whatever is the essence of God is shared equally by all three. A partially accurate illustration of this would be Siamese twins, who share one heart or one set of lungs. Both persons partake of the very same essence.

The Athanasian Creed put it like this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance.

When we say they are three persons, we have to be careful that we do not think of them the way we think of individual persons in the modern sense. To think of three persons as three distinct entities is tritheism – three gods. There are not three wills in God. What each of the members of the Trinity desires, the others desire. What each wills, the other wills. None of them can live independently of the others. It is a wrong idea of the Trinity to imagine that the three persons have to discuss things with each other to reach agreement. They are agreed because they share one essence of life. Yet they are distinct Persons with distinct offices and actions. Yet they perform acts distinct from one another: The Spirit seals, the Son intercedes, the Father grants gifts. However, when they do their acts, they do it with the power and life of the others.

Many of the things we see in Scripture are done by all three. The Father created, the Son created, the Spirit created. The Father raised Jesus. Jesus raised Himself. The Spirit raised Jesus. They love each other. They seek to bless each other. The Spirit seeks to exalt the Son. The Son glorifies the Father. The Father loves the exaltation of His Son. The Son is delighted to send His Spirit.

When we speak of our God, we are talking about something that is life beyond what we can picture, like centipedes trying to imagine human social life. This is life on the highest, purest level. Three persons, whose persons are distinct, but yet still completely dependent on one another. Three persons who have loved each other perfectly for all eternity.

Now, someone might ask if we really need to know this. Is it important to know?

There are four answers to that:

First, if God chooses to reveal it, then it is important. Being finite, lost and blind humans, we are pretty bad at deciding what is important to know and what isn't. If God speaks about it, it is relevant, whether I can see it right now or not.

Second, the truth of the Trinity is vital to the gospel. The gospel is the Father sending His Son to be our substitute. The Son offers Himself up as a substitute for us. But to whom does He offer Himself up? If God is only one Person, then God is offering Himself up to Himself. God sends Himself. God punishes Himself. That makes no sense, and it violates what the Bible says about the atonement.

2 Corinthians 5:21 - 6:1 For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.

Third, the truth of the Trinity is part of Christian living. In fact, we cannot live without it, for now we know that the Spirit brought us to the Son, and the Son shows us the Father. We know that the Spirit indwells us to make us like the Son, to the glory of the Father. We now know that we pray in the Spirit through the name of the Son to the Father. We now know that the Scriptures are revealed to us by the Spirit, who shows us the Son in them, which brings glory to the Father. On and on we could go, as we now see the Trinitarian way that our Christian lives now function.

Fourth, the truth of the Trinity is now vital to our worship. We now know that God is revealed as eternally existent in three persons. How can we neglect or ignore this precious truth? That is like finding out that a woman is married, but refusing to call her by her married name. It is true that her maiden name was once x, but to keep using that is insulting. It is true that once God's people didn't even ask the question about how many persons are in God. But now that Christ has come, we cannot help asking that question. It has been forced upon us. It has been revealed to us. We must deal with it. And when we contemplate this truth, it ought to fill us with awe and reverence. We ought to again realise that no human mind could have invented this truth. The essence of God is above and beyond our finite minds. We ought to sing, and pray and adore the three persons of the Trinity. Can we sing or pray to the Spirit? Is He a person? Is He equal to the Father and the Son? Then, as the church has always done, we sing to Him, we praise Him, we pray to Him, as we do to the Son, and to the Father.