

IN DEFENSE OF THE TRINITY

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Introduction

I was astounded, flabbergasted, and all out surprised to hear the Mormon Tabernacle Choir change the words and (for that matter) the whole theology to one of my favorite hymns. Oh yes, they began correctly, but at the end of the verse where the music and the theology should have climaxed into the pinnacle of Christian joy and exuberance, a terrible collision occurred. No, not a physical collision but a spiritual collision. The collision between right and wrong theology. The collision between orthodoxy and heresy. The collision between a high view of God and a slanderous minimization of His person and nature. You see, instead of singing “God in three persons, blessed Trinity”¹ the choir sang “God in thy glory, through eternity.”²

It is no secret that there are many religious groups who deny the Trinity. Matter of fact, it is safe to say that most faith systems outside of evangelical Christianity and Catholicism deny the triunity of God. Therefore, the sacred doctrine of the Trinity must be defended in every possible instance. Trinitarianism is a cardinal doctrine of the Christian church because it is the very essence and nature of who God is. It inevitably defines whether one believes in the one true God or a God of their own making. (Matthew 15:9; Romans 1:25) Rowan Williams states that: “Trinitarian theology, in so far as it is concerned with what ‘kind’ of God Christians worship, is far from being a luxury indulged in solely by remote and ineffectual dons; it is of cardinal importance for

¹ Reginald Heber and John B. Dykes, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (No. 20) in *Inspiring Hymns* (Grand Rapids, MI: Singspiration Sacred Music Publishers, 1951)

² Mormon Tabernacle Choir, “Holy, Holy, Holy”, Filmed [March 2013], YouTube Video, 00:56, Posted [March 2013], <https://youtu.be/2qCmtUhiKcA?t=56s>.

spirituality and liturgy, for ethics, for the whole of Christian self-understanding.”³ The goal of this paper is to give a brief history, summarize opposing belief systems, and Biblically defend trinitarianism as a cardinal doctrine of the Christian church.

History

Trinitarian doctrine had been around for many years, but controversy surrounding the relationship of Christ and the Spirit to the Father in the fourth Century revealed that it was a cardinal doctrine deserving attention as a heresy called Arianism⁴ began to oppose it. Arius of Alexandria “...an antitrinitarian presbyter of Alexandria, distinguished the one eternal God from the Son who was generated by the Father and who thus had a beginning. He also taught that the Holy Spirit was the first thing created by the Son since all things were made by the Son.”⁵ A debate ensued with Alexander, Bishop of the diocese in Alexandria with no common ground able to be reached. The Council of Nicea worked hard at finding some sort of compromise almost to no avail due in part to Alexander’s chief theological adviser, Athanasius. “Time and again the young Athanasius refused to accept any statement that left in doubt the full divinity of the Son.”⁶ Finally, Constantine proposed that the Son be defined “as being “of the same substance”

³ Rowan Williams. *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI / Cambridge, U.K., 2007), 142.

⁴ Arianism is a heresy promoted in the 4th century by Arius, the Bishop of Alexandria. This aberrant doctrine teaches that Jesus was a created being thus denying His deity, eternity, and equality with God the Father.

⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1999), 65.

⁶ Ted M. Dorman, *Faith For All Seasons: Historic Christian Belief in Its Classical Expression*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holdman Publishers, 2001), 156.

(*homoousion*) as the Father”⁷ which is considered to this day proper orthodox terminology for defining the relationship of the Son to the Father in a Christological context.

While the Council of Nicea had defined the relation of Christ to the Father, there still was controversy in the church relating to the Holy Spirit. Pneumatomachians or “fighters against the Spirit” viewed the Son and the Spirit not as the “same” substance as the Father but as “like” substance with the Father. In other words, the Son and the Spirit were similar but not the same as the Father. The debate grew very heated to the point that Emperor Theodosius called a council at Constantinople in 381 lead by Gregory of Nazianzus to settle this issue. The creed that came out of that council left no room to equivocate on the deity of the Spirit but the terminology evaded the “same” substance clause that was used for the relationship between the Son and the Father: “And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Life-giving, who proceeds from the Father, who is to be glorified with the Father and the Son, and who speaks through the prophets.”⁸

Athanasius worked hard to make sure that the doctrine of the Trinity did not in any way deny the deity of Christ. Tertullian was an early pioneer of trinitarianism and even though his view of the Son being subordinate to the Father was flawed and eventually led to Arianism; “His coining of the term “Trinity,” together with his formula that defined God as “one substance consisting in three persons,” provided the Western Church with a Trinitarian model that in turn eventually formed the basis for orthodox Christology, striking a balance between the unity and diversity within the Godhead that was all too often lacking in the Eastern wing of the Church.”⁹

⁷ Ibid. 156.

⁸ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1999), 67.

⁹ Ted M. Dorman, *Faith For All Seasons: Historic Christian Belief in Its Classical Expression*, (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holdman Publishers, 2001), 53.

Of course, there were many who assisted in making this cardinal doctrine a standard part of orthodoxy in the church but one man stood out, Augustine.

Augustine wrote an unimpeachable defense of the Trinity in *De Trinitate* where he warned about the importance of this doctrine: “In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.” (Augustine *De Trinitate* 1.3.5) “In this treatise he stated that each of the three Persons of the Trinity possesses the entire essence and that all are interdependent on the others... He also taught that the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son.”¹⁰

Opposing Belief Systems

There have been, are, and undoubtedly will be many different heresies that oppose the Trinity. However, Arianism and Sabellianism stand out as glaring and enduring in their opposition of this wonderful doctrine. As discussed previously, Arianism was the heresy that put the Trinity front and center as a cardinal doctrine of the church. Arius used passages that included the words “begotten” and “firstborn” such as John 1:14, 3:16, and 1 John 4:9 to support his position that Jesus was generated by the Father. The Greek term for “only begotten” (μονογενής—*monogenēs*) does not suggest a beginning point in time but rather means that Jesus as the only-begotten Son of God is “unique,” “the only one of its kind,” “the only example of its category.” In other words, “only-begotten” is used to mark out Jesus uniquely above all earthly and heavenly beings. No one else radiated the glory of the Father. (John 1:14) The Son “explained” the Father and no one but the unique Son could explain the Father. (John 1:18) It was the unique Son whom God sent into the world and it was only through His unique Son that eternal life was and could be provided. In examining the aforementioned passages, it is evident that only-begotten does not suggest a coming

¹⁰ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1999), 67.

into existence, but rather it expresses the uniqueness of the person. Christ was unique as the Son of God, sent by the Father from heaven.

Jehovah's Witnesses hold to Arianism and "...believe that the Bible teaches that Jesus is the Son of God, not part of a Trinity. (Mark 12:29)"¹¹ Many in the evangelical church try to peg Arianism on the Mormon church as well, but it seems that their views are more in line with Modalism. The Mormon Newsroom website states: "Latter-day Saints believe God the Father, Jesus Christ and the Holy Ghost are one in will and purpose but are not literally the same being or substance, as conceptions of the Holy Trinity commonly imply."¹²

Modalism or Sabellianism is a heresy that came from Modalistic Monarchianism, which taught that "...the Father became incarnated in the Son."¹³ In the West, this heresy took a bit of a twist and was known as "...Patripassianism since the incarnated Father also suffered in the Son."¹⁴ The Eastern twist to Modalistic Monarchianism was called Sabellianism (Modalism) claiming that God is one person who appears/ed in three different forms or modes. One of the largest proponents of the heresy today is the United Pentecostal church whose statement on antitrinitarianism reads:

"God has revealed Himself as Father (in parental relationship to humanity), in the Son (in human flesh), and as the Holy Spirit (in spiritual action). (See Deuteronomy 32:6 and Isaiah 63:16; Luke 1:35 and Galatians 4:4; Genesis 1:2 and Acts 1:8.) The one God existed as Father, Word, and Spirit before His incarnation as Jesus Christ, the Son of God; and while Jesus walked on earth as God Himself incarnate, the Spirit of God continued to be omnipresent. However, the Bible does not teach that there are three distinct centers of

¹¹ "Are Jehovah's Witnesses Christians?" JW.org, (accessed October 18, 2015), <http://is.gd/KpXDjl>.

¹² "Mormonism 101: What is Mormonism," The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints Newsroom, (accessed October 18, 2015), <http://is.gd/RsH7QY>.

¹³ Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, (Colorado Springs, CO: Victor Books, 1999), 65.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 65.

consciousness in the Godhead or that Jesus is one of three divine persons.”¹⁵ (A detailed statement of this doctrine can still be found on individual church websites such as the one below although the main UPC website has deleted it.)

Along with the United Pentecostal Church’s position on the oneness of God, it insists that people should be baptized only in the name of Jesus claiming that it is the Biblical way¹⁶ even though Jesus commanded the disciples to baptize in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (Matthew 28:19)

The problem with Modalism is that it denies the deity of Christ and the Spirit even though adherents claim to believe in their deity. Modalism also denies the personal relationships within the Trinity that is so vividly shown in John 17:22-24 as Jesus prays to the Father saying: "22 The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; 23 I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. 24 Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.”

Biblical Defense of the Trinity

Definition

It is true that the word “Trinity” is not found in the Bible, yet its reality is there. It is also true that “Trinity” may not be the best term for the plurality of the Godhead, but there isn’t a better one in the English language. Unfortunately, the term “Trinity” is rather ambiguous because it can

¹⁵ “The Oneness of God,” The Pentecostals of the Bay Area, (accessed October 18, 2015), <http://is.gd/yYTnPj>.

¹⁶ “New Testament Salvation,” The Pentecostals of the Bay Area, (accessed October 18, 2015), <http://is.gd/yYTnPj>.

emphasize ...the state of being three without any implication as to the unity of the three.”¹⁷ A proper understanding must include the distinctness and equality of the three persons as well as also include the unity of those persons within the Trinity. Christian scholarship has suggested terms like “Triunity” or “Triune God” as possible options, but all have their set of problems in that man cannot completely articulate one of the greatest mysteries of all revealed truth. It is beyond human comprehension how there is one God with three persons who are each fully God, and each person have individual responsibilities within the Godhead. A term cannot describe such complexness and even a concise definition has difficulty in encompassing all that the Trinity involves.

Lewis Sperry Chafer’s definition is clear and accurate: “The Trinity is composed of three united Persons without separate existence—so completely united as to form One God. The divine nature subsists in three distinctions—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ The Trinity is three persons in one essence but the word “persons” tends to detract from the unity of the Trinity and seems to be an inadequate term to describe the relationship within the Trinity. The term “subsistence” seems to lend itself better to the concept of unity within the Godhead yet gives a delineation between the persons. John Calvin states: “By person, then, I mean a subsistence in the Divine essence,—a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by incommunicable properties.”¹⁹ In suggesting God is three with respect to His Persons, emphasis must also be given that each Person has the same essence as God and possesses God’s fullness. God is not one and

¹⁷ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 91.

¹⁸ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1964), 276.

¹⁹ John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian Classics Ethereal Library), 116.

yet three but one in three. The doctrine of the Trinity is hard to understand and hard to define because in it we see God's transcendence.

The Trinity's Unity

The Trinity is a unity. God is not a composite nor is He vulnerable to any type of division. Henry Thiessen peppers this thought throughout his explanation of the unity of God by saying: "The unity of God means that there is but one God and that the divine nature is undivided and indivisible. ... God does not consist of parts nor can he be divided into parts. ... The unity of God allows for the existence of personal distinctions in the divine nature, while at the same time recognizing that the divine nature is numerically and eternally one."²⁰ Both the Old and New Testaments make the unity of God clear although the Old Testament does seem to have an emphasis on the unity of the Trinity while the New Testament emphasizes its plurality. Lewis Sperry Chafer wrote: "In general, the Old Testament emphasizes the unity of God, a fact which is also taught in the New Testament. Both the Old Testament and to a greater extent the New Testament, however, also indicate that God exists as a Trinity – God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit."²¹

A key passage in the Old Testament that gives a strong declarative statement about the unity of God is "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (Deuteronomy 6:4)²² The emphasis in this verse is that all three Persons of the Trinity possess the sum total of the divine

²⁰ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 89.

²¹ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 39.

²²All Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible (®), Copyright 1960-1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by Permission. www.lockman.org.

attributes, but yet the essence of God is undivided. This oneness in essence also emphasizes that the three Persons of the Trinity do not act independently from the other. The conclusion from verses such as Exodus 20:3 and Deuteronomy 5:7 was that the understanding of the unity of God was not only well known, but it was also expected.

The New Testament is no different regarding its testimony to the unity of the Trinity and shows that this important doctrine was emphasized not only in Judaism but in Christianity as well. In Mark 12:29, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:4 as he responds to a scribe's taunting question. As Paul spoke to the church and emphasized the "ones"—one body, one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism in Ephesians 4:4-5 he closes with the key example of unity that the body must have by saying in verse 6: "one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all." In John 10:30 Jesus told questioning Jews: "I and the Father are one." In John 14:9, Jesus told Philip: "...He who has seen Me has seen the Father..." All of these passages along with many others point to the unity of the Trinity. The difficult part for us to understand is that unity and plurality are not an "either/or" concept when it comes to God but "both/and."

The Trinity's Plurality

Henry Thiessen defines the plurality of the Trinity by saying: "...there are three eternal distinctions in the one divine essence, known respectively as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three distinctions are three persons, and one may speak of the tripersonality of God. We worship the triune God."²³ While the Old Testament does not contain a full revelation of the Trinity, it does give indications as to its existence as well as its plurality. The Old Testament certainly affirms the Trinity and implies that God is a triune being in a number of passages. Plural pronouns are

²³ Henry Clarence Thiessen, *Lectures in Systematic Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 90.

clear and leave no doubt as to the plurality of the Godhead. "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" Genesis 1:26 declares. As God discusses throwing man out of the Garden in Genesis 3:22 He says: "Behold, the man has become like one of Us..." At the Tower of Babel all the persons of the Trinity were involved in the confusion of the people's speech: "Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language..." (Genesis 11:7) As God speaks to Isaiah in Isaiah 6:8, He says: "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" Passages such as Genesis 1:1-2; Isaiah 48:16; 61:1 and 63:7-10 all clearly show the Trinity's Threeness and in the wisdom literature Jehovah is declared to have a Son (Psalm 2:7; Proverbs 3:4).

In more technical terms the construct of the Biblical languages in the Old Testament shows the plurality of the Trinity through plural verbs (Genesis 20:13; 35:7; 2 Samuel 7:23), plural titles (Job 35:10; Psalm 149:2; Ecclesiastes 12:1; Isaiah 54:5), God's name applied to more than one person in the same context (Psalm 45:6; 110:1; Hosea 1:7), and the name Jehovah applied to the angel of Jehovah otherwise known as a theophany (Genesis 22:11-12; Exodus 3:1-4; Judges 13:17).

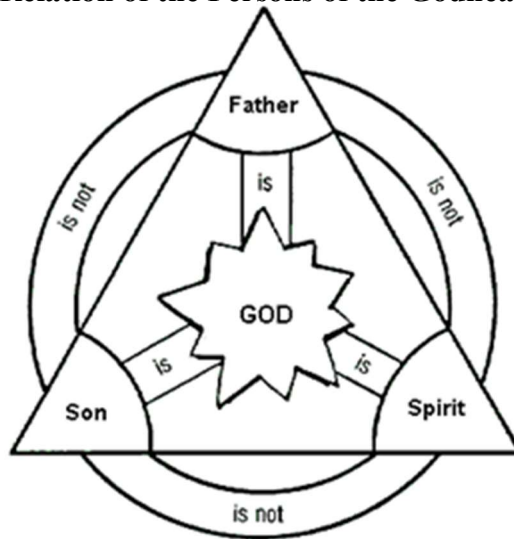
The plurality of the Trinity may seem obscure in the Old Testament, but the New Testament leaves little doubt. The Father is called God (Matthew 11:25; John 6:27), the Son is called God (Matthew 1:23; John 1:1; 20:28; Romans 9:5), and the Holy Spirit is called God (Acts 5:3-4; 1 Corinthians 3:16; John 14:16). In Matthew 28:19 all three persons of the Godhead are shown as associated equals. The word "name" in the Greek is in the singular form which clearly indicates that there is one God with three distinct persons within the Godhead—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Robert Reymond says:

"Jesus does NOT say, (1) "into the names (plural) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, or what is its virtual equivalent," (2) "into the name of the Father, and into the name of the Son, and into the name of the Holy Spirit," as if we had to deal with three separate Beings. Nor does he say, (3) "into the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,"

(omitting the three recurring articles), as if the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit might be taken as merely three designations of a single person. What He DOES say is: (4) “into the name [singular] of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,” first asserting the unity of the three by combining them all within the bounds of the single name, and then throwing into emphasis the distinctness of each by introducing them in turn with the repeated article.”²⁴

Clearly, we see the Scriptures affirm that there is one God, but within the unity of the Godhead, there are three coequal and co-eternal persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As unified and coequal and co-eternal as they are, the New Testament makes clear that The Father, Son, and Holy spirit are distinct personalities who exist together (Matthew 3:16-17; John 14:26; 15:26; Ephesians 2:18; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6). The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, but none is the other. In other words, while each Person of the Trinity is God, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is not the Father, etc... Table 1 illustrates the relation each person of the Godhead has to the other.

Table 1²⁵
Relation of the Persons of the Godhead



²⁴ Robert L. Reymond, *Jesus, Divine Messiah: The New Testament Witness*, (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1990), 84.

²⁵ www.gotquestions.org/img/trinity.jpg

The Trinity's Function

As distinct persons in the Trinity, none is of higher authority than the other although each have different roles. Notice the roles each person of the Godhead plays in a believer's salvation. "The Father sends, directs, and predestines. The Son does the will of the Father, becomes flesh, and accomplishes redemption. The Holy Spirit indwells and sanctifies the Church."²⁶ The Father chose us (Ephesians 1:4), predestined us (Ephesians 1:5; Romans 8:29) and gave the elect to Christ (John 6:39). The Father then sent Jesus His only begotten son (John 3:16; 6:44; 8:18) from heaven not to do His own will but to carry out the Father's will (John 6:38) so that he could accomplish the redemption of mankind (2 Corinthians 5:21; 1 Peter 2:24). The Father and the Son sent the Holy Spirit (John 16:7) when Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father.

Conclusion

The Trinity is a doctrine that is so important because it deals with who God is. For us as mere humans there is no way to completely grasp or articulate all of which this great truth encompasses. To deny the Trinity is to deny who God is and 1 John 2:23 is clear when it says that "Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father..." This doctrine defines orthodoxy and must be handled very carefully because "It is a doctrine that is closely connected to other key doctrines like the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit. ...our salvation is rooted in the mysterious nature of the Godhead who coexists as three distinct Persons all of whom are involved in our salvation in all its aspects, past, present, and future. It encompasses everything we know and practice as Christians—our sanctification, our fellowship, our prayer life, our Bible study, or our corporate

²⁶ Matt Slick, "The Ontological and Economic Trinity," CARM, (accessed October 18, 2015), <http://is.gd/kydL64>.

worship.”²⁷ The goal of this paper was to give a brief history, summarize opposing belief systems, and Biblically defend trinitarianism as a cardinal doctrine of the Christian church.

²⁷ J. Hampton Keathly, III, “The Trinity (Triunity) of God,” Bible.org, (accessed October 18, 2015), <http://is.gd/4ZcXbl>.

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