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The Trinity is (not are) God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit.

DONALD GREY BARNHOUSE

The doctrine of the Trinity is basic to the Christian religion. It is no exaggeration to assert that the whole of Christianity stands or falls with it.

R. B. KUIPER

Our sincerest effort to grasp the incomprehensible mystery of the Trinity must remain forever futile, and only by deepest reverence can it be saved from actual presumption.

A. W. TOZER

## THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY: IS IT BIBLICAL?

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*Tom Wells*

Among the many things that ought to humble us is how little we know about God. We may measure this ignorance in several ways. First, we must feel keenly how little we know of the revelation of God that we have in the Scriptures. We have found Augustine's oft-quoted maxim true: "The Scriptures are a river in which an infant may wade and an elephant may swim."<sup>1</sup> Some of us who once hoped to be elephantine in mastering the Book have, in fact, demonstrated the clumsiness of an elephant while wading in its fringes.

There is, however, a larger ignorance which is ours. Our baby steps have not only *not* brought us to midstream in God's Book but since God is infinite there is always another boundless ocean of Deity yet to be fathomed. This may well be the work of eternity. No wonder more than one theologian has spoken of *Deus Absconditus*, "the hidden God." Is it arrogance, then, that drives us on in seeking to know God? Hardly. Three other things are at work here. First, the Scriptures are full of him. Second, the impulse to integrate what little we know drives us on. Third, there are practical implications in true and false views of God. I can illustrate this with a simple question: If Christ is a mere man and not God, where is God's self-sacrificing love in sending him to die?

In discussing God as *Trinity* we are doing something we are not often able to do. We are discussing God as he has

always existed in himself. The overwhelming number of facts that the Bible gives us concerning God have to do with how he relates to us. He is our Creator, Provider, Redeemer and Judge. All of this is relatively clear. But in speaking of the Trinity we are asking about God's nature. We are asking the question, what was God like *then*, in eternity past? Were there "persons" in the Trinity? If so, how did they relate to one another? Philosophy has spoken on these subjects, but "what saith the Scripture?"

Two facts in Scripture provide the basic materials from which the doctrine of the Trinity arises. First, there is one—and only one—God. Second, in Scripture there are three "persons" that are entitled to this name.

#### THE FACT OF THE ONENESS OF GOD

If we ask the question, "How many gods are there?" we may answer it from the Bible in a number of ways. The most obvious way is to quote verses that assert God's uniqueness. For instance, in blessing the assembly gathered at the dedication of the first temple, Solomon asked *Yahweh* to maintain "the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires; so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other" (1 Kings 8:59-60). Again, our Lord Jesus spoke of "the only true God" (John 17:3). The apostle Paul wrote, "[T]here is one God" (1 Timothy 2:5). Finally, James warned his readers: "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the devils believe—and shudder" (James 2:19). As important as these texts are, however, from Genesis 1 onward the Bible also simply assumes the reality of but one God. The assumption shows itself several ways.

First, there is clearly no room for a plurality of gods in the account of creation. While the idea of a "universe" may come later in history than the writings of Moses, Genesis 1 clearly looks on the entire creation as coming from the intention and activity of a single Creator. "In the beginning

... God created the heavens and the earth." (Genesis 1:1). All things were made by God, without remainder. The record speaks of that most mysterious and complex of all things, life, and traces it up to the voice of God (1:20-25). Life in its highest form, humanity, comes directly from the determination of God (1:26-27). When God rested, he saw nothing that he had not made (1:31; 2:1-2).

All of this stands in marked contrast to other accounts of creation. We may take the Babylonian creation epic as an example. In it we find gods, not the God of heaven and earth. Man himself "is formed from the mixture of the blood of a slain god and the clay of Mesopotamia."<sup>2</sup> This epic "is typical of the primitive myths of cosmogony of the ancient world, but yields valuable comparative material. Its significance for biblical scholarship lies in the contrasting restrained dignity and firm monotheism of the Genesis account. The basic difference is that which lies between truth and its corruption."<sup>3</sup> This last point is worth underlining. Traditions of creation span the globe, suggesting an original, truthful account. The content of that account comes to us in the Genesis record. And it asserts monotheism, the doctrine of one God.

When we come to the fall of man, we find the same thing. At first blush we might think we have found a competitor for the title "god" in the serpent or in the one who lies behind the serpent, Satan. *Dualism*, the view that there are two ultimate forces (gods) in the universe, has often seduced both the world and the professed church over the centuries. But it finds no support here. No sooner has the serpent misled Adam and Eve than God appears as the final arbiter of the destinies of both the serpent and humanity. He is the supreme and unchallenged authority.

The Lord God said to the serpent, "Because you have done this, cursed are you among all animals and among all wild

creatures; upon your belly you shall go, and dust you shall eat all the days of your life. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will strike your head and you will strike his heel" (Genesis 3:14-15).

The serpent could compete with God through God's representative, man, but in the end he would receive a fatal blow. More than that, if anyone mistook the man and woman as having become equals with their Maker, God ordains their future as well, in verses 16-19. We do not have to ask if we are gods; we have lived out the judgment against us in the pain of childbirth and the sweat of our faces.

We do not need to trace the idea of competition with God through the entire Bible, but it clearly existed, and in each case God asserted his unique authority. The contest at the Exodus brought the God of heaven and earth into collision with the gods of Egypt, and the Exodus itself was its conclusive product. God's promise to Israel was, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God. You shall know that I am the Lord, who has freed you from the burdens of the Egyptians" (Genesis 6:7). Generally speaking the Israelites did not believe this promise (6:9), but in retrospect God could say:

[H]as any god ever attempted to go and take a nation for himself from the midst of another nation, by trials, by signs and wonders, by war, by a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, and by terrifying displays of power, as the Lord your God did for you in Egypt before your very eyes? To you it was shown so that you would acknowledge that the Lord is God; there is no other besides him (Deuteronomy 4:34-35).

God's unparalleled display of power was meant to teach

Israel a single lesson: The Lord alone is God. He has no competition. Of course this was a lesson that they needed to learn repeatedly. We hear it in the words of Joash concerning Baal: "If he is a god [but he is *not!*], let him contend for himself . . ." (Judges 6:31). We hear it again in David's confident word to Goliath, "[T]he battle is the Lord's" (1 Samuel 17:47). Why was that so? Because he is "the *living* God" (17:36), not a figment of man's imagination or the work of an artisan's hands. Centuries later a diet of grass taught Nebuchadnezzar the same lesson again (Daniel 4:29-35).

### GOD IN THREE PERSONS

The scriptural proof of the oneness of God is fairly straightforward. It consists of two clear points. First, the Bible explicitly teaches the oneness of God in many verses. Second, even where it is not explicitly taught, it is assumed. The activities ascribed to God implicitly exclude all competition. These points are so plain that serious Bible students today are content with the unity of God as a fundamental fact.

When we turn to the "threeness" of God, however, the situation changes somewhat. The fact of the unity of God seems itself to call any further development of our understanding of God into question. Why not, then, leave the matter there? Our minds rest nicely in the thought of one omnipotent God. And certainly that is the truth Scripture sets before us.

The question about "persons" in God arises first of all in an observation: the Bible seems to treat a man, Jesus Christ, as God. Historically this fact more than any other led eventually to the doctrine of the Trinity. As men and women read the Scriptures they could not escape this fact. Somehow the deity of Jesus Christ had to be reconciled with the unity of God. Only later did the same observation

about the Holy Spirit also demand an explanation. But we are not primarily interested in this as a historical problem worked out among theologians in their councils. In this article we want to hear the Bible on this subject.

There are two ways in which the Bible, and especially the New Testament, sets forth the deity of Christ. One way is by simply asserting it. The other way is by associating Christ with God as an apparent equal.

Let's take these two items, one at a time.

Does the New Testament assert that Jesus is God? Clearly it does.<sup>4</sup> The earliest portion of John's gospel provides some of the clearest evidence in the following verses:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (1:1, 3, 14, 18).

The amount of evidence in these few verses is quite convincing once we realize that "the Word" is a name for Jesus Christ, the One who walked among men in the first century. How do we establish this? Verse 14 declares it in unmistakable terms when it says, "the Word became flesh." For John this means simply, "the Word became a man." Though that is not its only use in the New Testament, the word "flesh" often means "man" or "a human being." For instance, Jesus describes his own authority to his Father in these words: "[Y]ou have given him authority over all people" (John 17:2), where "people" translates the Greek word for "flesh." Peter quotes God through the prophet Joel, saying, "I will pour out my Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 1:17) where the con-

text shows that all kinds of people are in view. In explaining how men and women are made right with God, Paul says, "For 'no human being will be justified in his sight' by deeds prescribed by the law . . ." (Romans 3:20). The words "human being" represent the single word "flesh" in the Greek text. And one last instance where "no one" is literally "no flesh": "God chose what is low and despised in the world, . . . so that *no one* might boast in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1:28-29). Once we understand that "flesh" in John 1:14 means "man" or "human" we are prepared to look at the passage as a whole.

Verse 1 makes the deity of Christ plain in two ways. First, it tells us that "in the beginning"—whenever that was, whether ten thousand years ago or ten billion years ago—the Word already existed. If the Word existed at the beginning, before anything was created, he must have been God. But there is more. John removes all doubt by saying plainly, "[A]nd the Word was God." Verse 3 confirms both these truths in another way by telling us that absolutely nothing was made without him. He, then, was not a created being. An uncreated being, of course, is the uncreated God. Verse 18 also calls him "God the only Son," giving the prologue a set of bookends, as it were, by declaring the deity of Christ in both the first and the last verses.<sup>5</sup>

The rest of the gospel of John assumes the equality between Jesus and God. Note what happens after Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "My Father is still working, and I am also working" (5:17). John goes on: "For this reason the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because he was not only breaking the Sabbath but was also calling God his own Father, thereby making himself equal to God" (5:18). If we ask the question, "Is this John's assessment of Jesus or the assessment of the Jewish leaders?" the answer is probably "both." The leaders, however, would have thought of Jesus setting himself forth as a competitor of the one true God.

That would have been the farthest thing from John's mind. John goes on to expound the idea of family likeness between the Father and the Son in the following verses. The Son does what the Father does (5:19). The Father, on the other hand, shows the Son exactly what he does. The picture is of an obedient son "learning the trade" of his father in much the same way as Jesus became a carpenter through Joseph's direction. This family likeness extends to raising people from the dead (5:21), judging mankind (5:22) and giving the Son the honor that belongs to God alone (5:23). And all of this is already implied in the words, "The Father loves the Son *and shows him all that he himself is doing . . .*" (5:20). Who else but God has the capacity to take in all that God the Father is doing?

It is Christ's capacity for this kind of comprehensive knowledge that leads finally to the words of Matthew 28:18, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."<sup>6</sup> God "has put everything under his feet" (1 Corinthians 15:27). Only the Father himself lies outside the authority of Christ.

The second way the New Testament sets forth the deity of Christ is by associating Christ with God as an apparent equal. The Great Commission illustrates this also. It does so by the command to baptize converts "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit . . ." (Matthew 28:19). So plain is this suggestion of equality between the persons of the Trinity that it has often been attacked on that very ground. Critics have thought these words to be impossible because, if authentic, they identify all three persons as God. And so they do, when we see them in the light of the direct assertions in John chapter 1 and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup>

There are other verses that bracket the Father with the Son. In discussing spiritual gifts Paul tells the Corinthians, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there

are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). How shall we distinguish "gifts" and "services" and "activities?" Gordon Fee has suggested that we need not do so. "Most likely they are simply three different ways of looking at what in verse 7 Paul calls 'manifestations' of the Spirit."<sup>8</sup> The blending of these "manifestations" follows the blending together of the names of God. There are distinctions here, but they converge so closely on one another that the authors of these manifestations can be described as either God, the Lord, or the Holy Spirit. Their association here points to their oneness.

We find the same thing in 2 Corinthians 13:13 [NRSV; 13:14 in most versions]: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you." Here again the three persons are combined in a way that suggests equality. And this is not peculiar to Paul. Peter describes Christians as those "who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ . . ." (1 Peter 1:2). In a context that includes God the Father, how can obedience be directed to Jesus Christ if he is not equal to God? (Cf. also Ephesians 4:4-6; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; Revelation 1:4-6.) These associations, while not conclusive in themselves, simply bear out the New Testament's witness to the Trinity in explicit verses about the deity of Jesus Christ.

One other factor has led the church to the doctrine of the Trinity: the personality of the Holy Spirit. To the writers of the New Testament, he is not a "thing" but a person analogous to both Father and Son. Some of the verses above already suggest that point by bracketing the Spirit with both Father and Son who are indeed persons in the fullest sense.

The role the Spirit plays in the New Testament makes his personhood certain. When Ananias and Sapphira lie, they lie to the Holy Spirit, a person (Acts 5:1-11). When

Jesus entered the temptation in the wilderness, the Spirit “drove” him (Mark 1:12) or led him up, activities that show urgency and direction of a kind found in the activities of persons. But “the Spirit did not allow” Paul and his companions to go into Bithynia (Acts 16:6). In forbidding them, he showed himself a person.

Another activity of the Spirit also shows his personhood: he is cited as the author of Scripture and of information received by the apostles. For example, “Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will renounce the faith . . .” (1 Timothy 4:1). Here is another instance: “Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts . . .” (Hebrews 2:7). This passage later shows that the speaker is God (see verses 9-11). Finally John, in writing to the seven churches of Asia says in each letter, “Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches” (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). Here we have one person speaking to other persons.

### THE RESULTING DOCTRINE

In the two earlier sections we have seen the materials from which the doctrine of the Trinity is drawn. First, there is only one God. Second, there are three persons who bear God’s name, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. There is both a oneness and a threeness in God. This truth from the Scriptures guards us on one side against a bare monotheism and on the other side against a doctrine of three gods. But how can this be?

The best answer to this question is, we do not know. Historically one frequent answer has been that the threeness represents the way God appears to us and for us in the work of redemption.<sup>9</sup> As tempting as this view is, it will not meet the test of Scripture. The distinctions in the Godhead reach back into eternity, as John 1 shows and as Jesus illustrated in his high-priestly prayer: “So now, Father, glorify

me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed” (John 17:4).

How then shall we picture the Trinity in our own imagination? The answer is, we cannot picture God as he is in himself. But that is not necessary. The Bible gives us information about God’s attributes that helps us to know what he is like. In a general way we may describe some boundaries for understanding the Three-in-One. The threeness in God is more varied than the threeness of the president of the United States as commander of the army, the navy, and the air force. God’s threeness is more than the diversity found in these presidential offices and activities. On the other hand, the persons of the Trinity are not as distinct as three members of the human race. God is not a *genus* with distinct *species*.

More important than these descriptions, however, is something else. We have in the Lord Jesus as we see him in the gospels, and in the New Testament writings that he has commissioned, the only “picture” of God that we need. In Jesus Christ God has revealed his own moral attributes. Above all else, that is what we need to know about God. We need to know those things that we might imitate them. We too must come to the family likeness that Jesus displayed perfectly. We will never be able to do that in every respect. We will never have all knowledge or all power. But we shall one day be like God in our moral characters. In that day “we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 John 3:2).

There is but one God. He is a tri-unity. Christians have adopted the word *Trinity* to make this point.

### Author

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and *Faith: The Gift of God*. He is a conference speaker and a contributing editor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

### Notes

1. I have quoted this from memory, without knowledge of its source. An Internet source cites J. I. Packer in his book, *A Quest for Godliness* (Wheaton, Illinois: Crossway, 1990), 99, in these words, "Augustine wrote long before, 'Just as there are shallows where a lamb may wade, so there are depths in the Scripture where an elephant may swim.'"
2. William White, Jr., "Creation Epic" in *Dictionary of Biblical Archaeology*. Edited by E. M. Blaiklock and R. K. Harrison. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1983), 139.
3. "Creation Epic," 140.
4. Two recent works that explore this concept in the Bible are Richard Bauckham, *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1998) and, much more extensively, Murray J. Harris, *Jesus As God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1992).
5. The Greek texts in 1:18 vary. Some do not speak of Christ as God, but as the only (=unique) or only-begotten Son. This would mean that there is no *direct* assertion of Christ's deity in 1:18, though it would be fully in keeping with his deity as seen in the earlier verses. For further discussion see the standard commentaries and Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London/New York City: United Bible Societies, Corrected edition, 1975), 198.
6. Much of this idea is anticipated in John 17:2 where Jesus says to his Father, "[Y]ou have given [me] authority over all people, to give eternal life to all whom you have given [me]." I take this as proleptic of what will be true immediately after the redemptive events of the following 72 hours. After that we see the Lord Jesus bringing the entire created universe into subjection for the good of his church (Ephesians 1:22-23).
7. These words have also been attacked on the ground that the rest of the New Testament uses another formula, baptism "in[to] the name of [the Lord] Jesus [Christ]" (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:48). But it may well be that the Lord Jesus was not setting out a formula here, but showing that commitment to himself was commitment to the entire Godhead.
8. Gordon Fee, *The New International Commentary on the New Testament: The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, 1987), 587.
9. This view is called *Modalism* or *Sabellianism* and recurs in many centuries. In our day it is formally represented by "Jesus-Only" Pentecostalism and is no doubt the way many individual Christians understand God.