

The Trinity and Its Heresies

Introduction: How important is it *really* that we get this doctrine right? Deuteronomy 6:3-4; Mark 12:28-30.

This is perhaps the most foundational doctrine of the Christian faith: if we go wrong with this doctrine we will be set up to embrace other serious doctrinal errors and practices and may lose our own souls. (Examples: Not honoring the Son as we honor the Father, John 5:21-23.)

I. The Biblical Record

A. There is exactly one true God

Isaiah 42:8 I am the LORD, that is My name; I will not give My glory to another, Nor My praise to graven images”

Deuteronomy 4:39 Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that Jehovah, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is no other.

Isaiah 43:10 “You are My witnesses,” declares Jehovah, “And My servant whom I have chosen, In order that you may know and believe Me, And understand that I am He. Before Me there was no God formed, And there will be none after Me.”

B. The Father is God: “God the Father” appears 13 times in NT

C. The Son is God

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was in the beginning with God. 3 All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

John 20:27 Then He said to Thomas, “Reach here with your finger, and see My hands; and reach here your hand and put it into My side; and do not be unbelieving, but believing.” 28 Thomas answered and said to Him, “My Lord and my God!”

Titus 2:11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men, 12 instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age, 13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,

D. The Holy Spirit is God

Acts 5:1 But a man named Ananias, with his wife Sapphira, sold a piece of property, 2 and kept back *some* of the price for himself, with his wife's full knowledge, and bringing a portion of it, he laid it at the apostles' feet. 3 But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to **lie to the Holy Spirit** and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? 4 "While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? **You have not lied to men but to God.**" 5 And as he heard these words, Ananias fell down and breathed his last; and great fear came over all who heard of it. 6 The young men got up and covered him up, and after carrying him out, they buried him. 7 Now there elapsed an interval of about three hours, and his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. 8 And Peter responded to her, "Tell me whether you sold the land for such and such a price?" And she said, "Yes, that was the price." 9 Then Peter *said* to her, "Why is it that you have agreed **together to put the Spirit of the Lord to the test**? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out *as well*." 10 And immediately she fell at his feet and breathed her last, and the young men came in and found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband.

E. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinguishable Persons

1 Corinthians 8:4 Therefore concerning the eating of things sacrificed to idols, we know that there is no such thing as an idol in the world, and that there is no God but one. 5 For even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, 6 yet for us there is *but* one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we *exist* through Him.

1 Corinthians 12:4 Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. 5 And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. 6 There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*.

Matthew 28:19 "Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age."

2 Corinthians 13:14 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all.

Also, the passages that reveal "I / Thou" relationships between the Persons of the Trinity.

II. Classic Formulations:

A. The Nicene/Constantinople Creed, 381AD

We believe in one God, the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, and the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from the heavens, and was made flesh of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man, and was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried, and rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures, and ascended into the heavens, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and comes again with glory to judge living and dead, of whose kingdom there shall be no end:

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together, who spoke through the prophets

B. An Abbreviated Formulation:

“God is one indivisible Essence that eternally subsists as three distinct Persons.”

1. Essence (Being, Nature, Substance): “That which makes God, God.”
2. Persons: “a mode of *personal* existence distinguished by incommunicable properties” or “a self-consciousness mode of existence”

C. The London Baptist Confession, 1689

In this divine and infinite Being there are three subsistences, the Father, the Word or Son, and Holy Spirit, of one substance, power, and eternity, each having the whole divine essence, yet the essence undivided: the Father is of none, neither begotten nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son; all infinite, without beginning, therefore but one God, who is not to be divided in nature and being, but distinguished by several peculiar relative properties and personal relations; which doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him.

III. Two General and Historical Models

A. Social Trinitarianism:

1. Eastern (Greek) Church: Gregory Nazianzen, Gregory Nyssen & Basil, the Great Cappadocian Fathers.
2. Begins with the reality of the three Persons and then defines their unity in terms of the generic (abstract) “essence” they share in common and in terms of their mutual indwelling (John 10:38; 14:10, 11).
3. Analogous to a society of three men sharing in the full “essence” of “man-ness”.

B. Psychological or Model Trinitarianism:

1. Western (Latin) Church: Athanasius & Augustine
2. Begins with the one indivisible Essence of God and then defines the Persons in terms of their relations within the one Essence.
3. Analogous to a person’s intellect, heart, and will or to a person’s self-knowledge.

IV. Historical Heresies of the Trinity

A. Unitarianism

1. Dynamic Monarchianism
2. Model Monarchianism
3. Arianism

B. Polytheism

V. Essential Components of a Biblically Sound Understanding of the Trinity

- A. Exactly one God, and only one God, exists
- B. The Essence or Being of God is something like an actual indivisible substance rather than a unifying set of properties or a universal generic essence.
- C. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit are three centers of consciousness in the Being of God rather than merely relationships.
- D. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are identical in being: each Person of the Trinity possesses the whole Being of God and not merely a part of the Being of God.
- E. Each Person of the Trinity is eternally distinguishable by properties peculiar to Himself and not to the others.
- F. Both the Being of God and the three Persons are equally ultimate.
- G. There is an order and unity among the Persons of the Trinity. (I believe that the Son and the Spirit are eternally subordinate to the Father in terms of their Personal modes of existence but not in terms of their Deity since they all possess the identical Essence of God.