

The Trinitarian Nature of Christianity

A Doctrinal Overview & Scriptural Compilation

A Doctrinal Overview

The Christian faith is fundamentally a Trinitarian faith. In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity is absolutely fundamental and central to our faith and life. So, briefly stated, what is the doctrine of the Trinity? *The doctrine of the Trinity is the teaching that there is one God who eternally exists in three distinct, yet co-equal, Persons.* In other words, there is only one God (Being; Godhead), and within this Godhead there eternally exists three distinct, yet equal,¹ Persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit). James White provides a good and succinct definition:

Within the one Being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.²

So, one *What* (Being) and three *Who's* (Persons). The Father is not the Son and the Son is not the Spirit and the Spirit is not the Father. Together, however, they are one God, not three gods. Each Person is fully God, not 1/3 of God. Although this may be a mystery to our finite minds, nonetheless, the Scriptures reveal this wonderfully, glorious truth (see below). James White's words are helpful at this point:

These technical definitions are generally negative; that is, they tell us more about what the Trinity *isn't* than what it *is*. This shouldn't be surprising, however. We must always remember that we are trying to define and describe something that is absolutely, universally *unique*. It is far easier to say, 'I don't mean this,' than it is to say, 'Well, it's like this,' since there is nothing in the created universe that really, fully is *like* an absolutely unique thing. That's what makes it unique in the first place! Consequently, theologians have had much more success at saying, 'The Trinity *is not this*,' than positively saying, 'The Trinity *is this*.'³

Now, while it is true that the doctrine of the Trinity is by far more clearly evidenced in the New Testament than in the Old Testament, as the Trinity was revealed "between the Testaments," in the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit,⁴ this does not mean that evidence is lacking in the latter [see, for example, Gen. 1:2, 26-27; Ps. 2:7 (with Heb. 1:5-6) 33:6; 45:6-7 (with Heb. 1:8); Isa. 48:16; 61:1 (with Lk. 4:16-18); 63:10-11]. In regards to this fact, Louis Berkhof supplies an excellent analysis:

¹ There is a difference between the equality of the Persons in essence and the hierarchy that exists between them. For instance, some confuse the submission of the Son to the Father (e.g. Jn. 5:19-23; 6:38) as meaning that the Son is not equal with the Father. This is misguided and fails to recognize the different roles (in creation, providence, and salvation) that exist between the Persons (e.g. Eph. 1:3-14). By way of illustration, while the husband is the head of the household, and the wife therefore submits to the husband, they are nonetheless equal in essence/nature.

² White, James. *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief* (MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998), 26.

³ *Ibid.*, 29. Emphasis is his.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 165-168.

The Old Testament does not contain a full revelation of the Trinitarian existence of God, but does contain several indications of it. And this is exactly what might be expected. The Bible never deals with the doctrine of the Trinity as an abstract truth, but reveals the Trinitarian life in its various relations as a living reality, to a certain extent in connection with the works of creation and providence, but particularly in relation to the work of redemption. *Its most fundamental revelation is a revelation given in facts rather than in words.* And this revelation increases in clarity in the measure in which the redemptive work of God is more clearly revealed, as in the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. And the more the glorious reality of the Trinity stands out in the facts of history, the clearer the statements of the doctrine become. The fuller revelation of the Trinity in the New Testament is due to the fact that the Word became flesh, and that the Holy Spirit took up His abode in the Church.⁵

In other words, the doctrine of the Trinity, due to its primary revelation in facts/acts, is intricately tied to the progress of redemption. As redemption progressed, so the clarity by which we may see the Trinity progressed. It is easily understandable, therefore, as to why the New Testament is more abundant in its teaching on this doctrine. Further, we should keep in mind that the New Testament authors, who were rigorous Jewish monotheists (the belief in one God), apparently saw no contradictions or difficulties with this teaching. Robert L. Reymond, a professor and systematic theologian, notes this well:

The New Testament writers—thoroughly ‘Trinitarian’ in their theology—evidently saw no incongruity between their doctrine of God and the monotheism of the Old Testament.⁶

In conclusion, if the New Testament authors and early Church had no qualms with this teaching, neither should we.

A Scriptural Compilation

The following is a compilation of select New Testament Scriptures⁷ that clearly evidence this teaching on the Trinity. Some texts only speak of two Persons within the Trinity, whereas others speak of all three. You will note that these passages present the three Persons of the Godhead (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)⁸ as distinct, yet equal in nature/essence. These passages reveal to us the importance of this doctrine in relation to the Christian faith and life (e.g. salvation, baptism, prayer, worship). As you read through these texts, ask yourself these questions: How do the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit relate to one another? What are their distinct roles? What aspect of the Christian faith/life does this text relate to?

John 1:1-5 ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through Him,

⁵ Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology* (MI: Eerdmans, 1932), 85. Quoted by Robert L. Reymond in *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 210-211. Emphasis is Reymonds.

⁶ Reymond, Robert L. *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 207.

⁷ All quotes are from the New American Standard Bible (NASB), 1995 updated edition.

⁸ Keep in mind that “God” most often refers to the Father. However, in Titus 2:13 and 2 Peter 1:1 “God” refers to Jesus Christ. Note also Acts 5:3-4 where lying to the Holy Spirit is lying to God.

and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ⁴In Him was life, and the life was the Light of men. ⁵The Light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.”

John 1:14, 18 “¹⁴And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth... ¹⁸No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.”

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

Acts 2:33, 36 “³³Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear.... ³⁶Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ—this Jesus whom you crucified.”

Romans 8:1-4 “¹Therefore there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. ²For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set you free from the law of sin and of death. ³For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh, ⁴so that the requirement of the Law might be fulfilled in us, who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.”

Romans 14:17-18 “¹⁷for the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. ¹⁸For he who in this way serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men.”

Romans 15:30 “³⁰Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me.”

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

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

Galatians 4:6 “⁶Because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’”

Ephesians 4:4-6 “⁴There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.”

Philippians 3:3 “³for we are the true circumcision, who worship in the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh”

1 Thessalonians 4:7-8 “⁷For God has not called us for the purpose of impurity, but in sanctification. ⁸So, he who rejects this is not rejecting man but the God who gives His Holy Spirit to you.”

2 Thessalonians 2:13-14 “¹³But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. ¹⁴It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Titus 3:4-7 “⁴But when the kindness of God our Savior and His love for mankind appeared [in the Person and work of Jesus Christ (2:11; cf. Jn. 1:1-18)], ⁵He saved us, not on the basis of deeds which we have done in righteousness, but according to His mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewing by the Holy Spirit, ⁶whom He poured out upon us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, ⁷so that being justified by His grace we would be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life.”

Hebrews 1:1-3 “¹God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, ²in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power. When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high”

Hebrews 9:14 “¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

1 Peter 1:2 “²[To those who are chosen] according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.”

1 John 5:20 “²⁰And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him [God, the Father] who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.”

A Theological Summary

Hopefully you have recognized some key areas in the Christian’s life where the triune relationship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit play a vital role. Indeed, it is impossible to talk about the Christian faith and life without bringing into the discussion the triune nature of God (whether we

realize it or not). So, following are a few summary points, based on the above passages, on the significance of the Trinity in our lives.

Salvation: The Father chooses or adopts His people; the Son secures their redemption by His life and bloody substitutionary sacrifice; and the Holy Spirit applies the work of Christ's redemption in the regeneration, sanctification, and glorification of the elect.

Worship: Worship and praise is due to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, although the Scriptures typically present the Father and the Son as the objects of our worship, with the Spirit empowering and guiding us. In short, worship is typically offered to the Father, through the Son (e.g. in His name), and in the fellowship and power of the Spirit.

Prayer: We pray to the Father, in the name of Jesus Christ (i.e. He mediates for us), and in the power and guidance of the Spirit.

Conclusion

We looked at nineteen New Testament Scripture passages above, demonstrating the biblical teaching of the Trinity and its significance for the Christian faith and life. Hopefully you noticed the equality of nature between the Persons of the Trinity. You should have also noticed the different roles of each Person, especially in regards to salvation. You should have also noticed the revelatory significance of the Son and Spirit to the Father; that is, they reveal and bring us to the Father. You should have also picked up on the shared titles between the Father and the Son (i.e. Lord, Savior).

What this study has demonstrated is that Christianity is fundamentally Trinitarian in nature. The doctrine of the Trinity is essential to our faith and life. Indeed, it is absolutely essential to the core of Christianity, the gospel (e.g. Eph. 1:3-14). For this reason, we should be thoroughly grounded in and convinced of this doctrine. Many more Scripture references could have been listed. Hopefully this study will encourage you to look for such texts, along with their significance.

Recommendations for Further Study

I highly recommend the following books for your further study on the doctrine of the Trinity. Book #1 is thoroughly exegetical and therefore serves as a wonderful in-depth study, as well as an apologetic text. Book #2 is a very in-depth book that covers a broad spectrum of this doctrine, as is evidenced from the sub-title. Book #3 is not as tedious of a read, but still gives a good overview of the doctrine itself, as well as a thorough discussion on the implications and significance of the Trinity in our faith and life.

#1. *The Forgotten Trinity* (by James R. White)

#2. *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (by Robert Letham)

#3. *Father, Son, & Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, & Relevance* (by Bruce A. Ware)