



WHAT IS THE TRINITY? By Dr. Dale Tuggy/A Review by Dennis Baldwin

In his “Epilogue” Page 137, Dale Tuggy makes this acknowledgment:

“The issue of the trinity is hard. You must judge why this is so. Is it because we’ve made it hard by our confused speculations, or is it instead because the tripersonal God is beyond our understanding?...The correct understanding of the trinity, whatever that is, must have been preserved. Find it. Keep reading. Keep thinking, and asking for God’s guidance.”

Even though this is at the end of the book it seemed fitting, since having read the same, I now can make certain assumptions; it seemed a good place to start. The topic of the trinity is a very hard issue for many of our family and friends. It does seem the first step to “the correct understanding” of such a very important issue:

“But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all men generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him.” James 1:5

Dr. Tuggy is careful to allow the reader to “think for himself/herself” as he posits the information he shares. He admits to, after much study and reflection, have come down on the side of accepting the “monotheistic” view of God, and acceptance of Jesus as truly the son of God. Dale endeavors to inform the reader as to how he arrived at his culminations. The reader will be greatly benefited from this reading and study. Dale brings good credentials to the table but does not flaunt his knowledge gained during years of scholarship.

A CALL FOR HETERODOX THINKING

Dr. Dale Tuggy is a philosopher by trade, which to me brings out something very interesting. It seems we can thank philosophy for at least some of the difficulty, despite Paul’s warning in Colossians.

“See to it that no one takes you captive through philosophy and empty deception, according to the tradition of men, according to the elementary principles of the world, rather than according to Christ.” Col. 2:8

In chapter six Dr. Tuggy refers to this statement from, The Southern Baptist Faith and Message, Sec. II:

“The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being.”

BUT WHAT IS AN *OUSIA*?

“The core of trinitarian theology (the theology of the Trinity) was first officially affirmed in 381, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three different “persons” but the same in *ousia*.” WITT, Page 69

“This word *ousia* was a technical term in Greek philosophy. Dale writes that “a certain party of catholic bishops (at the 325 and 381 councils) took a philosophers’ word and made it the centerpiece of their theology.” P.71. It seems interesting to me that a philosopher in the 21st Century should be working to make some sense of this travesty. Dale has a modicum of fun with it on page 98 when he says: “For us to believe that “God is one *ousia* in three Persons,” we must not only be able to pronounce sentences like that, but must also grasp their meaning...it is not enough here to point at the alleged experts, and say that we mean whatever they mean. And it can’t merely amount to claiming that God is one in some way and three in another way.”

What did the meeting of catholic bishops at Nicea mean by the adoption of the term *ousia*? Simply saying that it means “*essence*” does little to clear the fog. Was there not a biblical term available which could have conveyed the thought more clearly? “What is the Trinity?” attempts in chapter 7 to clarify this “*technical term in Greek philosophy*” which weaseled its way into the minds of these dedicated religious minds of the fourth century? The bishops at the time and since have struggled to help themselves as well as others understand the meaning of *ousia* by adding “*substance*” to the equation; which makes the fog even thicker.

Remember from page 8: “He that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity....we worship one god in Trinity and Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the [divine] substance.” Chapter 7 offers 9 “candidate meanings of *ousia*”. This review will offer a small bit of the book’s interpretation of the 9 meanings:

Candidate Meanings of *ousia*

- 1.The Father and Son are the same being/entity.
- 2.The Father and Son each has the universal essence of divinity.
- 3.The Father and Son have one individual essence of divinity.
- 4.The Father and the Son share the property of being one God himself.
- 5.The Father and the Son are constituted by the same kind of matter.

- 6.The Father and the Son are constituted by the same portion of matter.
- 7.The Father and the Son are parts of a whole. (A third part could be the Holy Spirit.)
- 8.The Father and the Son are very qualitatively similar.
- 9.Between the Father and the Son there is but one person, namely the Father.

“We see nine options here...each claim is different although the claims are related to each other in various ways...But which of these did the ancient bishops actually have in mind? P. 78”. Dale attempts to deal with the interpretations Biblically as well as to try to understand what the “ancient bishops” as they attempted to harmonize their interpretations with the “*shema*” from Deuteronomy 6:4 as well as Paul in I Corin. 8:4-6. They start by professing belief in ...”one God the Father all powerful...And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” P 79

ENTER A BIT OF LOGIC

“Dr. Tuggy wonders on page 127 how the Trinity (according to apologists) could have been only implied in the New Testament? Then kept secret until the fourth century. How could this tangled chain of reasoning have remained tangled for so long? Beyond, as he writes, the sight of so many dedicated readers?”

How could such an important issue to God’s self-revelation, “remain unpacked...the trap not sprung, the conclusion not drawn, for hundreds of years? Dale asks; Did God strike blind the readers of the NT until the time was right for the fulness of trinitarian revelation?” This would in fact “place a correct understanding of the one God beyond Jesus’s apostles?” Did, after all, Jesus’s apostles receive “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints”? Why then did not his apostles pass on Jesus’s theology?” P.130

Good questions are asked on P. 131. What should one expect the OT or the NT to say or not say if they in any sense teach that God is a Trinity? (Why did Jesus miss so many opportunities to confess to the 12, “Look fellas: I am God and don’t you ever forget it”?) Why did Jesus always refer to God as “Father”? Also, what questions do you think should have been asked and answered in the Bible if there was such a major change in God’s revelation of himself to his creation?

“Most of the NT comes from the apostles and their immediate circles, those directly taught by the Lord Jesus, and those directly taught by them. Listening to him requires listening to them.” P. 132

The First Chapter Last

The first chapter begins with a story about Jephthah, from Judges 12:4-6. It seemed that the men of Ephraim threatened Jephthah and the men of Gilead who gained control of

the Jordan River crossing and gained the upper hand by requiring the crossing Ephraimites to pronounce the word “shibboleth” which they had trouble with because they could only say “sibboleth”. 42,000 men lost their lives because they could not pronounce a word correctly. Even today, to say that a word or sentence is a “shibboleth”; which suggests (but doesn’t require) that its user don’t know what it means, so that the “shibboleth” is only a marker of group membership. For many, phrases like “the Trinity” or “God is triune”, serve as markers of Christian identity. P.6.

The creed “Trinity” itself has been elevated to high status. “He that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity....we worship one god in Trinity and Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the [divine] substance.” P.8” And “If anyone says that it is possible that at some time, given the advancement of knowledge, a sense may be assigned to the dogmas propounded by the church which is different from that which the church has understood and understands: let him be anathema. First Vatican Council 1869-1870.” Don’t think for yourself we will think for you or you will be lost! And millions have allowed it to continue without giving serious thought to “What if it is wrong?”

"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. John 14:1 (NRSV)

Dr. Dale Tuggy’s closing thought is: “The foundational question is: Who is the one God? Building on that, you can then get clearer on how Jesus relates to him.” Actually, Jesus posed it as an eternal life issue. It just does not get any more important than that; don’t you think?

“And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” John 17:3 (NRSV)

HOUSTON, WE HAVE A PROBLEM

“The creed finishes its claims about the Son...’for us humans and for our salvation he came down and became incarnate, became human’. ‘Became incarnate’ is unclear...did he become the soul of a certain human body? Did this spirit somehow form one person with both a body and a normal human soul? Were there two selves in Jesus, the man, the human self? In the whole Trinity, how many selves are there? This creed does not answer such questions. UNTIL ONE ADMITS THERE IS A PROBLEM, IT CAN’T BE SOLVED....We should set aside the apologists’ habit of making confident assertions about “the” doctrine.’ P. 17-23 Whether or not you ever work your way through this material, you, the thinking Christian, need a place to settle your mind. The only alternatives would seem to be confusion or avoidance. The book you are holding sticks

rigorously to relatively logical, historical, and biblical points, so as to help you navigate through the options.