The Doctrine of the Trinity (A Brief Overview)

Excerpt from *The Restitution of Jesus Christ,* Appendix A, pp. 512 - 518
By Kermit Zarley, Servetus the Evangelical

Introduction

While this book is about Christology, many readers may wonder, "What about the doctrine of the Trinity?" Trinitarian Philip Schaff states, "The Trinity and Christology, the two hardest problems and most comprehensive dogmas of theology, are intimately connected."[1] Yes they are. In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity was later formed because the Church finally settled on its dogma that Jesus is fully God. Even though we touched on the doctrine of the Trinity in Chapter Two,[2] we will now briefly consider it further.

We have seen that the Catholic Church decided on its final formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity in the late 4th century. It was that God, also called "the Godhead," is one *ousia* (substance or essence) consisting of three co-equal and co-eternal hypostases (subsistences, similar to beings): God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The Church officially made belief in this doctrine essential for acquiring salvation. That is, if you did not believe in the doctrine of the Trinity—or, more specifically, after having known about it you refused to believe it, or after having believed it you disbelieved it—the Church deemed that you were not a genuine Christian.

This dogma sustained throughout the Protestant Reformation and remains the official teaching in all mainline church denominations to the present. That is why eminent Presbyterian, systematic theologian A.A. Hodge could assert, "it is essential to salvation to believe in the three persons in one Godhead."[3] Yet Hodge wrote in the same volume, "A church has no right to make anything a condition of membership which Christ has not made a condition of salvation."[4] Did Jesus Christ make belief in three co-equal and co-eternal Persons in one Godhead a requirement for salvation? Chapter and verse, please!

The deity of Christ is the foundation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Without it, the doctrine of the Trinity collapses. G.W.H. Lampe rightly explains, "The Trinitarian distinctions,… had originally been developed in order to affirm that Jesus is God."[5]

Nathaniel Micklem even questions if it is legitimate to speak of "the doctrine of the Trinity," as if there is and always has been only one. He informs, "There are many doctrines of the Trinity." Then he cites a few, including those of Augustine, Abelard, L. Hodgson, Karl Barth, and Paul Tillich, showing that they all "differ greatly."[6] Of course, church denominations have identified the doctrine of the Trinity as the one the Catholic Church deemed official in the 4th century and thus have endorsed it as the correct one.

---

[1] P. Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:705
[2] See also Chapter Four/Is the Trinity in Genesis?/ Man in the Image of God.
[3] Archibald Alexander Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1886), 198.
[4] A.A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology*, 114.
[5] G.W.H. Lampe, *God as Spirit*, 225.
[6] Nathaniel Micklem, *Ultimate Questions* (Nashville: Abington, 1955), 135.

Historical Development

No matter who you listen to, the doctrine of the Trinity has proven to be the most technical and complex teaching in the history of church dogma. To assess it, we need to review briefly its historical development, which occurred in the following stages:

- *1st century*: Advocating a strict Jewish monotheism, that God is "one" (Person or Being), so that only the Father is God. Thus, Jesus Christ is not identified as God.
- *2nd century*: God is two un-equal Persons—the Father and His inferior Logos-Son. Jesus Christ temporally preexisted as the Logos-Son prior to His incarnation as man.
- *3rd century*: God is two un-equal Persons—the Father and His inferior Logos-Son. But the Father generates the Logos-Son to become an eternally preexisting Peron.
- *Early 4th century*: God is two co-equal and co-eternal Persons: the Father and the Son. So far, nothing has been decided about the constitution of the Holy Spirit.
- *Late 4th century*: God is three co-equal and co-eternal Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—and all three members of this Trinity share the same substance.

So, the final formula of the doctrine of the Trinity did not obtain until the late 4th century. (For a semantic discussion of words of Church authorities used to identify the one God and distinguish the three members of the Trinity from this Godhead, see subheads The Nicene Creed and The Council of Constantinople in Chapter Two of *The Restitution of Jesus Christ*.)

This prolonged, historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity raises serious questions. Why would it take so long for such a supposedly important doctrine to be discovered from the revered books and letters that became the NT? Doesn't such a lengthy period of development undermine its credibility? And how can Trinitarians claim that all professing Christians must believe this doctrine in order to be saved, since all generations of Christians prior to its final formulation in the late 4th century had never heard of it?

No Biblical Basis For the Word "Trinity"

The word "Trinity" is not in the Bible. Church father Tertullian coined it in 192 C.E. Many people ask, "Why all the fuss about a word that isn't even in the Bible?" We learned in Chapter Two what a fuss there was about the word *homoousios* in the Nicene Creed, which is not in the Greek NT either. Distinguished NT grammarian Nigel Turner, although a staunch Trinitarian, admits, "Most of the distortions and dissensions which have vexed the Church… have arisen through the insistence of sects and sections of the Christian community upon using words which are not found in the New Testament."[7] Amazingly, neither is the word "Trinity" in any of the early ecumenical creeds.

Many distinguished Christian scholars now acknowledge that the doctrine of the Trinity is not biblical and does not represent primitive Christianity. Roman Catholic Hans Kung, one of the most celebrated theologians in the world for the past several decades, asks concerning the NT, "Why is there never talk of the 'triune God'?... throughout the NT, while there is **belief in God the Father, in Jesus the Son and in God's Holy Spirit,** there is **no doctrine of one God in three persons**… no doctrine of a 'triune God,' a 'Trinity.'[8] He further observes, "If

---

[7] Nigel Turner, *Christian Words* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), viii.
[8] H. Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, 94 – 95. Emphasis his.

we wanted to judge Christians on the pre-Nicene period after the event, in the light of the Council of Nicaea, then not only the Jewish Christians would be heretics but also almost all the Greek church fathers."[9]

The *Encyclopedia Americana* rightly recounts the historical development of the Trinitarian doctrine. It says, "Unitarianism as a theological movement began much earlier in history; indeed it antedated Trinitarianism by many decades. Christianity derived from Judaism, and Judaism was strictly Unitarian…. Fourth-century Trinitarianism did not reflect accurately early Christian teaching regarding the nature of God; it was on the contrary a deviation from this teaching."[10] William Penn, founder of the Quakers and the State of Pennsylvania wrote, "the origin of the Trinitarian doctrine… is not from the Scriptures, nor reason,… it was born about three hundred years after the ancient gospel was declared; it was conceived in ignorance, brought forth and maintained by cruelty."[11] Kung thus concludes, "The theology which became manifest at the first [first six ecumenical] councils led to a considerable **alienation from the New Testament**."[12]

The mere fact that the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity is not there either. God had forewarned Israelites through Moses concerning the Law, "You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it" (Deut. 4:2). And Proverbs states rather somberly, "Do not add to His words lest He reprove you, and you be proved a liar" (Prov. 30:6; cf. Rev. 22: 18-19). It appears that Trinitarians have added their doctrine of the Trinity to God's truth.

Trinitarians generally offer the following NT texts to substantiate their doctrine. [13]

Matthew 28:19	2 Corinthians 13:14	Ephesians 2:18	I Peter 1:2
"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit"	"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all"	"for through Him [Jesus Christ] we both have access in one Spirit to the Father"	"according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ"
Romans 15:30	I Corinthians 12:4-6	Ephesians 4:4-6	Jude 20, 21
"Now 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"	"Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. And there are varieties of effects, but the same God"	"There is one body and one Spirit,… one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father"	"praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ"

---

[9] H. Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, 103.
[10] EA 27 (1956), 2941. Cited by Buzzard and Hunting, The Doctrine of the Trinity, 19. Of course, the word "unitarianism" is being used here synonymously with "monotheism."
[11] Quoted by J.H. Broughton and P.J. Southgate, *The Trinity: True or False*? 376.
[12] H. Kung, *Christianity: Essence, History, and Future*, 193. Emphasis his.
[13] See also 2 Cor. 1.21-22, Heb. 9.14

The most well-known biblical formulation that brings together the so-called "three members of the Trinity" is in Mt. 28:19, quoted above. It has been the church's most popular baptismal formula. Yet most contemporary Trinitarian scholars now admit that all of these above passages *only mention* the Father, the Son, and the (Holy) Spirit without substantiating their Trinity doctrine. Thus, many of them would agree with V. Taylor's assessment that "the Trinity is not an express New Testament doctrine."[14]

Many Trinitarian scholars concede that their doctrine represents no more than a deduction from Scripture. J.N.D. Kelly says of the NT, "Explicit Trinitarian confessions are few and far between; where they do occur, little can be built upon them."[15] Johannes Schneider admits, "The NT does not contain the developed doctrine of the Trinity."[16] And staunch Trinitarian D.A. Carson concedes, "Individually these texts do not prove there is any Trinitarian consciousness in the NT, since other threefold-phrases occur."[17]

The NT has other triune formulas which mention angels instead of the Holy Spirit. For example, Paul writes, "I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of His chosen angels" (I Tim 5:21). And Jesus spoke of the time when "the Son of Man… comes in His glory, and the glory of the Father and of the holy angels" (Lk 9:26; cf. Mt 16:27/Mk 8:38). He also said, "But of that day and/or hour no one knows, not even the angels of/in heaven, nor the Son, but the Father alone" (Mt 24:36/Mk 13:32).

Interestingly, Trinitarians have always felt compelled to prove that Jesus is God and that the Holy Spirit is a person, whereas they have never felt any compulsion at all to prove that the Father is God. However, the latter is axiomatic because the NT *constantly* interchanges the word "God" with "the Father" and never "God" with the "Son." For instance, a comparison of the first two passages listed in the above table—Mt. 28:19 and 2 Cor. 13:14—seems to show that the Father should be reckoned exclusively as God.

In the past, Trinitarians identified the three members of the Trinity as God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, and they further denominated them as "the first member of the Trinity," "the second member of the Trinity," and "the third member of the Trinity," respectively. But most contemporary Trinitarian scholars have abandoned these numerical designations since they imply rank and thus varying levels of dignity, concepts which seem to contradict their co-equality. Yet these Trinitarians continue the traditional arrangement and rarely if ever alter it, a practice that also implies rank. Notice that none of the eight passages cited above follow this fixed order. Instead, the supposed three members of the Trinity are arranged in five different orders in which God, who is the Father, is mentioned in the first position in only two of these eight passages.

Contradictory, Confusing, and Incomprehensible

So, the primary *scriptural* argument against the doctrine of the Trinity is that neither the word "T/trinity" nor its meaning are found anywhere in Scripture, but only that the Father, Son, and (Holy) Spirit are occasionally mentioned together.

The primary *philosophical* argument against Trinitarianism is that it postulates an abstract, tri-personal Godhead, a concept that is contrary to Nature. This Trinitarian God is not even reckoned as a Person or

---

[14] V. Taylor, *The Person of Christ*, 248.

[15] J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 22.

[16] Johannes Schneider, "*theos*," in NIDNTT 2:84.

[17] D.A. Carson, "Matthew," 598.

(arguably) a Being. That is why Trinitarian C.S. Lewis explains, and assents, that "in Christianity God is…not even a person."[18]

The primary *logical* arguments against the doctrine of the Trinity are that it is contradictory, confusing, and incomprehensible. It is contradictory in that Trinitarianism professes to be monotheistic (one God) while insisting that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all have separate identities as full-fledged Persons, each being God, yet they are not three Gods. In fact, post-Nicene patristic writings often contain a statement explaining that the three Persons of the Trinity are one Godhead, not three Gods.

Trinitarians readily admit that their doctrine is a paradox and a mystery. Jews, Muslims, and other non-Trinitarian believers in the one God vehemently deny that such a view is monotheistic. They usually allege it is tritheistic—the worship of three Gods.

Trinitarians defend their doctrine by arguing that it merely *seems* contradictory. When pressed to explain its seeming illogicalness and its contradiction, they frequently resort to their very irrational argument about its incomprehensibility. That is, just about all Trinitarians admit that their doctrine is humanly incomprehensible, explaining that it is because God is inscrutable. Traditionalist L.S. Chafer says of this subject, "If all of this seems incomprehensible, it is only because the finite mind is unable to grasp infinite truth."[19] John F. Walvoord, in his revised edition of one of Chafer's books, remarks, "this doctrine [of the Trinity] should be accepted by faith on the basis of scriptural revelation even if it is beyond human comprehension and definition."[20]

Talk about confusion, not to mention circular reasoning! Those who advance such arguments do not seem to grasp that, if their doctrine is incomprehensible, how can *they* comprehend it, let alone explain it?[21] And why should anyone believe the originators of this doctrine, since according to their assertions *they could not have understood it either*?

Trinitarians are well known for offering a multitude of analogies to explain their doctrine. But analogies are not rationale and thus prove nothing regarding the truth.

Christians can get so mixed up about their doctrine of the Trinity. Most of them intellectually affirm that God is tri-personal and thus an abstract Godhead. Yet in their worship they often betray belief in a uni-personal God by acknowledging Him as their "Father." In prayer, many Trinitarian Christians, even some who are well taught, interchange "the Father" and "Jesus" as if they are one and the same individual.

How strange it is that some Trinitarians are actually fond of asserting the veracity of their doctrine while simultaneously admitting its incomprehensibility! One time Daniel Webster was asked, "How can an intelligent man like you believe that three is one?" He replied, "I do not pretend to understand the arithmetic of heaven." Mr. Webster was like most Trinitarians, who accept their doctrine by blind faith as an unfathomable mystery that originated in heaven even though they assent to its utter incomprehensibility.

Abraham Lincoln (1809 – 1865) was perhaps the greatest president in U.S. history and one of the greatest men of God in his generation. As a U.S. Senator campaigning to become the sixteenth U.S. president, the media

---

[18] C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 152.

[19] Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Major Bible Themes* (Grand Rapids: Dunham, 1926), 21.

[20] Lewis Sperry Chafer, rev John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Themes: 52 Vital Doctrines of the Scripture Simplified and Explained* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 41.

[21] Cf. D. Cupitt (*Jesus and the Gospel of God,* 14), who effectively makes the same arguments against the classical Incarnation dogma.

asked him why he had never joined a church. Being a lawyer, Mr. Lincoln replied, "It's because I can't understand their creeds." One wonders if he had in mind mostly Trinitarianism. Lincoln came from the region where the anti-Trinitarian Christian Church denomination was centered.

Many Trinitarians, both clergy and laity, insist that their doctrine is so complex that it is best to *believe it and leave it*. They mean, "leave it only for scholars to discuss." Trinitarians have a famous ditty that can strike fear into the heart of most any Trinitarian who might be considering arguments for the implausibility of their doctrine. It is this:

> Try to explain the doctrine of the Trinity and you'll lose your mind.
> But try to deny it and you'll lose your soul.[22]

Restitution of the True Doctrine of God and Christ

Hans Kung critiques the doctrine of the Trinity as it relates to inter-religious dialogue between adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. He then states:

I shall try to sum up in three sentences what seems to me to be the biblical nucleus of the traditional doctrine of the Trinity, in light of the New Testament considered for today:

> -To believe in God the Father means to believe in the one God, creator, preserver and perfecter of the world and humankind; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have this belief in one God in common.

> -To believe in the Holy Spirit means to believe in God's effective might and power in human beings and the world: Jews, Christians, and Muslims also have this belief in God's Spirit in common.

> -To believe in the Son of God means to believe in the revelation of the one God in the man Jesus of Nazareth who is thus God's Word, Image and Son.[23]

Here is a restitution of the Bible's teaching on God the Father, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. I couldn't have said it better myself. Without admitting it, Kung redefines the doctrine of the Trinity as follows: (1) the one God is exclusively the Father, (2) the Holy Spirit is the power of God, and (3) Jesus' uniqueness is that God the Father has revealed Himself fully in Him. Kung adds, "For the New Testament, as for the Hebrew Bible, the principle of unity is clearly the one God (*ho theos*: the God = the Father)."[24]

---

[22] Cited by Millard J. Erickson, Introducing Christian Doctrine, ed. L. Arnold Hustad (Grand Rapids: Baker, Seminary, 1992), 105. According to Lewis Sperry Chafer (Systematic Theology, 8 vols. [Dallas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947], 1:288), Robert South (*Works*, 2:184) penned the original as follows: "As he that denies it may lose his soul; so he that too much strives to understand it may lose his wits."

[23] Hans Kung, *Credo: The Apostles' Creed Explained for Today* (ET 1992; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 154.

[24] Ibid.