

The Trinity: Invention or Revelation?

I. Introduction

This lecture is a presentation of the Christian concept of the Trinity. Today, many would question the validity of defending any dogma of an ancient religion, much less a dogma that cannot be examined by the scientific method like the nature of God. Our age is full of dogmatic uncertainty and tolerance for all kinds of competing, conflicting ideas. Pluralism is the watchword. Critical thought as applied to religious and philosophical ideas is the victim. Many seek refuge in what can only be proven scientifically. For the bigger questions like the purpose of life, the afterlife, the problem of evil in the world - the issues that bring us to the "why's" of our existence--many don't have a coherent way of deciding what to believe and choose their beliefs with a bewildering variety of justifications. Personal experience is often the authority with all the things that can shape it. Family heritage, supernatural experiences, personal preference all play their parts. But the search for truth is out of fashion, perhaps because it is easy to assume it is an impossible, impractical quest. I want to challenge this and instead state that your thoughts and beliefs about God are the most important thoughts and beliefs you will have in your life. Your beliefs about God or your lack of them shape every area of your life. Your standard of morality is determined by them. Your views of marriage, family, personal relationships and good and evil are determined by your beliefs about God. Your values for what is of worth in this world and what is worthy of your work and sacrifice, and the ethics with which you will conduct your life and career are all determined by your views of God. Christians and Muslims both actively recognize this. Their religions are based on the views of God presented in their holy books. And they realize that this basic issue of faith - what God is like - is of the utmost importance. This article is mainly addressed to those who already realize the importance of right thinking about God. It is mainly addressed to Christians and Muslims, but it is also hoped that those who are uncommitted or committed to another faith will find this lecture of interest and benefit.

The Trinity has always been a controversial concept but it has proved through the ages to be the most consistent and reasonable summary of the Bible's teaching about the nature of God. It has also proven to be the wellspring of all that Christianity offers in Jesus Christ--the full reconciliation between God and man that makes all other reconciliations possible. The Trinity has come up against many criticisms and challenges throughout the centuries. Today I want to address three of the major arguments people have used to try to disprove it.

First, to answer the charge that the Bible doesn't really teach a trinitarian view of God, it will be shown that the concept of the Trinity is a fair and consistent description of the Bible's teaching concerning God's nature. This is important because many try to read the Bible to support a view of God that is unitarian, or monotheistic in an absolute sense, devoid of any mystery, incomprehensibility, or internal distinction. The Bible's view is not this way and the Christian doctrine of the Trinity does present the view of God that is most consistent with the teaching of the Bible.

Second, many have charged that the Trinity is illogical, against common sense and reason. It will be shown that the concept of the Trinity does not violate reason, that it is a logical concept. Many find it difficult to see that Christians are not presenting a view of God that is $1+1+1=1$. Christians are not saying this and what they are saying is not illogical.

And third, some charge that the Trinity is blasphemous speculation about the nature of God. It will be shown that the concept of the Trinity is a reverent attempt to describe the nature of God. It is not an irreverent or blasphemous speculation concerning God's secret nature. It is instead a humble attempt to accept and understand what God has revealed about Himself in the Bible. It is a reverent attempt to accept what God has revealed and guard Christian doctrine from the blasphemies of polytheism.

Christians have always recognized that the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible. It is a known fact that one of its earliest written uses was circa AD 180 as the word "trias" in the writings of the church father, Theophilus of Antioch. The word did not come into official and widespread usage until the Council of Nicea in AD 325. With these facts, however, it must be recognized that the concept of the Trinity has been present from the beginnings of Christianity itself in the teachings of Jesus Christ and His apostles. That is why I will stress the word "concept" of the Trinity so much in this article. The concept was not carefully elaborated and explained at the beginning but it was implied and consistently stated in Jesus Christ's teaching and in the Apostles' teaching. This is seen especially in the Bible's teaching that Jesus the Messiah is fully God and fully human.

Let us now consider the scriptural basis for the concept of the Trinity.

II. The Trinity: a Biblical concept

To begin to understand the Trinity, one must understand that it is a concept presented in both the Old Testament and the New Testament of the Bible. In both Testaments there are clear statements of the unity of God and statements that imply or state some sort of plurality within the unity of God. For this article, it is assumed that the Bible is the authentic revelation that God gave to Israel, and the Church.

A. Old Testament references

1. The Unity of God:

- a. ***"Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one! And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."*** (Deuteronomy 6:4,5)
- b. ***"Know therefore today, and take it to your heart, that the Lord, He is God in heaven above and on the earth below; there is none other."*** (Deuteronomy 4:39)

- c. ***"I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other Gods before Me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, or any likeness of what is in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the water under the earth. You shall not worship them or serve them; for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God..."*** (Exodus 20:25)

2. Plurality within this Unity:

God's own statements:

- a. ***"Then God said, 'Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..."*** (Genesis 1:26)
- b. ***"Then the Lord God said, 'Behold the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil..."*** (Genesis 3:22)
- c. ***"Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech."*** (Gen. 11:7)

Note that in Gen. 1:26 that the plural pronouns are used with singular nouns: "God" is the singular subject of the sentence, "image" and "likeness" are singular nouns, in prepositional phrases, referring back to the singular subject. It does not say, "Let us make man in our images, according to our likenesses." Note also, that these are not plurals of respect or majesty as is a custom in some languages like Urdu. The ancient Hebrew language used in the Old Testament of the Bible never uses plurals in this way. Here is the observation of a noted professor of Semitic languages: "The first person plural can hardly be a mere editorial or royal plural that refers to the speaker alone, for no such usage is demonstrable anywhere else in biblical Hebrew." (1) No one in the Old Testament uses a plural of respect when addressing a superior. Plurals are not used that way in the Old Testament. Neither does any King in the Old Testament use this in addressing his subjects.

3. The word for "one" in Deuteronomy 6:4,5, "echad," can be used to convey unity that has internal diversity or more than one internal components. "This" is a compound-unity noun that is to say, a noun which demonstrates oneness or unity, but at the same time contains several entities." (2) For example:
 - a. Gen. 1:5 First day of creation, day and night = 1 day.
 - b. Gen. 2:24 Man and wife become 1 flesh.
 - c. Num. 13:23 1 cluster of grapes.

This word is used instead of the word "yachid" which signifies absolute oneness. Example: Gen. 22:2 God said to Abraham: "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac..." Note that this word, "yachid", is never used of God in the Bible. (3)

4. The Angel of the Lord: This is a special angel in the Old Testament who spoke with the authority of God Himself, received worship from people, and left people with the knowledge that they had seen God personally. Here are the references of His appearance to:
 - a. Hagar: Genesis 16:7, 13
 - b. Abraham: Genesis 18
 - c. Jacob: Genesis 32:24, 30
 - d. Moses: Exodus 3:1, 15
 - e. All Israel: Exodus 14:15, 20; 23:20, 22
 - f. Joshua: Joshua 5:13, 15
 - g. Gideon: Judges 6:11, 24
 - h. Sampson's Parents: Judges 13:2, 32
5. Specific references to the Son of God and the Holy Spirit of God in ways that imply deity:
 - a. Genesis 1:2; 19:24
 - b. Psalms 2:2,7,12; 45:6,7; 51:11; 110:1 (by David)
 - c. Proverbs 30:4 (by Solomon)
 - d. Isaiah 9:6; 11:1,2; 42:1; 48:12, 16; 61:1; 63:8, 16
 - e. Zechariah 7:7, 14
6. References that the Messiah is God:
 - a. Psalm 2:12
 - b. Isaiah 7:14; 9:6,7

- c. Jeremiah 23:5,6
- d. Micah 5:2

B. Things to notice about the Old Testament's presentation of the Trinity:

1. All of the above mentioned facets state their various points and emphases simply, without detailed explanation. There is no section in the Old Testament that concisely sets out the doctrine of the Trinity. Isaiah has the most references to it. God revealed it bit by bit giving hints here and there, and He has left it to us to put them together as we study His word with humility and reverence.
2. The Old Testament does not teach polytheism for at least the following reasons:
 - a. The Old Testament constantly refers to God with singular pronouns as one Being.
 - b. The Jews always maintained that they worshipped one God, and they maintained this in the face of clearly polytheistic cultures that surrounded them. When the people lapsed into idolatry and polytheism, the prophets of Israel called them back to the One God, and God brought judgments to punish their idolatry.
 - c. The plurality within the unity of God is presented in a way that is totally different from polytheism. Polytheism tends to deify objects, animals, or people; to create God's in the image of things, animals, or people. These independent gods usually are identified with one characteristic or attribute of God. "Polytheism projects gods who are independent entities; gods who are at cross purposes with one another. Within the trinity there is always absolute unity in desire, design, and execution. Every biblical reference shows the Father, Son and Holy Spirit operating in perfect union." (4)
 - d. No one has ever been able to show that the verses cited above as supporting the Trinity are corruptions of prior verses which support an absolute view of the unity of God. All of the verses mentioned above have always been part of the Old Testament Scriptures given by God.
 - e. It can be seen from all of the evidence mentioned above that, "the Hebrew Bible abounds with the idea of the three aspects of God: God the incomprehensible; God who appears to man in the image of man; and God who communicates with man by the Holy Spirit." (5) All three of these aspects are presented as having individual personalities, yet being the one God. It is difficult to understand, yet that is what the Old Testament presents.

This Old Testament teaching on the nature of God is continued and made more explicit in the New Testament. It is the view of God Jesus Christ used for the basis of His teaching which He then gave to His apostles.

C. New Testament References

1. The Unity of God:

- a. "...Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord..." (Jesus, quoted in Mark 12:29)
- b. "For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." (Paul, in 1 Timothy 2:5)
- c. "You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe and shudder." (James, the half-brother of Jesus in James 2:19)
- d. "There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the One who is able to save and destroy..." (James, the half-brother of Jesus in James 4:12)

2. Plurality within this Unity:

Jesus, using the titles Son of God, Son of Man, and the Messiah of Himself, said and did things that are only proper for God to say and do.

- i. Jesus claimed to have authority to forgive sin: Mark 2:512
 - ii. Jesus claimed to be able to grant eternal life to whoever believes in him: John 6:3540; 17:2
 - iii. Jesus claimed to have authority over all mankind: John 5:22; 17:2
 - iv. Jesus claimed to be worthy of the same honor due the Father: John 5:23
 - v. Jesus received worship from men due to God: Matthew 14:33; 28:9; John 20:28,29
 - vi. Jesus identifies himself as the the Angel of the Lord of the Old Testament, identifying himself by the most holy name of God from the Old Testament: John 8:57 with Exodus 3:13,14 "Yahweh."
3. Jesus is positively identified as the Son of God at least 110 times in the New Testament. All of the Gospels identify Him as the Son of God (Matthew 11x, Mark 5x, Luke 11x, and John 26x). Both Mark's and John's gospel accounts were

recorded expressly to show that Jesus is the Son of God (Mark 1:1; John 20:31). The following people identified Jesus as the Son of God:

- i. Satan: Matthew 4:3; Luke 4:3
 - ii. Numerous demons: Matthew 8:29; Mark 3:11; Luke 4:41
 - iii. The Centurion overseeing Jesus' crucifixion: Mark 15:39
 - iv. John the Baptist: John 1:34
 - v. Jesus' closest disciples: Matthew 14:33; 16:16; John 1:49
 - vi. Jesus himself: Matthew 16:17; Mark 14:61,62; Luke 22:70; John 3:16,18; 5:17-26; 11:4,25-27
 - vii. God the Father: Matthew 3:17; 17:5
- c. Also, the Bible presents that the Messiah and the Son of God are the same person, Jesus. This is done by Jesus' disciples (Matthew 16:16; John 1:49; 20:31) and by Jesus himself (Luke 4:41).
- d. In Mark 14:61,62 and also John 5:25-27 Jesus identifies Himself as both the Son of God and the Son of Man. He also ties both of these titles to the title "Messiah," or "Christ." All three of these titles, Son of God, Son of Man, and Messiah are related in the Bible. They refer to the same person. They speak to different facets of His identity, ministry, and character, but they also all refer to a person who is God in human flesh. "Son of God" primarily refers to Jesus' nature and relationship with the Father. "Son of Man" refers to Jesus' true, full humanity and His identity as the unique person from heaven mentioned in Daniel. "Messiah" refers to Jesus' role as God's perfect human prophet priest and king, both the king of Israel and the high King over all nations. Also, the Messiah is the One with God's authority and power to anoint people with the Holy Spirit of God. That is how the rest of the Bible uses these titles and it is how Jesus uses them of Himself.
- e. Other New Testament statements showing plurality within the unity of God:
- i. ***"Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."*** (Matthew 28:19)
 - ii. ***"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy spirit, be with you all."*** (2 Corinthians 13:14)

- iii. *"And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts."* (Galatians 4:6)
- iv. *"Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men."* (Philippians 2:57)
- v. *"But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith; praying in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life."* (Jude 20,21)
- f. Things to note concerning the New Testament's presentation of the Trinity:
 - i. The concept of the Trinity is found throughout the New Testament. It is not found in just the writings of only one disciple like John or Paul. It is found in the Spirit-inspired writings of the closest disciples of Jesus. It is stated or assumed in all of the New Testament books in that they openly and directly speak of Jesus being God and Lord. The doctrine of the Trinity is not based on a single verse, like 1 John 5:7,8. It is stated and assumed throughout the whole New Testament.
 - ii. Statements of plurality in the unity of God are more abundant and explicit in the New Testament than in the Old Testament. They continue and develop the facets of the doctrine revealed in the Old Testament.
 - iii. The Holy Spirit is treated as having full personality and exercising all of the attributes of God in the New Testament, as also do the Son and the Father. In the Bible, the Holy Spirit is presented as God Himself, not an angel representing God. The Holy Spirit's deity is too long of a subject for this article. There are many capable treatments of the subject that can be recommended. (6)

C. Conclusions

Though the word "Trinity" does not occur in the Bible, the concept is throughout the very fabric of both the Old and New Testaments. It is not something that men invented. It is a truth that was revealed by God. The Biblical concept of God's tri-unity was called "Trinity" by Christians who were seeking for a word to express what the Bible revealed about God's nature.

III. The Trinity: Logical or Illogical

A. A definition of the Trinity

Many think that the doctrine of the Trinity is illogical, that is, that it is self-contradictory and against common sense. Often, people think that Christians are saying, one person, God the Father + one person, God the Son + one person, God the Holy Ghost = one person. That truly is an illogical statement, but it is not what Christians are saying. Christians are not saying $1+1+1=1$.

The Trinity was defined in the Athanasian Creed, an early Christian document coming out of serious discussion on the nature of God as revealed in the Bible. Concerning the Trinity, this Creed reads:

"We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Substance."

This simple definition means that God is one essence or nature which exists in three Persons. If Christians were saying God is one Person existing in three Persons, or one essence existing in three essences, then the Trinity would indeed be illogical. But that is not what Christians believe, nor what the Bible presents of God's nature.

"Person" and "Essence" are two different categories of being. "Person" refers to personality; the individual exercise of intellect, feelings and will. "Essence" refers to the nature or substance of God. In human beings personhood and essence are contained in one physical body. One person and one human body are always together, so much so that we use "person" and "human being" interchangeably. But since God is a spiritual being He is not limited to a body as we are. Personhood and essence are not necessarily limited to both being one entity.

A simple way to phrase it is that the essence of God is the "what" of God's existence. The Persons of the Godhead are the "how" of that existence. They are a description of how the one essence of God exists. It is true, though, that we cannot conceive how this all works. This is where the mystery of God's nature enters in. It can be described in a way that doesn't violate reason and is logically consistent, but comprehending **how** it all works is above human capabilities. It can be described logically, but it cannot be comprehended.

Personally, I think this is the kind of thing we should expect with the infinite God. The complete workings of His nature are a secret and above our finite minds. But God in grace and mercy has revealed something about His nature that we can marvel and stand in awe; that we should be humbled in our human pride that tells us we are the masters of all things. What God has revealed also is logical or consistent with the highest standards of human reason. God is not inconsistent or contradictory. He doesn't violate the standards of consistency and reasonableness which govern these minds of ours that He has created.

Also, realize that this definition is what godly men came to as they received and studied what God had revealed. The Trinity was not invented by Christians. It is an honest, humble attempt to understand what God has revealed about Himself in the Holy Bible.

B. An Illustration of the Trinity

There have been many attempts to illustrate the Trinity from nature or mathematics or with regard to the human psychological makeup. It must be stated that no human illustration is fully adequate, because the Trinity is an attempt to express an unfathomable mystery. There is no perfect illustration that can make the Trinity comprehensible to the human mind. However, an honest attempt can be made to illustrate the facets of the Trinity that are understandable, and show that those parts that are beyond comprehension are not beyond it in a way that is unworthy or unbecoming of God. The following is the best illustration I have come upon: (7)

In nature, as you progress up through the natural world you find that as things increase in the complexity of life, you find a correlating increase in the complexity of their unity.

1. A stone: its unity is very simple. It is one substance with few internal differences. Its chemical makeup is simple. Internally it is not complex and correspondingly its unity is not complex.
2. Living things
 - a. Plants: increase the quality and complexity of the plant and the complexity of its unity increases. In addition to chemicals, plants have living chemical systems. They have life in addition to physical, chemical elements. The more internal differences there are, the more complex the unity becomes. It is still indivisible and unique, that is, it is still "one" plant.
 - b. Animals: again, the more internal differences the more complex the unity. Note with animals that the higher up you go in complexity, the complexity becomes not only physical but also involves consciousness and intelligence. Internal differences are enormously increased and correspondingly so is the complexity of the unity of the organism.
 - c. Mankind: in all the world of nature man is the most complex in his internal differences and the complexity of his unity. Complex physical life, intelligence, consciousness and self-consciousness are all present, yet all work together in a harmonious unity.

C. Conclusions

In the realm of living things, as things increase in internal differences and complexity, so their unity correspondingly increases in complexity.

Then, for the One who is Life Himself, the Author of life, who is absolutely unique and perfect in His unity, who is exalted above His creation, why should we be surprised to find His unity complex in a way that transcends our mortal minds? And this is what the

Bible presents, that God, in His own personal being, possesses the highest and richest unity of all.

The Trinity, though hard to comprehend, is not illogical or against reason. It surpasses reason while not contradicting it.

IV. The Trinity: Not blasphemy but a reverent description

A. Why is it not blasphemy?

Many think that the Trinity is blasphemous. They think that it is a form of polytheism that violates the oneness of God. They think it is associating a partner with God. They think it is sinful speculation into the nature of God. It does not do any of these.

For the doctrine of the Trinity to be blasphemous it would need to fulfill at least one of these three conditions:

1. If it was making a man out to be God.

The doctrine of the Trinity does not try to make a man out to be God. So much of the doctrine is based on Jesus' own words concerning himself that he was more than a man; that he came from heaven, that he had a special relationship of Son to the Father from eternity, that he identified himself with the angel of the Lord of the Old Testament, and that he said and did things that are only proper for God Himself to say and do. Jesus made himself out to be more than a man. In the Trinity, Christians are only accepting and trying to accurately work out Jesus' words about himself and his relationship to God the Father and the Holy Spirit.

2. If it was saying there were more than one God,

The Trinity does not say there is more than one God. It is an attempt to explain what the Bible reveals about the One God, that within this one, there are three persons sharing the one essence in perfect unity. Though this is hard to understand, it is not polytheism.

3. If it was speculation about God's nature that exceeded the bounds of revelation.

The Trinity also is not arrogant speculation about God's nature. It is an honest, reverent, attempt to express the fullness of what Holy Scripture

reveals about God. It stays within the bounds of the revelation of the Bible. It is not an idea that is a human invention.

B. Why is it reverent?

1. The Trinity glorifies God by fully accepting what He has revealed about Himself in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible.
2. The Trinity magnifies God by showing that God is beyond man's comprehension while yet staying true to reason of which He is the author.
3. The Trinity exalts God by humbling our intellects and showing that God is infinitely above His creation even in His personal being.

C. Conclusions

1. The doctrine of the Trinity is not polytheistic, illogical, or blasphemous. It honestly and adequately represents what the Bible reveals about the nature of God.
2. One must be careful to receive all of God's revelation concerning Himself, even that which is hard to understand.

"The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and our sons forever, that we may observe all the words of this law." (The Torah, Deuteronomy 29:29)

3. There are no good reasons to reject the doctrine of the Trinity as an adequate and useful description of the nature of God as revealed in the Bible.

V. Why is this so important?

Why is this all so important? Is it just to win arguments or pick at each other's views? No. It is much more important than that. The author wants you to know that the Bible teaches eternal salvation from hell depends on one's view of Jesus. Is He just a man or the eternal Son of God, the second Person of the Trinity? The Bible teaches that as the sinless Son of God and Son of Man Jesus did something for us that no one else could do; something no normal human, prophet, holy man, teacher, or sage could do. He paid the full penalty due to God for our sins. The Bible teaches that God desires to have a personal relationship with all of us but that our sins are in the way. All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's righteous standards (Romans 3:23). And we deserve hell for our sins. The Bible says "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23) The Bible states that Jesus, "...is the atoning sacrifice for our sins,

and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world." (1 John 2:2) Jesus said, "For God so loved the world that he gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) Jesus also said, "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)

The Trinity really matters, and deserves your sincere, objective consideration. It matters because what you think and know about God matters in this life and the one to come. Please consider what I have presented. May God bless you as you seek Him and His truth.

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27 May 1997, for a lecture at Leeds University.

VI. Endnotes

1. Dr. Gleason L. Archer, Jr., **Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties**, Zondervan Publishing House, p. 359.

2. S. Rosenthal, **One God or Three?**, The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., p. 18.

3. Here are all of the verses using the word "yachid" in the Old Testament:

Genesis 22:2,12,16 "only son"

Judges 11:34 "only child"

Psalms 22:20 "only life"

Psalms 25:16 "lonely"

Psalms 35:17 "only life"

Psalms 68:6 "lonely"

Proverbs 4:3 "only son"

Jeremiah 6:26 "only son"

Amos 8:10 "only son"

Zechariah 12:10 "only son"

4. S. Rosenthal, **One God or Three**, p. 37

5. Rosenthal, p. 29
6. John F. Walvoord's, **The Holy Spirit**, Zondervan Publishing House is one such reference.
7. **The Moslem World, Volume 1**, pp. 381-407, W.H.T. Gairdner, "The Doctrine of Unity in Trinity."