

An Introduction to the Trinity by Don Green

Evangelical Christians adhere to a doctrine of God called the "Trinity", which is so foundational to Christian teaching that it could fairly be called a litmus test of orthodoxy. Failure to affirm the Trinity is failure to affirm the truth. This essay will introduce this important Christian doctrine. The existence of God and the accuracy of the biblical data are assumed.

Any discussion of the Trinity should be prefaced by a recognition that God's greatness is unsearchable (Ps. 145:3). Man should therefore expect to encounter matters beyond his full understanding when he approaches God. Such is the case with the Trinity, which eludes total comprehension without being contrary to reason. It is a mystery known only by biblical revelation.

With this in mind, the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is this: There is only one true God, who has revealed Himself as having only one essence, and who eternally exists in three persons - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three persons are each fully God in every respect, existing co-equally, co-substantially, and co-eternally within the one divine essence. Each deserves worship and obedience. Yet these three persons are only one God.

Thus stated, there are three key elements to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. The first element is the oneness of God. The second is the full deity of each of the three distinct persons - the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The third element is that these three persons are one God, not three. These three elements will be examined separately. The supporting biblical citations below are illustrative, not comprehensive.

The biblical oneness of God is found in Moses' statement, "The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!" (Deut 6:4). Elsewhere, God states that there was no God before Him and that there will be no God after Him. He is the First and the Last. There is no God besides Him (Is. 43:10,

44:6). Clearly, the God of the Bible is an exclusive, unique God, against whom no other gods could possibly be raised. This one God has an essence which none can rival.

This biblical oneness of God must be fully retained as the next element of Trinitarian doctrine is considered, the deity of the three separate persons in the Godhead. While several lines of biblical evidence could be considered, only statements specifically attributing deity to the three individual persons will be considered. So, the Father is called God in John 6:27. The Son is addressed as God in Hebrews 1:8. Finally, the Holy Spirit is referred to interchangeably with God in Acts 5:3,4. Thus, while there is only one God, there are three persons in the Bible who are called God without qualification.

The third element of Trinitarian doctrine is that these three persons are only one God, as shown in those passages of Scripture that join the oneness of God with the three persons of the Godhead. For example, Jesus commanded His disciples in Matthew 28:19 to baptize in the name (singular name) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (plural persons). Here, each person of the Trinity is considered equally with the other persons under the one name, without compromise of the individual identities.

The distinction between the three persons has a functional dimension within the Godhead. One person of the Trinity may be subordinate for a time to another so that a particular task can be accomplished. For example, the Son submitted Himself to the Father when the Father sent Him from heaven to be the Savior of the world (cf. 1 John 4:14). In the present age, the Holy Spirit conducts a ministry that, among other things, glorifies the Son (John 16:14). However, these differences in function do not entail a difference in essence. Each person is fully God, having a particular work to fulfill, without violating the one essence that constitutes God.

Trinitarian doctrine must be distinguished from a tritheism that would maintain that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct gods having a unity in purpose and endeavor. While Trinitarians would affirm a unity in purpose and endeavor, they would also affirm a oneness of essence among the three persons which tritheists would deny.

Trinitarian doctrine must also be distinguished from a modalism that would maintain that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only different manifestations at different times of the one true God. Trinitarian teaching differs by holding that all three persons exist simultaneously from all eternity. This can be illustrated from the account of Jesus' baptism in Matthew 3:16-17.

Admittedly, the term "Trinity" is not found in the Bible itself. However, the doctrine that the term represents is an accurate synthesis of all the biblical statements about the unity and personhood of God. The Trinity goes beyond reason, but is not contrary to reason. While "three persons, one person" would be a contradiction, "three persons, one God" is not a contradiction. Thus, the Trinity is a mystery to be affirmed and believed, for it is the dividing line between truth and error.

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