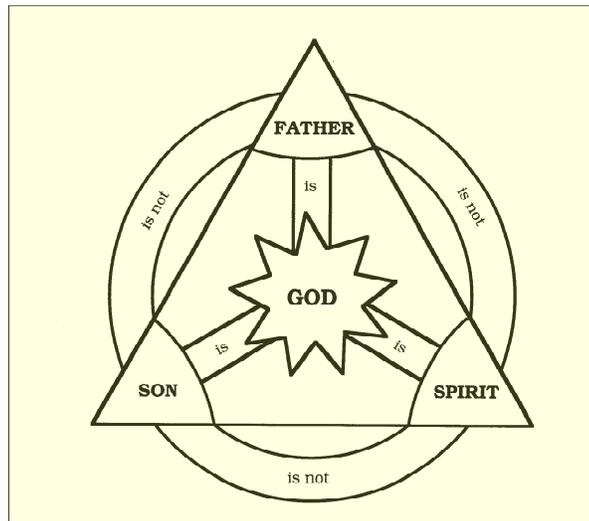


NOTES ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

\* \* \* THE NECESSITY OF THE TRIUNE NATURE OF GOD \* \* \*

"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD." (Deuteronomy 6:4)

"For there are three that bear record in heaven,  
the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit:  
and these three are one." (1 John 5:7)



S.L.H.  
Soli Deo Gloria!  
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I. INTRODUCTION

The word "Trinity" does not occur anywhere in the Bible. It is a word that has been coined (by contracting tri-unity) in an attempt to characterize the extraordinarily complex nature of God as revealed in the Bible.

Because God is transcendent (2Chron6:18), He cannot be known unless He reveals Himself (Deut29:29; Isa45:15). This He has done in the creation, in the Person of Christ, and (most importantly) in the Bible. God's revelation of Himself includes His triune nature (i.e., the Trinity). God's triune nature with its manifold implications is not an easy doctrine for man in his finitude to grasp, even in a cursory way; in fact, it is incomprehensible, part of the "unsearchable... wisdom and knowledge of God... past finding out" (Rom11:33). While this means that we can never understand God's triune nature in fullness, we can know something of it (i.e., that which He has revealed).

**Although the doctrine of the Trinity is inscrutable, it is not illogical.** In fact, logical consistency within the nature and attributes of God (as revealed in the Bible) demands plurality within the Godhead.

## II. DEFINITIONS OF THE TRINITY

There is no disagreement on the basic understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity within all evangelical/Protestant denominations of Christianity, or even between Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism.

Lewis Sperry Chafer: "The Trinity is composed of three united Persons without separate existence—so completely united as to form One God. The divine nature subsists in three distinctions—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

B. B. Warfield: "There is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three co-eternal and co-equal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence."

Baptist Faith & Message (2000): "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."

These attempted definitions of the Trinity, as well as all others, are incomplete and imperfect owing to the inability of the finite mind to fully grasp and comprehensively express that which is infinite. However, integral to all orthodox expressions of the doctrine of the Trinity is the idea of a distinction of Persons within the Godhead (Gen1:26; Jn1:1) in harmony with a unity of Being or essence (Deut6:4; 1Jn5:7).

Vital to the Biblical understanding of the Trinity are: 1) God is absolutely One. 2) God is absolutely Three.<sup>1</sup> 3) God's three-ness refers to modes of Being, not manifestations or roles. And, 4) Though there is subordination within the Trinity, this subordination does not refer to essence.

## III. DEITY OF THE FATHER, THE SON, AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

The Bible ascribes deity/divine attributes to three distinct Persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

God the Father. No debate exists regarding the fact that the Bible recognizes the Father as God. The Father is called God in many places in the Bible (Jn6:27; Gal1:1; Philip2:11; 1Thess1:1; 1Pet1:2, etc.).

God the Son. Jesus Christ is called the Son of God in many places in the Bible (Matt16:16-17; Luk1:35; Mk1:1; Jn1:34; 10:36; Act9:20; Rom1:3-4, etc.). The deity of Christ is clearly asserted in John 1:1, 10:30-33, and 20:28. Furthermore, He is ascribed the divine attributes of omniscience (Matt9:4), omnipotence (Matt28:18), and omnipresence (Matt18:20; 28:20), and He is asserted to perform exclusive works of God such as creation (Jn1:3), sustaining the creation (Col1:17; Heb1:2), and forgiving sins (Mk2:5,7).

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<sup>1</sup> That God is absolutely One and at the same time absolutely Three is not a logical contradiction, since He is not One and Three in the same way.

God the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is called God in Acts 5:3-4. Furthermore, He is ascribed the divine attributes of omniscience (1Cor2:10) and omnipresence (1Cor6:19), and He is asserted to regenerate people (Jn3:5-6,8), which is an exclusive work of God.

Though not extensive, **there are a few places in the Bible where the Trinitarian formulation of the Godhead is either implicitly or explicitly visible (e.g., Isa48:16; 61:1; Matt28:19; 1Cor12:4-6; 2Cor13:14; 1Jn5:7). The three Persons of the Trinity are seen assembled together at the baptism of Jesus (Matt3:16-17).**

## VI. ATTRIBUTES OF GOD NECESSITATE PLURALITY

Scripture is the only sure source of our knowledge concerning the attributes of God (Isa8:20; Jn17:17; 2Pet1:19-21). The Bible reveals that God is **transcendent** (1Kgs8:27), **immanent** (Matt28:20), **self-existent** (Ex3:14), **immutable** (Mal3:6; Heb13:8); **omnipotent** (Col1:17; Heb1:2-3), **omniscient** (Ps139:4; Act15:18), **omnipresent** (Ps139:7-10), **holy** (1Pet1:16), **just** (Gen18:25), **good** (Mk10:18), **love** (1Jn4:8), etc. These are not external qualities or standards merely 'satisfied' by God. Rather, the God of the Bible in His very nature and character defines these qualities. We cannot know what 'good' is apart from the character of God, for He alone is good (Mk10:18). We cannot know what 'love' is apart from the character of God, for He is love (1Jn4:8), and His attribute of love becomes the standard for our love (Jn15:12); the same is true for holiness (1Pet1:16). Furthermore, in His nature and character God is both perfect (Matt5:48) and perfectly consistent (Jas1:17; 1Jn1:5). This means that each of God's attributes is informed by every other, and that they all coexist in perfect harmony.

What are the ramifications of the attributes of God being logically consistent and coexisting in perfect harmony? Consider God's attribute of **aseity**. While it is not correct to say that the aseity of God is more important, or more fundamental, than the other attributes of God<sup>2</sup>, nevertheless His aseity is a logical starting point in discussing consistency and harmony within God's attributes. The aseity of God is His attribute of self-existence, declared most dramatically to Moses in God's assertion that "I AM THAT I AM" (Ex3:14; see also Jn1:4; 5:26). The aseity of God means that God does not need anything outside of Himself and is, thus, not dependent upon His creation in any way (Job22:2-3; 41:11; Ps50:12). Thus, it follows that God did not have to create. Scripture reveals that God chose to create simply because it pleased Him to do so (Rev4:11).

God did not have to create and could have chosen not to do so. However, this possibility creates an apparent tension within the attributes of God. Specifically, a number of the attributes of God revealed in Scripture require a plurality of persons in order to sensibly realize their expression. For instance, what is the meaning of "love" in the context of a single, solitary person? "God is love" (1Jn4:8), but the nature of love is such that a

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<sup>2</sup> Since the attributes of God coexist in perfect harmony, each one being fully informed by all the others, it is not correct to place any single attribute above any other.

relationship between at least two persons is necessary for its meaningful expression. Similarly, other attributes ascribed to God in the Bible, such as His goodness (Mk10:18), justice (Gen18:25) and faithfulness (2Tim2:13), while perhaps less obvious than that of love, can also be seen to require multiple persons in order for their meaningful expression. But to reconcile such attributes of God with His attribute of aseity demands a plurality of Persons within the Godhead from all eternity, else God would have been compelled to create in order for Him to realize their full expression. Scripture, however, refutes any notion that God was compelled to create (Isa40:15-18).

For the aseity of God asserted in Scripture to be in harmony with His other (equally Biblical) attributes demands a plurality of Persons within the Godhead<sup>3</sup>. The Trinity is not an esoteric doctrine detached from others, but is required for logical consistency. To be self-contained apart from the creation, yet still able to enjoy fellowship, express in full His attributes of love, goodness, justice, and faithfulness (for example), requires multiple Persons. This requirement is satisfied in the doctrine of the Trinity, and, in fact, the doctrine of the Trinity becomes an absolute necessity. The triune God of the Bible can enjoy fellowship, communication, express love and be glorified within the three-Person structure of the Trinity, apart from His creation and from all eternity. Thus, the triune God is not only independent of His creation, He was under no compulsion whatsoever to create. The doctrine of the Trinity preserves the Biblical attribute of the aseity of God in harmony with all of His other attributes.

It follows logically that if the Trinitarian concept of monotheism is required to satisfy simultaneously the aseity of God in harmony with all of His other attributes, then all other non-Trinitarian forms of monotheism fail at this point. All forms of solitary monotheism, having only one person in their 'godhead', suffer from the fatal problem of the unbiblical conception of a 'god' who not only must create in order to fully express his attributes, but must also sustain that creation into eternity future<sup>4</sup>. Thus, a solitary deity cannot exhibit the attribute of aseity in harmony with other attributes such as love, justice, goodness and faithfulness; but a 'god' who is not self-existent is not the God who has revealed Himself in the Bible. The inescapable conclusion is that the solitary deity of classical Unitarianism, contemporary Jehovah's Witnesses, Islam, and even modern Judaism does not possess the Biblical attribute of aseity, so that their 'gods' are not and cannot be the God of the Bible.

## **VII. TRIUNE NATURE OF THE UNIVERSE**

It is not surprising that the triune nature of God is reflected in the universe He created (Cp., Rom1:20). In fact, the scientist and theologian Dr. Henry Morris saw in the structure of the physical

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<sup>3</sup> While plurality within the Godhead can be logically inferred from God's attributes, the Trinity of three distinct Persons must be specifically revealed.

<sup>4</sup> The requirement to sustain the creation into eternity future places serious constraints on the kind of eschatological judgment of creation that is possible for a solitary deity.

universe a "trinity of trinitities". By this he meant that the universe is comprised of three components, space, time, and matter, which are and must be everywhere present. Furthermore, these three components which comprise the universe each display themselves in a three-fold structure. Space is comprised of and defined by three dimensions (i.e., length, width, depth). Similarly, time is conceptualized in a three-fold way as past, present, and future. And finally, matter is always unseen energy, which results in motion, and which manifests itself as a physical phenomenon (e.g., light, sound, texture, hardness).

In calling this recursive three-fold structure of the universe a "trinity of trinitities", Morris does not mean that "space, time, and matter" is or should be used as a so-called "analogy" of the Trinity<sup>5</sup>. However, it ought to be obvious that the universe around us displays in varied ways and majestic detail a sophisticated and inherent triune structure. As Bible-believing Christians, we cannot accept that such an obvious feature of our universe is a chance or insignificant detail. Rather, our conclusion must be that it is the very nature of the triune Creator showing forth in a glorious way in the creation He has made (Ps19:1; Rom1:20). This does not take the thinking Christian by surprise. To ask if God could have created in a way that would not reveal His triune nature would be equivalent to asking if He could have created in a way that did not reveal His power, goodness, justice, etc.? The obvious answer is no!

#### VIII. RESOLUTION OF DIALECTIC TENSION BETWEEN "THE ONE" VS. "THE MANY"

Dialectic tension<sup>6</sup> between "the one" and "the many" creates the greatest conceptual difficulty of all time in both philosophy and language; despite millennia of concerted effort (i.e., Plato and Aristotle expended considerable effort on this problem) which continues during the present day, pagan/unbelieving thought has not found any resolution.

Philosophically, the source of vexation is the question of what is the most ultimate reality, that which unifies (the One) or that which distinguishes (the Many)? If the One is most important, then differences between good and evil, light and darkness, spirit and matter, personality and non-personality are merely insignificant features of one great amorphous unity—the **Continuity of Being**. On the other hand, if the Many is most important, then none of the individual pieces of the universe are inter-related; the universe is ruled by pure **Chance** (or **Fate**, as in pagan mythologies). These philosophic extremes manifest themselves in politics as totalitarianism (where individual rights are suppressed by the State) vs. anarchy (where everyone does what is right in his own eyes; cf. Deut12:8; Judg21:25). Common experience teaches us that somehow there has to be a balance between these two extremes<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> All such analogies that have ever been offered distort the Scriptural truth of the Trinity in one or more ways and should not be used.

<sup>6</sup> Dialectic tension is a relational paradox that arises when two opposing or incompatible forces exist simultaneously.

<sup>7</sup> The U.S. Constitution is virtually unique (though grounded in Biblical principles, especially as drawn from the Mosaic Covenant) in attempting to strike this balance politically in the formation of a representative republic in which

Language, in order to facilitate meaningful communication, also requires a balance between the One and the Many. Consider the simple sentence, "the dog is brown". We all use this type of sentence every day without any consideration regarding what we are implicitly assuming reality is like. This simplest of assertions assumes we can know individual things such as a dog (and that the concept of a dog is stable; i.e., what is a dog today will be a dog tomorrow); this is the Many. But such an assertion also assumes that individual things can be classified, because they share common characteristics; they are part of a One. The ability to classify is universally common with all mankind. In language, the One and the Many must be in perfect balance, for if we dared to overemphasize the Many—the individual objects themselves—we would wind up knowing nothing about everything (since no object could be classified with any other knowable property). On the other hand, if we dared to overemphasize the One—the properties or classes—we would wind up knowing everything about nothing (since the properties would become mere abstractions divorced from everyday occurrences). Again, there has to be a balance. Since **logic** works on language, it also demands a balance between the One and the Many.

The problem for the pagan/unbelieving thinker is that he has never been able to *give an account*<sup>8</sup> for this fundamentally needful balance at the very heart of his thinking. Pagan thought, therefore, finds itself relying on the logical rules of inference (the One) in the midst of a world of instances (the Many) with *absolutely no explanation for why communication/logic works so much of the time!*

The difference between pagan and Biblical thinking lies in the Creator-creature distinction (Num23:19; Ps50:21; Isa55:8-9; 1Cor1:25). The pagan insists on one kind of reality, one level of being (i.e., materialism, humanism); the Bible reveals two kinds of reality and two levels of being (Creator and creature, which are never mixed). Pagan thought is left with a never-ending oscillation between the notion of the Continuity of Being (One) and that of Chance or Fate (Many). In the pagan view, the One and the Many are always in competition. In contrast, the Bible-believer sees the One and the Many in creation as derivative of the One and the Many in the Creator (cf. Section VII, The Triune Nature of the Universe). The doctrine of the Trinity recognizes that in God's Being, which is ultimate reality, both the One and the Many co-exist in perfect, non-competitive harmony. The Triune Creator, existing as One and as Three, thinks and speaks with unity and diversity. As a finite replica of his Creator (Gen1:26), Man thinks and speaks in a similar fashion; his language and logic bear witness to their origin in the Triune Creator.

**The triune nature of God perfectly harmonizes the tension between the One and the Many, which has no resolution apart from Biblical revelation.**

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important rights of the individual citizen are preserved, while at the same time unifying all citizens in a single nation.

<sup>8</sup> Cornelius Van Til observed that, "Unbelievers can count, but they cannot account for their counting."

## IX. CONCLUSION

How important is a correct conception of God and His nature? The Lord said that one of the most important questions to be contemplated is "What think ye of Christ? Whose Son is He?" (Matt22:42). Elsewhere He said that to know the only true God and His Son Jesus Christ is the essence of eternal life (Jn17:3). Thus, there is no greater obligation on the creature than to know God and to "worship Him in spirit and in truth" (Jn4:24).

To know God we must understand what He has revealed Himself to be like in His nature, character, and attributes. All the classic orthodox creeds of the Christian Church have confessed the doctrine of the Trinity (as does the Baptist Faith and Message), but today the average Christian understands little about it. While the deity of Christ is certainly a truth kept before us, the Trinity is a truth much richer than merely the deity of Christ. It ought to be the subject of serious study and meditation by every Christian, because it goes to the very heart of knowing God and Who He is. Furthermore, when we understand correctly the attributes of God as revealed in Scripture, we must conclude that the triune nature of God is not a mere abstract theological oddity that the average Christian can safely ignore, but an absolute necessity in establishing the Christian God as the God of the Bible (the only true God) and understanding the world He has made.

### RESOURCES:

Edward Henry Bickersteth, The Trinity: The Classic Study of Biblical Trinitarianism (Kregel Publications: Grand Rapids, MI, no date).

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