



WHY BELIEVE IN THE HOLY TRINITY?

Throughout history the doctrine (i.e., teaching) of the Trinity has evoked polemical discussion. It continues to do so today. In expressing a resolute belief in the Triune nature of God, my purpose is not to defend God. God needs no defence, least of all from me. I merely intend to explain why an analysis of the Bible, church history, and life, necessitates a belief in the Trinity.

When Christians speak of the Trinity we have in mind three great truths: (1) That God is one; (2) That the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are God; (3) that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct yet inseparable persons within the Godhead.¹

The most obvious question arising from these facts and the one around which the controversy has raged, is how God can be both one and three simultaneously. In response, many, such as Jews and Muslims, have tended to dismiss the idea of the Trinity and/or assume that the teaching espouses tritheism (a belief in three gods). Others, such as the Jehovah Witnesses, accept the existence of God the Son and God the Spirit, but have not accorded them co-equality with God the Father.

The orthodox Christian response begins from the premise that God has revealed himself and that we are to receive his revelation as it is. We neither discovered God nor invented him. We take God on His own terms. We do so, realizing all the while that he is ultimately incomprehensible. First, because He has not revealed all there is to

know of Himself—"The secret things belong unto the Lord our God: but those things which are revealed belong unto us" (Deuteronomy 29:29)—and secondly, because our minds are finite. Said Augustine of Hippo (354–430), 'If you can understand it, it's not God!'² In the alternative words of the seventeenth-century theologian Thomas Watson: "Our narrow thoughts can no more comprehend the Trinity in unity than a nut-shell will hold all the water in the sea."³

Notwithstanding these hindrances to a complete knowledge of God, we may look at "those things which are revealed", how they have been unpacked throughout the centuries, and detected in human experience, to see that the Trinity is not something that is the figment of human imagination.

THE TESTIMONY OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

First, we hold to the Trinity because the Holy Scriptures—what we call inscripturated revelation—teach it. In saying this, it is important to acknowledge, without embarrassment I may add, that the word "Trinity" is not found in the Scriptures. But then neither is the word "providence," "sacrament," or "rapture." Like these other terms, "Trinity" is

a tool which enables the remarkably complex biblical witness to God to be brought together in a more sophisticated whole.... It takes what is already there, . . . and shows how it is all related together as a consistent whole.⁴

When delving into the Scriptures we must understand that they trace the history of redemption. Characteristic of this history is the fact that throughout its course God has progressively revealed

¹ Donald Macleod, *Shared Life* (London: Scripture Union, 1987), 7.

² Alistair McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Eastbourne, UK: Kingsway Publications, 1987), 9.

³ Thomas Watson, *A Body of Divinity*, reprint ed. (Edinburgh: The Banner of Trust Trust, 1983), 109.

⁴ McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, 117.



himself and his good news for lost humanity. In other words, over the centuries he has afforded us increasing light on the gospel.

Old Testament.

While there are no overt references to the Trinity in the Old Testament, it is important to realise that under that era, God's revelation concentrated on his inherent unity. We can readily see why this was so. Israel, God's chosen nation, was surrounded by tribal groupings that were polytheistic (they worshipped more than one god). Thus, in one of the most important verses of the Old Testament, we read of Moses telling God's people, "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4). Israel's God was God alone over both his chosen people and over the whole earth. But the text, known as the *Shema*, also conveys the truth that God is a single being. This stress on God's oneness was intended to dissuade Israel from turning to idolatry.

Nevertheless, in the Old Testament we find a number of hints that there is more to God than simply his oneness. While these intimations would not have been understood by an Israelite to mean unmistakably that God is triune, when read in the light of the New Testament, it is clear that the pertinent Old Testament texts are preparatory to the New Testament's revelation of the plurality of divine persons within the Godhead.

Perhaps the clearest indications of the plurality persons within the Godhead in the Old Testament is the fourfold use of plural pronouns

⁵ Scholars are nowadays more shy about seeing in *Elohim* (a Hebrew name for God) an intimation of the Trinity. The plural probably denotes the majesty of God rather than a plurality of persons, nonetheless its use with a singular verb remains intriguing.

("us" and "our") in reference to God.⁵ To press home the point, we shall quote from the Jehovah Witnesses' New World Translation: "And God went onto say, 'Let us make man in our image according to our likeness . . .'" (Gen. 1:26; cf. 3:22; 11:7 and Is. 6:8)

Furthermore, mention may be made of "the Angel of the Lord". This Angel is "distinguished from the Lord and identified with the Lord."⁶ For instance, in Genesis 16:11 the angel asserts to Hagar, "The Lord has heard your misery". Yet, when the narrative tells us of Hagar's response, it reads: "So she called the name of the LORD who spoke to her, 'You are a God of seeing'" (v. 13 [ESV]). In other words, Hagar clearly understood the angel to be an appearance of God. He came from God and yet was God. In Genesis 31:11-13 we read of the angel of God speaking to Jacob in a dream saying, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me." The angel of God is said to be God and yet is distinguished from Him.

New Testament.

In the new covenant era, God's unity continues to be of importance. In Christ's preamble to the first of the commandments (Mk. 12:29), for instance, we find an endorsement of the teaching of the *Shema*. Furthermore, in His High Priestly prayer Christ underlines His oneness with His Father: "And this is life eternal that they might know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." (Jn. 17:3). We find the same emphasis in Romans 3:30; 1 Corinthians 8:4, 6; Galatians 3:20; 1 Timothy 1:17; James 2:19.

⁶ Macleod, *Shared Life*, 11



With the first advent of the Christ, however, there occurs an explosion of revelation concerning the Trinity. God takes on a human face in Christ—the Christ who came to make him known (Jn. 1:18). The New Testament amply records the greater light Christ brought to the matter. Indeed, indications and statements of the Trinity permeate the entire New Testament. Indeed, the divinity of the Son is assumed by authors of the Gospels and the Epistles. Nowhere is there a sense of embarrassment in attributing deity to Christ.

In the Gospels we detect the three-in-oneness of God in the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11). Jesus is described by His Father as “My beloved Son”. As Christ rises from his baptism the Spirit descends on Him like a dove. Christ’s baptism reveals, then, three distinct persons operating in complete harmony. Jesus expresses the same at the end of His earthly ministry when commissioning His disciples: “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name [singular] of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:18-20). The use of the article with each person of the Godhead alerts us to the fact that the names of the Father, the Son and the Spirit refer not to three forms of operation of the one God. Rather, they are three individual (but mutually penetrating) persons or subsistences of the Godhead; hence the greatness of the mystery.

In the Gospels special mention ought to be made of John 1:1—a text used by Jehovah Witnesses to reject trinitarianism. Reference is made to the fact that the Greek contains no article before the second use of “God”, such that the verse ought to be translated: “In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was a god [*kai theos ēn ho logos*]”. A brief study of idiomatic Greek

teaches us, however, that where two nouns in the nominative are linked by the verb “to be”—in this case “the word” [*ho logos*] and “God” [*theos*]—the complement (*theos* here) drops the article. The translation “the word was God” fully accords then, not only with Greek grammar, but with the high Christology that runs through John’s Gospel.

In the Epistles, it is evident that the apostles were fully conversant with Christ’s teaching, and His claims to deity in particular. Although coming to the apostolic office later than the other apostles, the same can be said of Paul. On the Damascus road he heard the risen Christ speak to him from heaven (Acts 9:4-6; 26:15). In 1 Corinthians 9:1 he asks: “Am not I an apostle? Have not I seen the Lord”. We take seriously then Paul’s attribution of deity to the Lord Jesus. Indeed, so confident was he of this that we find him on occasion rearranging the order of the persons of the Trinity: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God [a reference to the Father] and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Corinthians 13:14). Elsewhere, he refers to Christ as a co-equal source of grace with the Father (Ephesians 1:2). None of the persons of the Godhead is then inferior to another. They are the same in essence, and are each co-equal and co-eternal, notwithstanding the fact that Christ subjected Himself to His Father for the sake of the work of redemption.

Likewise, the New Testament attributes deity to the Holy Spirit, personhood too. Mentioned in the Old Testament a hundred times, we have greater insight into the person and work of the Spirit in the New Testament. Indeed, what was attributed in the Old Testament to *Yahweh* (the covenant name of the Lord), is attributed to the Spirit in the New Testament (cf., Is. 6:9-10 and Acts 28:25-27; Ps. 95:7-11 and Heb. 3:7-9; Lev. 26:11-12 and 2 Cor. 6:16). The Spirit is portrayed as equal to the Father and the Son (Matt. 3:16; 28:19; 1



Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 2:18; 4:4-6; 1 Pet. 12). He is said to possess divine attributes: sovereignty (Jn. 3:8), eternity (Heb. 9:14), omnipotence (Rom. 5:19), and omniscience (1 Cor. 2:10-11). He undertakes a number of divine works. He works miracles (Matt. 1:18-20; Lk. 1:35). He gives new birth (Jn. 3:5-6; Tit. 3:5). He resurrects (Rom. 8:11). He empowers believers (Acts 4:29; 2 Tim. 1:7). He makes them holy (Rom. 15:16; 1 Cor. 6:11; Gal. 5:22-23). He gives them gifts (1 Cor. 12:1-11).

Not only is the Spirit personal, He is divine. A “He” (in some senses a “She”), but not an impersonal ‘it’. Personal pronouns are used of him (Jn. 15:26; 16:13-14). Personal actions are attributed to him. He speaks (Mk. 13:11; Acts 10:19-20; 13:2; 21:11; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:7). He understands (1 Cor. 2:10-11). He wills (Jn. 3:8; 1 Cor. 12:11). He exerts power (Acts 10:38; Rom. 15:13; Eph. 3:16). He reveals (Lk. 2:26; 1 Pet. 1:11). He guides (Jn. 16:13). He teaches (Lk. 12:12; Jn. 14:26). He comforts, counsels, helps and loves believers (Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; Rom. 15:30; Jas. 4:5). He can be lied to (Acts 5:3). He may be grieved (Eph. 4:30), resisted (Acts 7:31), and blasphemed (Matt. 12:31-32). The Holy Spirit cannot then be regarded as merely an impersonal force or influence. He is every bit as much a person as God the Father or God the Son.

THE TESTIMONY OF HISTORY

While subordinate to the testimony of Holy Scripture, the testimony of history is not without its relevance for belief in the Trinity. History teaches us that the doctrine of the Trinity was neither

invented nor adapted. Rather, it is a biblical truth which came to be understood more fully with the passing of the centuries.

Tertullian (160-220AD), the father of Latin Theology, was the first to use the term “Trinity” (*Trinitas*). By this he meant that God is three-in-one. He also introduced the term “essence” or “being”, to express the unity of God. Most important of all was his use of the term “person”. It was this term that enabled him to speak of the three-in-oneness of God. “The three persons”, he stated, “are one in essence not in person”.⁷ “These three are one in essence not in person.”⁸

Athanasius of the fourth century built on Tertullian’s insights. Christ, he contended, was truly God (*homoousios*) and not simply like God (*homoiousios*). He reasoned that if Christ were not God, he could not be our Saviour. Being God, he is as worthy of our worship as is God the Father. At the Council of Nicea (325)—a council of 300 bishops—this teaching was formally recognised as the official teaching of the Christian church. However, little had been said at that time of the person of the Spirit. This was rectified at the Council of Constantinople in 381, wherein the Spirit was described as “the Lord, the Life Giver, proceeding from the Father, and with the Father and Son to be worshipped and glorified.”⁹ By the end of the fourth century then, the church’s understanding of Scripture had grown, such that the Son and the Spirit were now seen as one in essence with the Father.

We could go on. The historical development of the Trinity is extensive. While we admit and confess that the way the church

⁷ MacLeod, *Shared Life*, 27

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*, 32



came to understand better the trinitarian teaching of Scripture was not always pretty, we nevertheless believe that despite our failings, Jesus has kept his word: the Spirit he sent from the Father has indeed been guiding us into all truth (Jn. 16:12-13).

THE TESTIMONY OF EXPERIENCE

It is easy to dismiss the idea of the Trinity, especially if we do not receive the Bible as God's Word. We may also find much in its historical development to justify such a response. What is more difficult to ignore is the way in which human experience reflects the historic understanding of the biblical doctrine. Critical here is the idea that humankind has been made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). That image is, we have seen, a trinitarian image, and one of which we retain vestiges in the post-Fall conditions of humanity. Indeed, we cannot understand ourselves or our human experience without taking account of the Trinity.

Scottish theologian Donald Macleod supplies three ways in which our fallen humanity bears the image of the Trinity.¹⁰

First, human equality is predicated on the equality of the persons of the Godhead. Whether we be male or female, black or white, we are created in the image of co-equal divine persons. Inequality should be odious to us, then, precisely because of our creation in the image of the co-equal divine persons. How few recognise however, that the source of our equality is our creation in the image of the Trinity.

Second, we see vestiges of our creation in the image of the Trinity in the fact that humanity is both one and diverse. We are all

different because the triune God created us so. This difference includes the minutia of our fingerprints, as is seen even in the case of identical twins. We are all unique. In other words, we are not simply different modes of the one person. We are different persons who not only look different but have varying abilities.

Third, just as the three persons of the Godhead share the reality and sense of community, so do we. Our desire for community and fellowship is innate. For all our differences, we long to belong. Writes Erroll Hulse:

We are not made to be self-centred, but for companionship. We are gregarious by nature. As "other person centredness" is characteristic of the three persons of the Trinity so we find our fulfilment not in self-centredness, but in God-centredness and other people centredness.¹¹

For all the selfishness of life in a fallen world, we nevertheless see the truth of this in the vestiges of the divine image we retain. The longing for community explains the desire for friendship. Friendships fulfil a basic need of humankind. It is precisely because we know this instinctively that we question how hermits can survive. Classically, we see this truth in the institution of marriage. As "God is not a lonely nomad... [nor] a being living in freezing isolation," but "lives in a communion of love and light,"¹² so he has declared that it is not good for man to be alone (Gen. 2:18). Thus, typically, God blesses consecutive generations of men with helpers, for mutual enrichment as man and wife. The families that ensure are built on a bond of blood, and thus become crucial social units. If we see this much of the Trinity in our fallen human experience, how

¹⁰ Macleod, *Shared Life*, 45-51

¹¹ Erroll Hulse, *Reformation Today* 112 (Nov. -Dec. 1989), 20-21

¹² *Ibid.*, 20



much clearly could we see the Trinity in us had we never fallen! Indeed, in an unfallen scenario we would want to see His reflection.

CONCLUSION

While Christianity shares the same roots as Judaism, Christianity gives expression to that which the Hebrew Scriptures pointed. We say this not with triumphalism but in the earnest prayer that our Jewish friends may yet come to receive Jesus as Saviour and Lord. To our Muslim friends we would humbly point out that the Christian church formulated what it understands the Scriptures to declare about the Trinity two centuries before the birth of Mohammed and the founding of “the world’s youngest universal faith.”¹³ When Islam did emerge, it espoused a novel understanding of the Trinity (or a triad), wherein God the Father had sexual intercourse with Mary (the second member of the “Trinity”), resulting in the birth of Jesus (the third member). The Holy Spirit is thus omitted. Islam, then, has not understood the doctrine orthodox Christian doctrine it rejects. The Jehovah Witness movement claims by contrast to Christian, but, originating in the top-soil of history, it conjures up a use of the Scriptures (an idiosyncratic translation and interpretation of it) which undercuts and serious claim to attention.

Much more could be said, but I close by emphasising that the case for the Trinity is not a matter of scoring points. Nor is the idea of the Trinity something we just toy with in our minds, as we would an interesting proposition. Our hope as Christians is My hope is not, ultimately, that you come to believe in the Trinity as a vital element of the Christian faith. That is what we call a mere intellectual faith.

Saving faith is in evidence when we come to trust the Trinity—God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit—for our salvation.

We urge you then to pray to God that he would show you your need and grant you the great gift of salvation. God has promised to answer those who call on him in sincerity and in truth (Acts 2:21). In the process, it will be—

- God the Spirit who will guide you away from hope in yourself to a life of faith in God the Son.
- God the Son upon whom you will rest for your salvation. As God, he alone was able to exhaust God’s wrath against you. He did so as man standing in our place of condemnation.
- God the Father who will receive you into a relationship with the triune God. He sent his Son to be the Savior of sinners and the Spirit to draw them through Christ to himself.

Only by way of the cross, then, can you come to know God personally. Non one knows God other than in his tri-unity: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19).

¹³ P. Parshall, *New Paths in Muslim Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1980), 13