THE TRINITY OF GOD

DEFINITION OF THE TRINITY

The Trinity of God is a doctrine that is fundamental to the Christian faith; belief or disbelief in the Trinity marks orthodoxy from unorthodoxy. Human reason, however, cannot fathom the Trinity, nor can logic explain it, and, although the word itself is not found in the Scriptures, the doctrine is plainly taught in the Scriptures. The early church was forced to study the subject and affirm its truth because of the heretical teachings that arose opposing the Trinity.

The term *Trinity* is not the best one because it emphasizes only the three persons but not the unity within the Trinity. The German word *Dreieinigkeit* ("three-oneness") better expresses the concept. A proper definition then must include the distinctness and equality of the three persons within the Trinity as well as the unity within the Trinity. The word *Triunity* may better express the doctrine."' A proper definition of the Trinity states: "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."

MISINTERPRETATIONS OF THE TRINITY

Tr-theism. In early church history men such as John Ascunages and John Philoponus taught that there were three who were God but they were only related in a loose association as, for example, Peter, James, and John were as disciples. The error of this teaching was that its proponents abandoned the unity within the Trinity with the result that they taught there were three Gods rather than three Persons within one Godhead.

Sabellianism or Modalism. This teaching, originated by Sabellius (c. A.D. 200), erred in the opposite from that of Tr-theism. Although Sabellius spoke of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, he understood all three as simply three modes of existence or three manifestations of one God. The teaching is thus also known as *modalism* because it views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Arianism. Arian doctrine had its roots in Tertullian, who subordinated the Son to the Father. Origen carried Tertullian's concept further by teaching that the Son was subordinate to the Father "in respect to essence." This ultimately led to Arianism, which denied the deity of Christ. Arius taught that only God was the uncreated One; because Christ was begotten of the Father it meant Christ was created by the Father. According to Arius there was a time when Christ did not exist. Arius and his teaching were condemned at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325.

EXPLANATION OF THE TRINITY

God is one in regard to essence. Early in church history the question developed whether Christ was the same as the Father in substance or in essence. Arius taught that Christ was like the Father in substance, yet the Father was greater than Christ; hence, although some equated the terms substance and essence, the proper way to designate the Trinity became "one in essence." The essential oneness of God is linked to Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, 0 Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one (Heb. *echad,*"compound unity; united one"). This statement stresses not only the uniqueness of God but also the unity of God (cf. also James 2:19). It means all three Persons possess the summation of the divine attributes but yet the essence of God is undivided. Oneness in essence also emphasizes that the three Persons of the Trinity do not act independently of one another. This was a constant theme of Jesus in rebuffing the charges of the Jews (cf. John 5:19; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10).

God is three with respect to Persons. The word *persons* tends to detract from the unity of the Trinity, and it is readily recognized that persons is an inadequate term to describe the relationship within the Trinity. Some theologians have opted for the term *subsistence,* hence, "God has three subsistences." Other words used to describe the distinctiveness of the Three are: distinction, relation, and mode. The term *persons* is nonetheless helpful inasmuch as it emphasizes not only a manifestation but also an individual personality. In suggesting God is three with respect to His Persons it is emphasized that (1) each has the same essence as God and (2) each possess the fullness of God. "In God there are no three individuals alongside of, and separate from, one another, but only personal self-distinctions within the Divine essence." This is an important deviation from modalism (or Sabellianism), which teaches that one God merely manifests Himself in three various ways. This unity within three Persons is seen in Old Testament passages such as Isaiah 48:16 where the Father has sent the Messiah and the Spirit to speak to the restored nation. In Isaiah 61:1 the Father has anointed the Messiah with the Spirit for His mission. These references emphasize both the equality and the unity of the three Persons.

The three Persons have distinct relationships. Within the Trinity exists a relationship that is expressed in terms of subsistence. The Father is not begotten nor does He proceed from any person; the Son is eternally begotten from the Father (John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9). The term *generation* suggests the Trinitarian relationship in that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. The Holy Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son (John 14:26; 16:7). The word *procession* suggests the Trinitarian relationship of the Father and the Son sending the Spirit. It is important to note, however, that these terms denote a *relationship* within the Trinity and do not suggest inferiority in any way. Because the terms can tend to suggest inferiority some theologians deny their usefulness.

The three Persons are equal in authority Although terms like *generation* and *procession* may be used in referring to the functioning within the Trinity, it is important to realize that the three Persons are equal in authority. The Father is recognized as authoritative and supreme (1 Cor. 8:6); the Son is also recognized as equal to the Father in every respect (John 5:21-23); the Spirit is likewise recognized as equal to the Father and the Son (cf. Matt. 12:31). (This topic will be developed further under the discussion of the deity of Christ and the deity of the Holy Spirit.)

ANCIENT DIAGRAM OF THE HOLY TRINITY
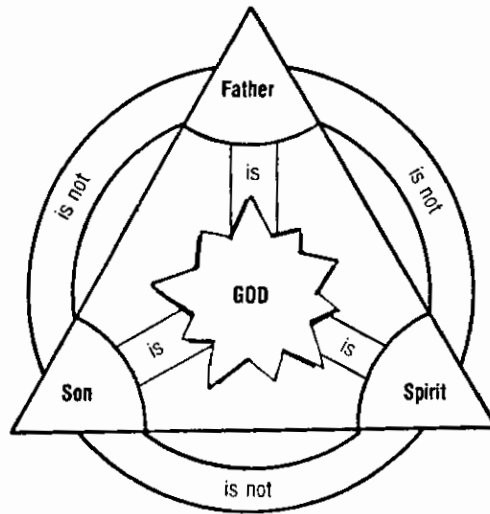
OLD TESTAMENT TEACHING

While there is no definitive or explicit statement in the Old Testament affirming the Trinity, it is fair to say that the Old Testament allows for the Trinity and implies that God is a triune being in a number of passages. In the creation account of Genesis 1 both God the Father and the Holy Spirit are seen in the work of creation. It is stated that God created heaven and earth (Gen. **1:1)** while the Holy Spirit hovered over the earth to infuse it with vitality (Gen. 1:2). The term *God* in Genesis 1:1 is *Elohim,* which is a plural form for God. Even though this does not explicitly teach the Trinity, it certainly allows for it as seen in the plural pronouns "us" and "our" in Genesis 1:26. In Psalm 110:1 David recognized a distinction of persons between "LORD" and "my Lord." David implies that Messiah is One greater than an ordinary human king because he refers to Messiah with an ascription of deity, "my Lord." In the prophecy concerning Christ in Isaiah 7:14 the Lord makes it clear that the One born of a virgin will also be Immanuel, "God with us." It is an attestation to Messiah's deity. Two additional passages previously mentioned

that imply the Trinity are Isaiah 48:16 and 61:1. In both of these passages all three Persons of the Godhead are mentioned and seen as distinct from one another.

NEW TESTAMENT TEACHING

Ultimately, to demonstrate that the Scriptures teach the Trinity, two things must be affirmed: that there is only one God, and that all three Persons are called God. While a fuller demonstration of the deity of each member of the Godhead is discussed under the respective categories, the teaching can be concisely stated here. The *Father* is called God (1 Cor. 8:6); the *Son* is called God (Heb. 1:8-10); the *Holy Spirit* is called God (Acts 5:3-4); God is *one God* (Deut. 6:4). Combining these four statements affirms the Trinity. There are additional New Testament passages in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are seen in such a relationship as to affirm both their unity and equality.

In the act of making disciples Jesus commanded that the apostles were to baptize the new disciples "in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:18). It seems clear that the equality as well as the unity of the three Persons is intended. In Mary's conception the Trinity is involved: the Holy Spirit came upon Maty, the power of God overshadowed her, and the resultant offspring was called the Son of God (Luke 1:35). All three are also seen as distinct at the baptism of Jesus (a denial of modalism; cf. Luke 3:21-22). In John 14:16 the unity of the three is again mentioned: the Son asks' the Father who sends the Spirit to indwell believers forever. The unity of the three is clear. In Romans 8:9-11 all three are mentioned as indwelling the believer. The benediction of 2 Corinthians 13:14 surely is a strong affirmation of both the equality and unity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (cf. also 1 Cor. 2:4-8; Rev. 1:4-5).

DIFFICULTIES WITH THE DOCTRINE

Those who deny the Trinity sometimes object to the use of certain terms that seem to imply that Christ is inferior to the Father, which if true, would deny the Trinity. Several of these problematic terms are noted here.

Meaning of begotten. The term *begotten* is used in several senses with respect to Christ. First, it is evident from Matthew 1:20 that Christ was begotten in His humanity but not in His deity. Christ was God from all eternity (Mic. 5:2), but at Bethlehem He took to Himself an additional nature, namely, a human nature. The Holy Spirit superintended Maty's conception to assure the sinlessness of the humanity of Christ. It is with reference to the humanity of Christ that the term *begotten* is used; it could never be used with reference to His deity. Begotten does not relate to Jesus' being the Son of God. In time and space Jesus was declared to be the Son of God (Ps. 2:7; Acts 13:32-33; Rom. 1:4). These verses all emphasize that Jesus' Sonship is vindicated or verified as a result of the resurrection, but the resurrec-

tion did not make Him the Son of God. Jesus has been the son of God from eternity. Thus, Psalm 2:7 and Acts 13:33 emphasize that begotten refers to the public declaration of the Son-ship of Christ (but not the origination of the Son- ship) .

Meaning of first-born. Those who deny the deity of Christ frequently do so by referring to the term *first-born,* suggesting that if the term relates to Christ it must imply He had a beginning in time. However, both a lexical study of the word as well as a contextual study of the usages provides a different solution to the meaning for first-born. In its Old Testament culture the predominant emphasis was on the status of the oldest son. He enjoyed the double portion of the inheritance (Deut. 21:17), privileges over other family members (Gen. 27:1-4, 35-37), preferential treatment (Gen. 43:33), and the respect of others (Gen. 37:22). Figuratively, the word denotes priority or supremacy (Ex. 4:22; Jer. 31:9)[43] and is so used of Christ. In Colossians 1:18 where Christ is referred to as first-born the meaning is clear: as firstborn, Christ is Head of the church and preeminent in evetything." In Hebrews 1:6 the supremacy of Christ as the first-born is seen in that angels worship Him. Only God is worshiped. Psalm 89:27 is perhaps one of the clearest explanations of the term *first-born.* This is an example of synthetic poetry in Hebrew in which the second line explains the first. In this Messianic Psalm God affirms that Messiah will be the first-born, that is, the highest of the kings of the earth. *First-born* is explained as ruling over the kings of the entire earth. From both a linguistic and exegetical study it is clear that *first-born* draws attention to the preeminent status of Jesus as Messiah.

Meaning of only-begotten. The term *only-begotten* (Gk. *monogenes)* (cf. John 1:14, 18; 3:16; 1 John 4:9) does not suggest a beginning point in time but rather means that Jesus as the only-begotten Son of God is "unique," "the only one of its kind," "the only example of its category." Only-begotten "is used to mark out Jesus uniquely above all earthly and heavenly beings."" In Genesis 22:2, 12, 16 it reflects the concept of "only, precious" as Isaac was viewed by his father, Abraham. John the apostle describes the glory radiated by the unique Son of God—no one else radiated the glory of the Father (John 1:14); moreover, the Son "explained" the Father—no one but the unique Son could explain the Father. It was the unique Son whom God sent into the world; eternal life was provided only through the unique Son of God (John 3:16). In examining the passages it is evident that *only-begotten* does not suggest a coming into existence, but rather it expresses the *uniqueness* of the person. Christ was unique as the Son of God, sent by the Father from heaven.