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Why Belief in the Trinity is Essential in Christianity - Part 1
Understanding the Concept of the Trinity

by Freddy Davis

Belief in one God is a common theme in Theism, but there are numerous beliefs concerning how that one God exists. There are those who have a Unitarian understanding of him. Religions such as the Mormonism, Islam, The Christian Churches of God, and Oneness Pentecostals are all Unitarian in their theology. They typically hold a belief about God that fits into one of two categories. The first is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three separate persons in the One God, but rather they exist in three modes or manifestations of existence. The second major approach is that there is no such thing as a Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and identify the single God only as God. These beliefs are very different from the Trinitarian belief of biblical Christianity.

The explanation of the Trinity found in the Bible is one that is not direct. The Bible does not have just one single place which explains the Trinity as one God who, within himself, contains three separate persons – three separate centers of consciousness. Rather than give that kind of direct explanation, the Bible simply assumes that to be true. The process of revealing that assumption, then, is expressed as the various persons of the Trinity are spoken of in the Bible. There are places where all three members of the Trinity are spoken of at the same time, but there are other times when only one or two are referenced in a particular passage. As such, we have to compile all of the references concerning God in the Bible and put them together to develop a systematic theology in order to get the big picture of his revelation of himself. (A somewhat comprehensive biblical ex-

planation will be laid out in parts three and four of this series.)

It is important to note, though, that belief in the Trinity is an essential Christian doctrine. It is essential because it describes the very nature of God. Those who have a Unitarian belief about him are worshiping a God who is different from the one described in the Bible.

Why it is Difficult to Understand the Trinity

There are numerous things concerning the Christian faith which are difficult for human beings to understand because spiritual reality exists beyond the laws of nature. All of the things we are able to explore directly, as physical beings living in a physical universe, can be done by observation and by using scientific methods. But there is a part of reality which exists beyond the physical universe. If we are to know anything about these transcendent matters, that must somehow be revealed to us by someone who lives in that transcendent reality. As such, the things which have their foundation in eternity are not things which can be observed and manipulated using observation and experimental science. These things must be believed by faith.

When talking about faith, though, this does not mean there is no evidence we can draw upon to get at the truthfulness of the thing being believed by faith. It is just that the evidence is different than what can be gathered using the scientific method. To really understand this we need to have a better grasp of the concept of "faith." Many people have a false under-

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standing of the meaning of the word. These people equate the concept of "faith" with "blind faith." That is, they think something believed by faith must be believed without any support whatsoever. But that is simply not the case. There are many things that are believed by faith which actually correspond with the way reality is structured. And with these things, there are actually various kinds of evidence that can be put forth. The fact that scientific proof cannot be shown does not, in any way, mean that what is believed by faith is not backed up by evidence, or that it is not true.

Before we dig more deeply into the concept of the Trinity, though, there is an important point that needs to be understood. Without understanding this point, it will be impossible to even begin trying to understand the concept of Trinity. The Trinity is of one of those things which has its foundation in the eternal spiritual world and cannot be demonstrated by natural science. In fact, a Trinity cannot even exist based on the laws of the material universe. When we get to the bottom line, the only reason we even know anything about it is because God has revealed this to us.

While most people who hold a Unitarian view of God might agree with that premise, when you evaluate their arguments against the Trinity, they are almost always based on an assumption which begins with the operation of natural laws. There are a couple of prominent ways this plays out, so let's look at a couple of examples.

Muslims believe in a Unitarian God, and when they argue against the Trinity they inevitably argue that the Christian concept of Trinity represents belief in three Gods. That is simply not true, but they cannot see

it because the starting point for making their argument is that three persons in one being is impossible. Well, it is impossible in the material universe, but not in eternity where God exists.

A second example is well illustrated by the beliefs of Oneness Pentecostals. They believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but they assert that these are simply different ways that God has manifested himself at different times. For example, when God is in the manifested form of the Son, he is not the Father or the Holy Spirit. He can only be one at a time. Once again, this is a belief that is based on the assumption that eternity must abide by the laws of the natural universe – which is simply not true.

Metaphorical Attempts to Understand the Trinity

As was mentioned above, the Trinity is the belief that God is a single being with three separate centers of consciousness – three persons in one being. The truth is, this concept is an essential Christian doctrine. That said, it is extraordinarily difficult to fully grasp. The reason for the difficulty is that this kind of existence is impossible based on the limitations of the material universe. Thus, people have resorted to using various metaphors in order to try and comprehend it more fully. Let's look at some of the more common ones.

An Egg

An egg is a single thing but is made up of three separate parts – shell, yolk and white – that are to represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The limitation of this metaphor is that the parts of the egg can be separated and used independently of each other. There really are three separate elements to the egg. That is not true of God. He is a single being consisting of three independent persons which cannot be separated.

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A Pie Cut into 3 Pieces

In this metaphor, each piece of a pie which has been cut into three pieces is, indeed, an independent unit. The three pieces represent, of course, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But when the pie is cut this way, while each piece is made of the exact same material, the pieces do not have any essential connection with one another. With the Trinity, the three independent persons are still part of a unitary, unseparated, being.

A 3-in-1 Shampoo

This illustration envisions a single substance which is able to perform three separate and independent activities – for instance a cleanser, moisturizer and toner. The three substances represent, of course, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The problem here is that the ingredients are not truly united. They can be separated out from one another. The members of the Trinity, on the other hand, cannot be severed from one another in that way.

Water

Water is a single compound (H₂O) but can exist in three very distinct forms - liquid, solid and vapor. The three forms, naturally, represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The limitation of this metaphor is that the H₂O can only be in one state at a time. God is all three persons of the Trinity, all at the same time.

A Person

Another metaphor is that of a person. For instance, a man can be a single individual yet have different roles in life. He can be a father, a husband and a friend all at the same time – each of these roles, obviously, representing the role of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Godhead. The problem with this metaphor is that a person, even though living out different roles, is still only a single individual. God really does exist as three sepa-

rate and distinct persons within one being.

A 3 Leaf Clover

A three leaf clover is a single living thing with three separate and distinct leaves. The three leaves, of course, represent the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The problem in using this as a metaphor for the Trinity is that the clover plant is still a single plant and the separate leaves do not hold any kind of separate identity as do the three members of the Trinity. They are all the same plant.

Trinitarian Heresies

Interestingly, the various illustrations, while perhaps helping our understanding in some ways, all represent heretical beliefs about God. The egg, pie and shampoo illustrations represent a heresy called tritheism. The water, person and clover metaphors represent the heresy of modalism.

Tritheism

Tritheism is a form of polytheism which specifically asserts the belief that there exists three separate Gods. This doctrine maintains that all three Gods share a similar nature, but are not exactly the same. In this heresy, the members of the Trinity are not seen as being part of a single being, but are actually three separate Gods. Muslims try to assert that this is what Christians believe.

Modalism

Modalism is the belief that there is only one God who manifests himself in three different ways. Sometimes he manifests himself as the Father, sometimes as the Son, and at other times as the Holy Spirit. In this belief, God can only be in one form at any given time. This is the approach you will find being taken by groups such as Oneness Pentecostals.

There are, of course, other ways people conceive of God beyond tritheism and modalism. While we will

not try to give a comprehensive rundown on them all, there are a couple of others which are prominent enough in discussions on the Trinity to make it worthwhile to be aware of them.

Subordinationism

There is form of tritheism, called subordinationism, which has a slight twist. This doctrine conceives of one God in three persons, but asserts that the essence of each person exists in a hierarchy and are not co-equal as the doctrine of the Trinity asserts. In this view, God the Father is the greatest followed by Jesus, then by the Holy Spirit. As such, while this belief tries to assert an actual Trinity, the three persons of the Trinity must end up actually being separate from one another.

Arianism

Arius lived from around 250 - 336 A.D. and was a leader in the church in Egypt. He basically denied the full deity of the preexistent Christ, very much like Jehovah's Witnesses do today. Arianism is a non-trinitarian belief which asserts that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, but is entirely distinct from and subordinate to God the Father. As such, it is a form of Unitarianism. Arian taught that God the Father and the Son of God did not always exist together eternally. He taught that the Logos was a divine being created by God the Father before the world. Thus, the Son of God is subordinate to God the Father.

How Do Biblical Christians Imagine the Trinity

As we consider the concept of Trinity, there are some things that we will ultimately have to reconcile within ourselves. Of course this principle is not true only concerning the Trinity. It is true about everything that is connected with transcendent reality (actually everything that has its basis in faith, period).

The first thing we must accept is that it is impossible to fully comprehend the concept of Trinity from our position as creatures living in the natural universe. A Trinitarian being, such as is described in the Bible, cannot exist in the material universe. God created the natural laws of the universe but is not bound by them. His Trinitarian existence is based on laws which exist outside of the natural universe.

The second thing we must accept is that belief in the Trinitarian existence of God must be believed by faith. This does not mean it is not true, and it also does not mean there exists no evidence for its truth. It is just that proofs which are limited to a naturalistic

framework do not reach out to the kinds of evidence which confirm the things which exist in transcendent reality. Evidence for God's existence as a Trinitarian being does exist, but is confirmed by our personal interaction with God, not by scientific experimentation.

As we live life and interact with God, our personal confirmation of his Trinitarian existence is affirmed and confirmed as we live in relationship with him. We interact with him as Father as we engage his creation. We interact with him as Son as we acknowledge his work to secure our salvation, and as we identify with his incarnated human existence. We interact with him as Holy Spirit as we personally engage him in daily life. When we attempt to conceive of him in non-Trinitarian ways, we deny elements of his existence as God. He has revealed himself to us as a Trinity and we need to accept it and relate to him as he actually exists.

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