

Ministers' Fraternal Study Guides

The Trinity

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1. Introduction

Most ministers are somewhat embarrassed about the doctrine of the Trinity. They do not understand it. They vaguely recall terms such as modalism and sabellianism and arianism but are not quite sure what they mean. They feel deep down that the doctrine of the Trinity must matter very much indeed – since it is at the heart of the doctrine of God - but they do not quite see how and, so long as the JWs stay away, they seem to manage reasonably well without it. Some remind themselves of the mysteries of God's being and the complexities of historical debates and sooth their consciences with the thought that no-one else understands these things either. A few are restless to pursue this topic, confident that the vigorous and faithful pursuit of the knowledge of our great (and Triune) God brings honour to him and blessing to them. Using a ministers' fraternal to consider these matters may help the few and add to their number.

2. Key Biblical Data

- a) *There is one God* - Deut 6.4, 1 K 8.60, Is 44.6 Mk 12.29-32, 1 Cor 8.4
- b) *There are three distinct persons*
 - plurality in the OT - Gen 1.26, 3.22, 11.7, 16.7-13, 18-19, Is 48.16 Hag 2.4-7; angel of the Lord - Ex 3.2-6, Jg 13.2-22; Spirit is personal - Is 63.10-14; Wisdom is personal - Prov 8; coming Messiah is God - Ps 45, Is 9.6 etc
 - Father and Son are distinct - Jn 5.32, 37 - begetter, begotten, sender, sent
 - Father and Son are distinct from the Spirit - Jn 14.16-17, 15.26, Gal 4.6
 - texts mentioning all three persons: Matt 3.16-17, 28.18-20; Lk 1.35; Jn 14.16, 26; Rom 5.5ff, 8.3-4, 8.8-11, 8.16-17; 1 Cor 6.11, 12.4-5; 2 Cor 1.21-22, 13.14; Gal 4.6; Eph 1.3-14, 2.18, 4.4-6; 2 Th 2.13; 1 Peter 1.2; Jude 20; Rev 1.4-5
- c) *The Father is God*
- d) *Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God*
 - He is called God - Jn 1.1, 1.18, 20, 28 Rom 9.5 Tit 2.13 Heb 1.8 I Jn 5.20
 - OT descriptions of God are applied to him - Mt 3.3 Jn 12.41 Rom 10.9-13, Eph 4.7-8 Phil 2.9-11
 - He has the attributes of God - Mic 5.2 Heb 7.3 Mt 18.20 28.20 Jn 5.19 Heb 1.3 Jn 21.17 16.30 Rev 2.23 Heb 13.8
 - He does the work of God - Jn 1.3 Col 1.16-17 Heb 1.3
 - He receives the worship due to God - Jn 5.23 14.14 20.28 Acts 7.59 Lk 23.46 Heb 1.6 Phil 2.10-11 Rev 5.12-14 2 Peter 3.18 Heb 13.21
 - His name is on a level with God - Matt 28.19 1 Cor 1.3 2 Cor 13.14 Rev 20.6 22.3
 - Equality with God is claimed - Jn 5.18 Phil 2.6 Jn 10.30-33
- e) *The Holy Spirit is God*
 - He is spoken of as God - Acts 5.3-4 I Cor 3.16 6.19 12.4-6
 - He has the attributes of God - Gen 1.2 Ps 139.7-8 I Cor 3.16 I Cor 2.10 2 Sam 23.2-3
 - He does the works of God - Gen 1.2 Ps 33.6 Jn 3.5
 - His name is associated with God - see above

3. Overview

3.1 The five propositions above constitute the boundaries of the doctrine. As the Athanasian creed summarizes, “The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Yet there are not three gods but one God.” Or as the Westminster Confession has it: “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.” (II.III). Historically, Christian reflection upon the doctrine has given attention to two questions.

3.1.1 First, how may we explain the relationship between the threeness and the oneness of God? This has generated a technical vocabulary which is intended not to close down the discussion but to give precision to it. In preparation for the fraternal it would be helpful to reacquaint yourself with the following terms, distinctions and statements:

- Substance/ essence
- Person
- Homo-ousios & homoi-ousios
- Nicene Creed
- Athanasian Creed
- Tritheism
- Modalism
- Sabellianism
- Immanent Trinity (= ontological Trinity / Trinity *ad intra*)
- Economic Trinity (= revealed-in-history Trinity / Trinity *ad extra*)
- Subordination – ontological and functional
- The Father as “fount of divinity”
- The Son as *autotheos* (“Calvinist extra”)
- *Filioque*
- Perichoresis / circumincession
- Eternal generation
- Eternal procession

3.1.2 Second, how does the doctrine of the Trinity affect our understanding of other doctrines and what practical consequences flow from it? Here, the reach of Christian reflection is astounding. Christian art, community life in the local church, the possibility of men and women having equal worth but different roles, an understanding of conscience, self-love and the different sorts of love (benevolence, complacency, mutuality) all flow from belief in a Triune God.

3.2 The equal ultimacy of the One and the Three. A favourite theme of Cornelius Van Til was that if we are true to the teaching of Scripture then we cannot assert either that “God is *really, at bottom, ultimately* One – oh, and he is Three as well” nor that “God is *really, at bottom, ultimately* Three – oh, and he is One as well”. Rather we must assert the “equal ultimacy of the One and the Three”. Two very practical applications of this are in social theory and epistemology (use your dictionary!):

3.2.1 Social theory. The two extremes of social theory are radical individualism (in which a human being is truly human as he is in isolation from all others) and radical collectivism (in which a human being is truly human only understood as a member of various classes, groups and connections). The first denies the fundamentally relational character of human existence. The second undermines moral responsibility/accountability by which God justifies or condemns a person on the basis of his/her own relationship to Christ. Neither view is sustainable. Ask the individualist whether you can properly understand any human being at all without knowing about his/her relationships with other human beings. Ask the radical collectivist whether a person stranded on a desert island has lost their humanness by virtue of losing their relationships. Only Trinitarian thought - asserting the equal ultimacy of the One and the Three/Many – provides a sound way of looking at individuals in society, paying proper regard both to their relationality and to their responsibility.

3.2.2 Epistemology. One worldview – monism – says that everything is ultimately one and that all differentiation is illusion. Another worldview says that everything is ultimately plural (you cannot get “behind” the trillions of “particulars” that make up the world) and that all generalizations are arbitrary. Neither a ultimately monistic nor an ultimately pluralistic worldview can provide the basis for thought. Only belief in the Triune Creator - asserting the equal ultimacy of the One and the Three/Many – provides a sound way of thinking and knowing. By this we recognise that yes, there are trillions of particulars which can be differentiated but that yes, things are connected and so generalizations may be made. This is because creation reflects the equal ultimacy of the One and the Many in the Triune Creator who has made all things and whose purpose gives all things meaning.

4. Areas of agreement / disagreement

The doctrine of the Trinity has once again been a “hot topic” in academic theological circles for the last 30 years. The chair of the Fraternal may introduce key features of the debate including,

- Rahner’s dictum: “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity”.
This is accepted as the starting point for most current discussion of the Trinity and has proved fruitful in protecting key boundaries and suggesting lines of enquiry;
- The “de Régnon paradigm”: Eastern and Western Trinitarian theologies are (simplistically?) set over against each other with the East supposedly starting with and emphasizing threeness and the West supposedly starting with and emphasizing oneness;
- Augustine is often (unfairly?) regarded as a malign influence: he is (virtually) accused of so emphasizing oneness of substance that he generates a “a fourth thing” (the “substance” which all three persons possess) and at the same time of being implicitly modalist (there is *really* one God who presents three different faces);
- Trendiness of social Trinitarianism: (wrongly?) claiming the Cappadocians as authority, many egalitarian theologians place a very strong emphasis indeed upon the social analogy – the life of the Trinity as a life of community, mutuality and equality;
- Importance of “personal relations”: each of the persons is wholly and truly God and each of the persons mutually indwells the others. There is nothing divine lacking in any of the persons: no person has something divine which the other two persons do not have. What then is the distinction of the persons? It is not a substantial distinction but a distinction of the relations: The Father is not the Son because the Father begets the Son; the Son is not the Spirit because the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son; and so on. The life of the Trinity is the life of “personal relations” between three who are wholly and fully God, distinguished exactly in their not bearing the same relation to each other: the Father only is unbegotten; the Son is begotten; the Spirit proceeds.

5. Suggested further reading

- Surveys of the basic data – Bible dictionaries, theological encyclopaedia, systematic theologies (C. Hodge, A A Hodge, Dabney, Gill, Berkhof, Shedd, Grudem etc)
- Augustine, *De Trinitate* (online)
- Hilary of Poitiers, *De Trinitate* (online)
- Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, qq.27-42, *Treatise on the Trinity* (online)
- John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book One, Chapter XIII (online)
- Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, Third Topic, qq.XXIII-XXXI
- Jonathan Edwards, “Observations on the Trinity” and “An Essay on the Trinity” in *Treatise on Grace*, ed. by Paul Helm (1971)
- B.B. Warfield, *Calvin and Augustine*
- Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*
- John Frame, *The Doctrine of God*
- Thomas Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?*
- Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*
- Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, (vol IV), *The Triunity of God*

6. Questions for discussion

- a) Identify any two disputed evangelical doctrines. Now consider how it is that the fact that God is three-in-one and one-in-three bears upon these doctrines.
- b) How does the doctrine of the Trinity relate to the doctrine of salvation?
- c) “The essential life of the Triune God is one of mutual honouring, of self-donation to the other, of a loving glorifying of the other persons.” Demonstrate this from Scripture and then outline its practical consequences for the life of the individual Christian and the life of the church.
- d) Is it stretching the deliberate language of paradox too far to say that God is one person and God is three persons?
- e) How far should we regard ourselves as under the authority of the classic Trinitarian creeds?
- f) Does the doctrine of the Trinity really, really matter? Why / why not?
- g) “If God is a monadic single then love cannot be essential to him – he can only love once there is someone or something to love. This means that Allah is either dependent on creation to be a loving God or is incidentally rather than essentially loving. To have a God who is essentially, eternally and independently a God of love, he must be a God of plurality.” Do you agree?
- h) Does heterodoxy on the doctrine of the Trinity bar us from Christian fellowship with others who profess Jesus as Lord? On what grounds?
- i) Role-play the awkward atheist or JW and push at the difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity while helping each other to formulate appropriate responses.
- j) May we pray to God the Holy Spirit and if so, when and why should we do so? How does the fact that God is Triune affect a) your prayer life b) your “practice of the presence of God” and c) your witness?
- k) How do we teach our children about the Triunity of God? To whom do we teach them to pray – and why?
- l) In what ways is the Son ontologically equal with and functionally subordinate to the Father and how does this inform or respond to egalitarianisms – whether that of the speciesist or the feminist or the children’s rights advocate etc?
- m) How *explicitly* Trinitarian is our corporate worship? In what ways could or should it be more so?
- n) How do we make sure that the doctrine of the Trinity is properly covered in our teaching ministry?
- o) How do we make sure that we and our fellowships move from a “doctrine of the Trinity” to “knowing God as triune”?

7. Appendix: What is the relationship between the name Yahweh and the persons of the Trinity?

- 7.1 The widespread assumption that Yahweh = God the Father and that the NT reveals Yahweh’s Son and Yahweh’s Spirit comes up against the NT application of OT Yahweh passages to Jesus. (Matt 3.3, Acts 1.8, 4.12, Rom 9.32-33, 10.13, 14.10, Jn 12.40-41, 19.37, Phil 2.10, Heb 1.10-12, I Peter 3.14-15, Rev 1.17-18, 2.8, 22.12-13; the “I am”s of John’s Gospel – John 6.48; 8.12; 8.28, 58; 10.7; 10.11; 11.25; 14.6; 15.1; 18.5).

7.2 But Yahweh cannot simply = God the Son either. There is probably a connection between OT Father and NT Father – not only in respect of Father of the nation but more particularly in respect of Father of the King: Yahweh as Father of Israel – Ex 4.22, Dt 33.6, 18, 19, Hos 11.1, Is 1.2, 63.16, 64.8, Jer 3.19, 31.9, Mal 2.10. Yahweh as Father of the King – 2 Sam 7.14, 1 Chron 28.6, Ps 2.7, Ps 89.26f. In any case, the Yahweh of the OT is Father of the Lord Jesus Christ – use of Psalm 110 – e.g. Luke 20.41-44 + Psalm 2.7. And the LXX 'kurios' is used of God the Father – Luke 1.6, Matt 5.33.

7.3 And OT Yahweh passages are applied to the Spirit in the NT: Is 6.9-10 and Acts 28.25-7; Ps 95.7-11 and Heb 3.7-9; Lev 26.11-12 and 2 Cor 6.16

7.4 Reymond and Warfield summarize the necessary conclusions:

7.4.1 Reymond: "the OT Yahweh is also the tripersonal God of the NT, the name being used in some OT contexts to designate specifically the Father (Pss 2.7, 110.1), in other contexts to designate the Son (Isaiah 6.1, John 12.41), and in still other contexts to designate the Holy Spirit (Ps 95.7-11, see Heb 3.7-9)"

7.4.2 Warfield: "[The NT writers ...] do not, then, place two new gods by the side of Jehovah as alike with Him to be served and worshipped: they conceive Jehovah as himself at once Father, Son and Spirit. In presenting this one Jehovah as Father, Son and Spirit, they do not even betray any lurking feeling that they are making innovations. Without apparent misgiving they take over OT passages and apply them to the Father, Son and Spirit indifferently ... they saw the Triune God whom they worshipped in the God of the OT revelation, and felt no incongruity in speaking of their Triune God in the terms of the OT revelation. The God of the OT was their God and their God was a Trinity"