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The "Trinity" ... *fact or fiction?*

The early centuries of the Christian church were riven by fierce dispute regarding the nature of God. Is God a "trinity"?

by James McBride

Our human perception of the nature of God in no way affects the reality. God is what He is no matter what anyone believes! He probably chuckles at the varieties of belief - but undoubtedly gets pretty angry at the violence of the protagonists. Christians through the centuries have literally tortured and killed in support of their particular trinitarian view. And today scorn is heaped on any professing Christian who denies "The Holy Trinity".

Of course no-one, whatever view he or she holds about God, has any thought of disrespect for Him. All are trying to express their understanding of the Scripture teaching, and few hold "unorthodox" views from malice. So it is at least uncharitable to self-righteously condemn all who differ from a trinitarian view! This is especially true in face of the large volume of scholarly objections to the orthodox concept.

Objections

The doctrine "bristles with difficulties" writes pro-trinity Louis Berkhof (*Systematic Theology* p.82). He points out the "deficiencies" of early writers on the doctrine - including Tertullian, Origen. It's not until Augustin (d.430AD) that we have what modern protagonists of the trinity would deem acceptable! Yet controversy continues to this day. It remains "a mystery beyond the comprehension of man" (p.89)!

Divinity Of The Spirit

The existence of "the Holy Spirit" is universally accepted by Christians of every persuasion. What is in dispute is the nature of the Spirit, and the relationship within the Godhead.

Whatever that nature and relationship, the Holy Spirit is divine and personal. The Spirit is an integral part of the Godhead. It's our view, however, that the Scriptures are unambiguous that the Spirit does not have any separate "bodily" existence - the commonly-held and misunderstood lay view of the trinitarian doctrine. There's the Father, there's Jesus and there's the Holy Spirit. And somehow the three are one. A mystery!

In essence, the Holy Spirit is God's "persona" - by which He acts throughout the universe. By analogy, in human terms we talk of a "powerful personality", by which the individual exerts influence by his or her very presence. It is the force of the human spirit. God's Spirit is of course holy, perfect, infinitely powerful and everywhere present. God, through the Spirit, can perform any action - move a mountain, for example, in answer to prayer! - without a "physical presence". It's the way Jesus Christ, now located in heaven at God's right hand, carries out on earth the work He did in His human body. As Paul writes, "The Lord [*ie* Jesus Christ] is that Spirit" (II Corinthians 3:18).

The terms used in Scripture of the holy Spirit confirm this. They don't lend themselves to a person but to an influence, a dynamic force: baptized by the Spirit, filled with the Spirit, quench the Spirit.

Trinitarian Texts

This "mystery beyond comprehension" isn't very evident in the text of Scripture. Indeed the only 'clear' verses are laughed out of the text by theologians. Take, for example I John 5:7, rarely included except as a foot-note in modern translations. It's "an insertion" (*Berkeley*). "Added in late MSS of the Vulgate" (*New International*). "Clearly a gloss and rightly excluded from the RSV even in the margin" (*New Bible Commentary Revised*). "The best authorities do not consider it to be part of the original text" (*SPCK Commentary*). "Not the shadow of a reason for considering them genuine" (*Alford: On the New Testament*). It is "the only passage speaking of tri-unity", say Protestant scholar Louis Berkhof.

Source

Noted textual scholar F H A Scrivener writes: "We need not hesitate to declare our conviction that the disputed words were not written by St John: that they were originally brought into Latin copies in Africa from the margin, where they had been placed as a pious and

orthodox gloss on v.8: that from the Latin they crept into two or three late

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Greek codices, and thence into the printed Greek text, a place to which they had no rightful claim" (*Plain Introduction to the Criticism of the New Testament*, 1883, 3rd ed).

Judgment on this text is summed up by Wm Cunningham: "...most Trinitarians now admit that there is a decided preponderance of critical evidence against the genuineness of I John 5:7" (*Historical Theology* v.2 p.216).

Matthew 28:19

There can be little doubt that this text, too, "*baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*" is an early spurious gloss on the original form of words used in baptism - "*in my name*".

Wrote F C Conybeare: "In the course of my reading I have been able to substantiate these doubts of the authenticity of the text of Matthew 28:19 by adducing patristic evidence against it so weighty that in future the most conservative of divines will shrink from resting on it any dogmatic fabric at all while the most enlightened will discard it as completely as they have its fellow text of the Three Witnesses [I John 5:7] And "...of any other form of text [Eusebius] had never heard until he had visited Constantinople and attended the Council of Nice" [*Hibbert Journal*, 1902].

The *Acts of the Apostles* gives us a photo-fit of the practices of the primitive Christian community. There we find that baptism was done 'in the name of Jesus'. The use of 'the three-fold name' is now recognized as a late doctrinal expansion. "The facts are, in summary, that Eusebius [church historian of the early 4th century] quotes Matthew 28:19 twenty-one times, either omitting

everything between 'nations' and 'teaching', or in the form 'make disciples of all nations in my name', the latter being the more frequent" (*Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*).

The only 'clear Biblical evidence' for a view of God as a 'trinity' collapses under the weight of historical judgment. It arrived very late in Christian theology, and can be traced in the teachings of the inspired apostles only by reading into them concepts that derive from sources other than the Scriptures.

Consequences

While all human views of the Godhead are seen "through a glass, darkly" - and in no way affect what the Godhead is really like - yet acceptance of a non-Biblical view can have serious consequence. The truth frees us. Embracing error in one doctrinal aspect distorts other teaching. How we perceive the nature of God affects our understanding of the Scriptures.

For example, a narrow trinitarian concept of God blinds us to the clear and breathtaking Bible teaching that man can become - through the same indwelling Holy Spirit - a part of the divine Family. [Request our articles *Why Were You Born?* and *After The Resurrection*] If God is a closed "trinity" - a pre-Christian and unbiblical notion - how can mere humans become part of the divine Family, His children? How can we come to be in the very image of God? How can God, as Paul wrote, "*become all in all*"?

Another adverse consequence of trinitarian belief seems to be the unChrist-like urge to persecute - historically to the point of death - all who reject it! Certainly Christians who reject it - and on strong Biblical

evidence - are often branded a 'cult' and excluded from Christian facilities.

It is remarkable that most protagonists for a trinitarian view of God are in the forefront of a whole package of other unbiblical doctrines. In general they accept the non-Biblical days of worship - Sunday, Christmas, Easter *etc.* They embrace the false notion of an immortal soul, confusing their hearers by teaching that they have an "immortal soul" yet also preaching a bodily resurrection. They frighten by teaching the pagan notion of an eternal ever-burning hellfire for the wicked, and deceive by promising the unbiblical notion of "going to heaven" at death.

By contrast, where a Biblical concept of the Spirit is held, such false teachings are likely to be firmly rejected. And human destiny is recognized as becoming, truly and fully, "*sons and daughters of the Almighty*".

While respecting other "guesses" at the nature of God, we strive to express what we perceive to be the Bible view.

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