

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Try to explain it, and you'll lose your mind;
But try to deny it, and you'll lose your soul.

I. Introduction

- A. This doctrine is unique to Christians
- B. This doctrine is a universal Christian belief
- C. This doctrine is emphasized through a variety of Christian practices
 - 1) Baptism
 - 2) Hymns
 - 3) Prayers
 - 4) Creeds

II. Its Revelation in Scripture

- A. Partially revealed in the Old Testament (hinted at)
- B. More fully revealed in the New Testament
- C. Three affirmations from Scripture
 - 1) There is one God.
 - 2) God is three Persons.
 - 3) Each Person is fully God.

III. Its Development in History

- A. First aspect: The Church rejected false ideas about God
 - 1) "Modalism" or "Sabellianism" (2nd Century)
 - God is not really three distinct Persons, but only one Person who appears to people in different "modes" at different times.
 - 2) "Arianism" (4th Century)
 - God the Son was at one point created by God the Father, and before that time the Son did not exist, nor did the Holy Spirit, but the Father only. Thus the Son and the Spirit are not equal to the Father.
 - 3) "Adoptionism" (3rd-4th Century)
 - Jesus lived as an ordinary man until his baptism, but then God "adopted" him as his "Son" and conferred on him supernatural powers.
- B. Second aspect: The creation of a technical vocabulary
 - 1) Trinity
 - a) Greek: *Trias* – Theophilus of Antioch (late 2nd Century)
 - b) Latin: *Trinitas* – Tertullian (Early 3rd Century)
 - c) Our English word "Trinity" is simply a transliteration of the Latin word *Trinitas*.

- 2) Three what?
 - a) Latin: *personae* (3rd century)
 - b) Greek: *hypostasis* (4th Century)
- 3) One what?
 - a) Latin: *substantia* or *essentia* (4th Century)
 - b) Greek: *ousia* (4th Century)
 - c) The difference one letter can make
 - i) *Homoousios* – of the same nature/essence
 - ii) *Homoiusios* – of a similar nature/essence
- C. Third aspect: Official affirmation of the doctrine by the first two Church Councils
 - 1) Council of Nicea (AD 325)
 - 2) Council of Constantinople (AD 381)
- D. The importance of Athanasius
 - 1) “*Although many early church leaders contributed to the gradual formulation of a correct doctrine of the Trinity, the most influential by far was Athanasius.*” - Wayne Grudem
 - 2) “*Athanasius understood better than any of his contemporaries that Christianity stands or falls with the confession of the deity of Christ and of the Trinity.*” - Herman Bavinck
 - 3) The Athanasian Creed (4th-5th Centuries)

IV. Its Explanation by Analogy

- A. Impersonal
 - 1) Three-leaf clover
 - 2) The root, branch, and fruit of a tree
 - 3) The three forms of H₂O: steam, water, and ice
- B. Personal
 - 1) Social analogy – God is like a community or family of three persons
 - 2) Psychological analogy – God is like a human being and every human being is made up of three factors: mind, memory, and will
 - 3) Male analogy – God is like a man who is, at the same time, a father, a husband, and a son
- C. It is probably best to conclude that no analogy adequately teaches about the Trinity, and all break down in significant ways.

V. Its Relevance for Today

- A. Relevant to faith
- B. Relevant to worship
- C. Relevant to preaching the gospel
- D. Relevant to Christian unity
- E. Relevant to theology
 - 1) Viewing creation as a Trinitarian work
 - 2) Viewing redemption as a Trinitarian work
 - 3) Implications for the atonement
 - 4) Implications for justification by faith alone