

Is the Trinity a Mystery to You?

For those who have questions about the trinity

This may help. Perhaps you have struggled to understand the doctrine of the trinity as taught in your church. But, on the other hand, the pastors must know after all, that is why they went to seminary schools.

How could any Christian wonder about what is almost universally believed and taught for so many hundreds of years in the Christian churches? (There are those cults out there that believe deviant teachings and act strangely. You would not want to be caught up with any of their dreaded thinking.) Still there might be some unresolved, gnawing questions about the mystery of the trinity that just make your heart and mind a little uncomfortable. What does it mean, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit? How are three Gods really one and one three?

Possibly you have been told that the trinity is beyond the reach of logic and reason because it was meant to be incomprehensible. Isn't that what faith is all about? But is the trinity beyond the reach of Scripture and History? What does the historic record teach us about the doctrine of the trinity? What do the Scriptures really teach us about the trinity? And doesn't our God invite us, "Come let us reason together."?

Trinities in History

Yes, the trinity has been a prevailing belief for a very, very long time perhaps longer than most Christians would imagine. While worshipping innumerable minor deities, triads of gods appeared in all the ancient cultures of Sumer, Babylonia, Egypt, India, Greece and finally Rome. The "mysteries" of the first universal civilization, Babylonia, were transported down in time. The names of the gods changed. The details of ancient incomprehensible religions changed, but the essential ideas were the same. The Sumerians worshipped Anu (the Father), Enlil (the god of earth) and Enki (the lord of wisdom). The Egyptians worshipped Amun who was really three gods in one: Re was his face; Ptah his body and Amun his hidden identity "combined as three embodiments or aspects of one supreme and triune deity" (Oriental Heritage, W. Durant, 201).

Yet, you might ask, How do we know these trinities are not just misrepresentations of the real threeness of God? (After all there were "flood stories" in every culture too reminiscent of the Genesis account.) Assyrian clay tablets now available have most strikingly confirmed the narrative of Scripture which give us revealing insight into our questions (Edersheim Bible History 59-62). Where did the idea of a three-in-one God originate? After the flood, Nimrod a descendent of Noah's son Ham settled in Asia: "And Cush begat Nimrod: he began to be a mighty one in the earth. He was a mighty hunter before the LORD and the beginning of his kingdom was Babel out of that land went forth Asshur [mar., "he went out into Assyria"] and builded Nineveh" (Genesis 10:8-11).

"Mighty hunter" was the title given to the great conquering warrior-monarchs of the time. In rebellion of God's command to disburse and people the earth, Nimrod built the Tower

of Babel, became very powerful and was even worshipped. We now know the ancient Babylonians worshipped the first person in the Godhead, the Great Invisible, also the Spirit of God incarnate in the human mother and also the Divine Son. Nimrod was this "Son," the first king of Babel, Babylon. And so the first notion of a triune God was born. In the immediate centuries before the advent of Jesus Christ, we see Plato even in his deeply philosophical mode proposing a trinity of sorts. ("The Supreme Reality appears in the trinitarian form of the Good, the Intelligence, and the World-Soul" (G. Laing, *Survivals of Roman Religion*). Through all cultures, this perversion of the truth about God was handed down.

One God

One culture, however, escaped this corruption of truth. From the line of Shem, Noah's other son, Abraham was called out of "Ur of the Chaldees" (Genesis 11:31; 12:1,2), the ancient Babylonian empire. His descendants were given the revelation of God by Moses from Mount Sinai. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD" (Deuteronomy 6:4). No Hebrew scripture supports the idea of a trinity god. Some verses have been pressed into use by trinitarians, but without success. For example, in the creation account, Genesis says, "God [elohim, plural.] created the heavens and the earth" (1:1). However, the plural does not have to do with number; it is "plentitude of might" (Pentateuch & Haftorahs, The Soncino Press). In any case, the verb "created" is singular, and would not indicate two gods, let alone three. Even the New Catholic Encyclopedia admits that the doctrine of the Trinity is not taught in the Old Testament (Vol. XIV, 306).

While he walked the earth, Jesus clearly acknowledged, "My Father is greater than I" and that it was his Father who sent him, "He that receiveth you receiveth me, and he that receiveth me receiveth him that sent me" (Matthew 10:40). He consistently acknowledged God as the source of power for his miracles and finally implored his Father, "Not my will but thine be done." How then can Jesus be co-equal with God if the Father is "greater"? How could he be the one sent and also the Sender and why would he pray to himself that not his will but His other will be done? Is our only answer, "It's a mystery"?

Mysteries Explained

If the trinity is supposed to be an unexplainable "mystery," why do the apostles always talk about revealing mysteries to Christians? "I would not have you ignorant of this mystery [about Jewish blindness] (Romans 11:25) the revelation of the mystery (Romans 16:25) the mystery hidden God hath revealed (1 Corinthians 2:7) Behold I show you a mystery (1 Corinthians 15:51) "having made known the mystery of his will" (Ephesians 1:9) "to make known the mystery of Christ" (Ephesians 6:19) "make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27), etc. So how did the Christian Church accept a mystery of a trinity?

In the early church the apostles needed to refute another rising belief system gnosticism. It considered matter to be evil and sought salvation through knowledge. Gnosticism also focused on the "mysteries" meant only for the intellectuals to understand. Christ, the gnostics said, entered Jesus at baptism and left just before he died on the cross. The

Apostle John particularly addressed this budding heresy: "Many deceivers have gone out over the world, people who do not acknowledge that Jesus Christ came as a human being" (2 John 7; also 1 John 4:1-3). Jesus' humanity was repulsive to gnostics. After the Apostles died, Christians responded to gnosticism by claiming not only did Jesus Christ come in the flesh as the Son of God, but he was God Himself fully God and fully man.

Pagan Triads

By the third and fourth centuries, Christians were weary of Pagan persecution. The temptation was to compromise. Besides, the Pagan emperor Constantine needed Christians to salvage his shaky empire. Constantine embraced Christianity. Added to this happy blend of politics and people was the chief triumvirate of Roman gods Jupiter, Juno and Minerva. Jupiter was the principal deity of Roman mythology and Juno was the next highest divinity. Minerva, the "offspring of the brain of Jupiter" was regarded as the "impersonification of divine thought the plan of the material universe of which Jupiter was the creator and Juno the representative" (McClintock & Strong, Vol. 6). Many Pagan ideas, in fact, were incorporated into Christianity. "Christianity did not destroy paganism; it adopted it" (Caesar and Christ, W. Durant, 595).

Contrary to popular belief, it was not Constantine's fourth century Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 that formalized the "Doctrine of the Trinity." The Athanasian Creed in the fifth century finally included the three, "the godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost...the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal So likewise the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Ghost is God; and yet they are not three Gods, but one God." Furthermore, this creed added that belief in the trinity "is necessary to everlasting salvation." Strong belief led to action. "Probably more Christians were slaughtered by Christians in these two years ([A.D.]342-3) than by all the persecutions of Christians by pagans in the history of Rome." (Age of Faith, W. Durant, 8).

Truth is Reasonable

Truly, our Christian belief is based on faith. But it is a faith based on the Scriptures belief not born of the compromised traditions handed down through the centuries. When we say Jesus is the "Son of God," we mean he was the Son of God. He received life from his Father. When we read Jesus said, "I go to my Father," we understand he meant he was on earth then he returned to his Father. His Father was in heaven; he was on earth. When Jesus said, "Not my will, but thine be done," he meant he wanted to do his Father's will. He was not praying in agony to himself. God cannot die. Jesus really did die for our sins. When Jesus promised to send the holy spirit, he was promising to send the power of God as a transforming influence on the minds of Christians (Romans 12:2; 1 Corinthians 2:16). Would you expect to see each of these spirits as persons the "spirit of fear" (2 Timothy 1:7), the "spirit of bondage" (Romans 8:15) and the "spirit of the world" (1 Corinthians 2:12), etc.? Of course not. God's holy spirit is not a spirit of fear working in us; it is not a spirit of bondage. It is a holy transforming influence in our minds and characters. This oneness of mind or spirit explains how Christians can be one with each other and one with God.

What a wonderful prospect Christians have in the complete and final fulfillment of Jesus' prayer, "Neither pray I for these alone but for them also which shall believe on me

through their word; that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us" (John 17:20, 21). In glory, we shall be one with each other and the Father and the Son the same way God and Jesus are already one.

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