

# THE TRINITY REVIEW

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare [are] not fleshly but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ. And they will be ready to punish all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled.

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## The Intellectual Triunity of God

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The doctrine of the Trinity is essential to the orthodox Christian faith. Trinitarian thought pervades the New Testament and is presupposed in the central doctrines of the Incarnation (*Luke* 1:35), Atonement (*Hebrews* 9:14), Resurrection (*Romans* 8:11), and Salvation (*1 Peter* 1:2) as well as in the practices of water baptism (*Matthew* 28:19) and prayer (*Ephesians* 2:18). Consequently, there can be no doubt that failure to accept the Trinity will lead to fatal errors in the rest of one's theology. However, the Trinity is often viewed as a difficult if not self-contradictory concept. Is the Trinity really incoherent? The present article seeks to respond to this question with an emphatic "No."

### *The Doctrine of the Trinity*

In essence, the doctrine of the Trinity may be outlined by the following three propositions:

1. There is only one God who is immutably and eternally indivisible and simple (*Deuteronomy* 6:4; *John* 17:3; *1 Corinthians* 8:6).
2. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are each fully and co-equally God (*John* 20:17; *John* 1:1; *Acts* 5:3-5).
3. The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinct and not one and the same (*Mark* 1:10-11; *John* 15:26; *Hebrews* 9:14).

Now each of these affirmations is essential to the doctrine of God. To deny (1) is to fall into the error of tritheism. To repudiate (2) is to embrace subordinationism. To reject (3) is to settle for modalism. The reader may note that the personality of the Three is not explicitly stated. This is because the word "person" is not a Biblical term but one of convenience in theology. Nonetheless the *intent* behind the word "person" is wrapped up in these three truths. Call them what you will – persons, consciousness, or selves – whatever the Father is, the Son and the Holy Spirit are as well.

### *The Alternatives before Us*

The only problem is that these three propositions appear to be self-contradictory or at least very puzzling. How can God be three and yet one? Or how can one God be three without being schizophrenic? It would seem that we have three alternatives before us:

1) We could deny one or more of the three propositions. But as we have already observed, to repudiate any of these affirmations leads to the heresies of tritheism, subordinationism or modalism, respectively. Hence we cannot deny any of these truths without committing theological suicide.

2) We could accept all three propositions as necessarily paradoxical. That is, we could maintain that they are each individually true and yet

collectively contradictory at the same time. But this not only defies the rules of logic, it is also unscriptural. The doctrine of Biblical inerrancy precludes the possibility of a real contradiction in Scripture, and the Biblical property of perspicuity or clarity thwarts the prospect of insurmountable difficulties in the Word of God. (See W. Gary Crampton's article, "Does the Bible Contain Paradox?" *The Trinity Review* Number 76.) Therefore it must be possible to reconcile these three Trinitarian truths.

3) We could humbly acknowledge our present lack of understanding and seek to find a resolution allowing us to consistently maintain all three truths. This is the only acceptable approach and is the one we shall pursue. So while it is true that the Trinity's actuality is a matter of faith, its coherence is open to rational examination.

### *Finding an Answer*

Now the simplistic answer to those who assert it is a contradiction to say God is both three and one is to respond that he is three in a different sense than he is one. However, if we desire to be convincing, we should also try to define the senses in which God is three and one and do so in a way that preserves all three Trinitarian affirmations. For instance, one could say that God is three Persons with one divine nature. But though this is true, if it is left unqualified it implies tritheism. Three men clearly share a common human nature but are not indivisible. One man could be killed without necessarily endangering the existence and identities of the other two. So there must be something unique to the divine nature precluding such divisibility.

Perhaps the best solution offered to date to the problem of the Trinity is that proposed by the late Gordon H. Clark. He defined a person as a set of thoughts. That is, "a man is what he thinks" (*The Incarnation*, 1985, 54 and 64; *The Trinity*, 1985, 105 and 106). There are a number of clear advantages to this definition. Positively, a thinking entity exists personally ("I think, therefore I am"). He can have personal relationships. He has a will. Negatively, a non-thinking entity is not a person. We do not address a corpse as the person but as the

person's body. The personality survives physical death and is then separated from the body (*James* 2:26). So clearly the personality is connected with the mind and not the body.

Now I would modify Dr. Clark's definition slightly to say that a person is distinguished by *how* he thinks rather than *what* he thinks. This is simply because the content of human thoughts changes day to day without destroying the personality. I do not cease to be Joel Parkinson when I learn something new nor do I become someone else when my memory fails me. Yet concerning God, such a subtlety is irrelevant. His thoughts are all encompassing and immutable. Therefore *how* God thinks and *what* he thinks are one and the same. Accordingly, we shall adopt Gordon Clark's definition for the purposes of this proposal.

Clark goes on to show that the three divine Persons are distinct due to their differing thoughts. "Since also the three Persons do not have precisely the same set of thoughts, they are not one Person, but three" (*The Trinity*, 106-107). Such a distinction may on the surface seem peculiar since each of the divine Persons knows all truths (*1 John* 3:20; *Matthew* 11:27; *1 Corinthians* 2:11). One might then be inclined to conclude that the three Persons have the *same* thoughts. But what Dr. Clark is referring to is what I call the "subjective knowledge" of the Persons while their omniscience concerns "objective knowledge."

Now "subjective knowledge" consists of facts concerning one's personal experience while "objective knowledge" is truth regardless of one's experience. To say, "I am writing this article," is a subjective proposition; only I can say it. On the other hand, the statement, "Joel Parkinson wrote this article," is objective because it can be known and said by anyone. (Of course, God does not know anything *because* of his experience, since his knowledge is timeless and immutable. But this does not mean that he does not know his Earthly works. The terminology used here is simply intended to concisely distinguish between first person and third person propositions.)

Thus the subjective thoughts of the three divine Persons and their objective knowledge are not one and the same even though they are both all-encompassing. The Father does not think, "I will or have died on a cross," nor does he think, "I will or do indwell Christians." Only the Son can think the former and the latter is unique to the Holy Spirit. But all three know "the Son will die or has died on a cross," and "the Holy Spirit will or does indwell Christians." So the subjective thoughts distinguish the Persons even though their objective knowledge is shared and complete.

## *Experience*

Applying this definition of "person" to the Trinity leads us to the notion of the "intellectual triunity" of God. This asserts that God has three subjective thoughts and one objective knowledge. Such a view of God sustains the personal distinctions within the Godhead, precluding the error of modalism. It also avoids subordinationism since each of the three remains equally omniscient. Moreover, shared and identical objective knowledge possessed by the three maintains a unity that is unique within the Godhead and negates tritheism.

There are, however, those who disagree with this assessment. Cyril Richardson charged that, "If there are three centers of consciousness in God, there are three gods; and no matter in what way we try to state their unity...they are still three" (*The Doctrine of the Trinity*, 94). More recently, John O'Donnell alleged that if there are three consciousness in God this is "obviously the same as tritheism" (*The Mystery of the Triune God*, 103). But these assertions are wrong. Tritheism requires three *separable* gods. That is, it must be possible to eliminate one while leaving the remaining two intact, or it must be possible to conceive of one independent of the others. But three omniscient Persons cannot be divided or separated.

The indivisibility of three *omniscient* Persons can be demonstrated as follows:

1. Omniscience means knowledge of all truths, without exception, whether past, present or future. This is true by definition.

2. God has such universal knowledge and is omniscient (*Isaiah* 46:10; *Hebrews* 4:13; *1 John* 3:20). There are some who attempt to limit God's knowledge to all past and present truths, but not all future truths, in defense of human free will (for example, see Richard Rice, *God's Foreknowledge & Man's Free Will*, 39, 54). But such attempts fail in the face of Scriptures which affirm that God foreknows the words (*Psalms* 139:4) and even the sins (*Deuteronomy* 31:21; *Jeremiah* 18:12) of men. Therefore if we accept the Bible as truth, we are forced to concede God's total omniscience.
3. God is also immutable (*Psalms* 102:27; *Malachi* 3:6; *James* 1:17; *Hebrews* 13:8). This again is the inescapable testimony of the Bible.
4. For God to be immutable and omniscient, he must also be immutably omniscient. This necessarily follows from Premises 2 and 3. Otherwise, he could learn something new in violation of his immutability and would not have previously known all things contradicting his omniscience.
5. One omniscient Person knowing all truths also entails comprehensive knowledge of the thoughts of other omniscient Persons. If, for instance, the Son did not know the Father's thoughts in entirety, he would not know all things.
6. Such penetrating inter-personal knowledge does exist within the Godhead. This is necessarily true since the three Persons are God and God is omniscient. But it is also the explicit teaching of Scripture. "No man knows the Son, but the Father; neither knows any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (*Matthew* 11:27). Here the Son's knowledge of the Father is placed on a level with the Father's knowledge of the Son. This parity of knowledge is demonstrated by the antithesis between the Father knowing the Son and the Son knowing the Father, by

that fact that neither attain this knowledge by revelation (as men do) but simply know it on their own, and by the fact that each "knows" (Greek: "epignoski" meaning "fully knows") the other. Similarly, the Holy Spirit knows the thoughts of the Father. "For what man knows the things of a man, save the spirit of man which is in him? Even so the things of God knows no man, but the Spirit of God" (*1 Corinthians* 2:11). Again, this knowledge is intrinsic to the Holy Spirit since it is independent of any revelation (*1 Corinthians* 2:10). Hence, each of the three omniscient Persons eternally and immutably knows the thought of the other two completely.

7. For this to be the case, separability among the three is absolutely impossible. If there were to be a rift within the Godhead, then each of the Persons could no longer immediately know the thoughts of the others. But this could only occur if these thoughts were never known (denying that they were *ever* omniscient) or if they were to forget something (denying their *immutable* omniscience). So we see that the unique case of divine omniscience is only possible for the three Persons if they are utterly inseparable. Or, to put it another way, the fact of divine omniscience makes divisibility among the three thinking Persons metaphysically impossible.

## *Objection!*

At this point someone might ask why or how the three divine Persons are omniscient. But a Christian is not at all obliged to explain why or how God exists as he does. He is only obliged to demonstrate the internal consistency of what is revealed about God in the Bible. God's nature is simply an eternal reality without a prior cause. We cannot point to some reason why he is as he is because to do so would imply something beyond God and empty him of his sovereign self-existence.

Someone might also object that they still cannot imagine how there can be three Persons in one God.

It all seems too involved and complicated to grasp. In response we simply need to recall that it was the intention of this article to demonstrate the logical coherence of God's intellectual triunity, not to imagine this triunity. It can be shown mathematically that one million times one million is equal to one trillion. But who can *imagine* a million, much less a trillion? God is unimaginable. That is why images of God are forbidden by the Second Commandment. We can demonstrate, however, that the Trinity is a rational doctrine by a step-by-step examination of the Scriptures.

## *Objection Overruled*

We therefore conclude that the concept of the intellectual triunity of God helps to show the coherence of the Trinity. On the one hand, there are three subjective thoughts in the Godhead which cannot be reduced to one personality. On the other hand, there is one common objective body of knowledge to the three Persons. The omniscient content of this shared knowledge uniquely renders the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit indivisible. If they are indivisible, then they are one God. Yet we have not confounded the Persons.

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