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THE DOCTRINE OF THE DIVINE TRINITY

Of the many doctrines of Bible, the teaching of the Triune God is among the most disputed and most misunderstood. We could define the Trinity as: One God, existing eternally in three persons, known as God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit; coequal in nature and essence with distinctively ordered functions and roles. While there are certainly irreconcilable aspects that keep us from a full comprehension, there is also a need for us to trust that what the Bible states as true, and therefore study what the Bible synthetically represents to us. The doctrine of the Triunity (preferred over Trinity) is one such doctrine that is not explicitly stated in Scripture, but is clearly taught throughout its pages. Our goal in this paper is to define the doctrine, give biblical support for it, show its necessity for an orthodox view of God and defend against the false doctrines that are variously promoted.

Biblical Support

Christian Theology is only as good as its source. We believe that the Bible is the only authority for faith and practice and therefore it is our primary source (2 Pet. 1:3). When we approach the Scriptures, we are to read and study them in their context. Context goes from local to global, that is to say the particular verse, rests within a particular passage, that passage resides in a book, the book resides within the realm of all of Holy Writ. As we begin to gather all the Scriptural data, we begin to synthesize what we find into categories and from there we systematize categories into a structured theology. Doctrine never completely stands alone in a text, but through study of the whole of Scripture, it is determined to be what it appears or not.

While New Testament evidence is overwhelming, one of the places where minds get clogged is in the area of Old Testament support for the Triunity. The usual statement is that the Triunity is not truly represented in the Old Testament, but is rather a New Testament emphasis. If our principal of Biblical synthesis is to stand we would need to see if the Old Testament does indeed support a trinitarian theology. Is there such support?

W.G.T. Shedd states, “The doctrine of the Trinity is revealed in the Old Testament in the same degree that the other truths of Christianity are: not with the clearness and fullness of the New Testament, yet really and plainly” (W.G.T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* [1 vol. ed.], pg.226). The evidence of this is first seen in Genesis 1:26a where the Hebrew is rendered, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness” (NASB-U). “Make” in the original is a first person plural. Derek Kidner says, “[This] is the plural of fullness, which is found in the regular word for God (*elohim*) used with a singular verb; and this fullness, glimpsed in the Old Testament, was to be unfolded in the further ‘we’ and ‘our’ of John 14:23” (Derek Kidner, *Genesis: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, pg.52). This unity of plurality might also be applied in Deuteronomy 6:4 where Moses declares, “Hear O Israel! The LORD our God the LORD is one!” We do not want to emphasize plurality over unity, for our understanding of God is monotheistic; however, there is a pluralistic carry over in both Hebrew words *elohim* and *ehad*. We also see a nod at Trinitarian language in Isaiah 48:16, where in a clearly Messianic tone it is stated, “And now the Lord GOD (YHWH) has sent Me and His Spirit.” We could say with confidence that the emphasis of the Old Testament is the monotheism of God, while also stating that it does not ignore the Trinitarian doctrine which the New Testament so pointedly proclaims. Indeed this rather enhances the idea of revelation being progressive as is stated in Hebrews 1:1-3,

which not only states that Jesus Christ (the second person of the Triunity) is how the Father has ultimately revealed himself, but also that, “ He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power” (Heb. 1:3).

There is also New Testament support for a Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead. Besides the passage in Hebrews mentioned above, there is also Jesus claim to being one with God, especially in the Gospel of John. In John 1:1 Jesus, represented as the Word (cf. 2-17), is said to be in the beginning, with God and is represented as God indeed. The Gospel of John is replete with evidence, but some of the more pointed places where Jesus equation with the Father is stated clearest is in his interactions with the Pharisees. Two striking examples are John 8:58 and John 10:30. In John 8:58 Jesus utters, “Before Abraham was born, I am.” The Pharisees wanted to stone him to death for this statement, because Jesus was equating himself with God using the greek phrase *ego eimi*, translated I am. This is equivalent with the Hebrew phrase *Yhwh* in which God the father declares himself as the I AM. That is that there is no time when I haven’t existed. John Fish writes, “In the LXX of Isaiah 43:10 this expression ἐγὼ εἰμί, (egō eimi) is used to describe God in his eternal existence as opposed to the false gods of the pagans” (John Fish, *Emmaus Journal Volume 12*, pg.79). In John 10:30 Jesus also declares that he and the Father are one. Again the Jews wanted to stone him. It is likewise, because Jesus is equating himself with God. In fact they give their reason later. When Jesus asks why they are stoning Him for showing the good works of the Father, they reply, “For a good work we do not stone You, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God” (John 10:33). There is no doubt from the New Testament account, that Jesus claimed to be God with his mouth and proved to be God by His miracles.

Jesus not only equates Himself with the Father, but also tells of the other member of the Trinitarian Godhead, who would come and indwell the New Testament believer (1 John 4:13). In John 16:7-11 Jesus describes the one who is coming as the Helper and He will, “will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment; concerning sin, because they do not believe in Me; and concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father and you no longer see Me; and concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world has been judged.” We not only get further affirmation, but also see the beauty of the functional roles of the Triunity in a later verses, “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come. ‘He will glorify Me, for He will take of Mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said that He takes of Mine and will disclose it to you’” (John 16:13-15).

Besides the equation of both Jesus and the Spirit as equal to the Father, we do have passages that indicate their unity. In Jesus words to his disciples about their mission to go and make other disciples, they are to baptize converts in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). It is important that Jesus uses the singular form of the word “name” and does not say “baptize in the names of.” There is unity in this statement: one name, three persons!

The Necessity of Trinitarian Belief for Orthodoxy

The question may arise that if this is a difficult doctrine to get our hands around, is it necessary for one to believe in the doctrine of the Trinity in order to be orthodox and indeed born again? In short, if we say that the Bible is the only basis for faith and practice (*Sola Scriptura*)

and it proclaims, in one word or many, that there is a Triunity that forms the Godhead, we must believe it and if it rightly describes the One in whom we are placing our trust, it is essential for being made right with God.

Jesus declares that one must not only believe in God, but also in Him and that He is the only way to the Father and to know Him is to know the Father and vice versa (Jon 14:1,6-7). Jesus prayed that eternal life is to know both the Father and the Son (John 17:3). Of the Spirit Jesus says, “But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come” (John 16:13) The Spirit therefore works in us after we are born again, but it is essential to know this as part of the doctrine of salvation.

It follows then that in order for one to be born again (and therefore orthodox) one must believe in the Biblical Jesus, who claims to be one with God the Father, yet distinct in function. The same is true of understanding the Spirit’s role as a member of the Triunity.

Heretical Anti-Trinitarian Conclusions

In any Biblical teaching, usually someone comes along and in an attempt to explain away the mystery of a doctrine, there becomes error. The doctrine of the Triunity is no exception. Out of the aberrant views that have come about, Paul Enns sees three that rise up as the leaders: Tri-theism, Sabellianism/Modalism and Arianism (Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology*, pg. 199). James White names them as Polytheism (which would encompass Tri-theism), Subordinationism (Which would include Arianism) and Modalism (James White, *The Forgotten Trinity*, pg. 30) Each of these, in an attempt to explain away the enigmatic characteristic of the Triunity, has also explained away an important aspect of the doctrine, that makes it fall short of

what the Scripture explains. Tri-theism/Polytheism eliminates the unity of the Godhead, by stating that the three separate persons of the Godhead are actually three separate gods. The Scriptures clearly states, there is a plurality in unity (Gen. 1:26; Deut 6:4; Matt. 28:19).

Although the fullness of this we cannot grasp, we accept it by faith, since the Scriptures state it.

Arianism/Subordinationsim, does damage to the equality of the Triunity by stating that Son is less than equal to the Father in essence. The Scripture clearly states again, this is not the case (John 10:30, 8:58). The Scripture does state that there is a functional difference between the members of the Godhead, but none are less “God” than the other (Matt. 11:27; Matt. 26:42; Matt. 28:19).

The error of Modalism is the most prevalent error today (outside of true believers’ misconceptions), in that Holiness and Oneness Pentecostals hold to this doctrine. This doctrine does damage to the plurality of the unity. As Enns states it, “[Modalism] views one God who variously manifests Himself in three modes of existence: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Enns, pg.199). Again, Scripture refutes this false doctrine in much the same way it does the others, especially in Jesus claim that he and the Father are one (John 10:30) and His submission to the Father (Matt. 11:27).

Conclusion

Unfortunately many today in the church hold doctrine too loosely and as a result, important doctrines, like the Triunity of God are diminished in the mind of those believers. They know they should and do believe it, but often times they are unsure of the details and the arguments that support the biblical position. As such they are in danger of being deceived. This does not negate their salvation, but simply makes them ineffective for kingdom work.