

Is God really a 'Trinity'?

A BIBLICAL RESPONSE TO OBJECTIONS

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The Challenge

The Christian understanding of God is that he is one God, but in three Persons: Father, Son (Jesus) and the Holy Spirit. Lots of people find this a strange, mind-boggling idea: how can God be one and three at the same time? These include sceptical atheists and people of other faiths, such as Muslims and Jews.

Similarly, a number of cult and 'fringe' Christian groups deny the historic Christian teaching that God is a Trinity. These groups include Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarians, Christadelphians and Christian Science. In fact, the main test of whether a group is a 'mainstream' church or a cult has always been whether they believe in the Trinity.

The main arguments used by groups sympathetic to belief in God, but critical of the Trinity are these:

- a) The idea of the Trinity is found nowhere in the Bible.
- b) It was a doctrine which arose in the 4th century, largely due to church politics, and wasn't fully developed until as late as the Middle Ages.
- c) It grew not from the Jewish roots of Christianity, but as a corruption from pagan religions, who often grouped their gods in threes.
- d) It is actually dishonouring to the one God to misrepresent his nature as a Trinity.

(Arguments taken from Jehovah's Witnesses booklet, 'Should You Believe in the Trinity?' Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989).

THE EVIDENCE

Background:

All Christians who hold to the historic faith (whether Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Pentecostal, or whatever) would reply that such groups have misread and distorted the evidence to support their own unorthodox beliefs. The cults' doctrines sound superficially plausible, because there is some truth in what they say: the word 'Trinity' is not found in the Bible, and a full doctrine of the Trinity was only developed during the early centuries of the church (particularly 2nd - 5th centuries).

But historic Christianity totally rejects the idea that the idea of the Trinity was a late, pagan corruption of the true faith. Rather, it grows directly from the New Testament experience of God at work in the lives of individuals and the believing community. We can put it this way: from earliest times, Christians had a trinitarian faith, even if wasn't expressed in such terms until a later date.

Early Jewish Christians, from Paul and the Apostles through the early centuries of the church, were fiercely monotheistic (they believed in one God), over against the polytheism (many gods) of neighbouring countries and the Roman invaders. They never for a moment questioned that the one true God was the God of their ancestors and the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament). But they were now faced with a dilemma. Their overwhelming *experience* of Jesus Christ was of a man who said and did things only God could say and do. And their *experience* of the Holy Spirit was the experience of a Person, not an impersonal force or 'thing'.

How could they reconcile what they knew of God with the experience of three apparently distinct divine Persons, with distinct roles? One option was to say the old picture of God was wrong, and that there are actually three separate Gods (*tritheism*). But this went against everything they knew about God. After all, when Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment, he began by quoting Exodus: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one..' (Mark 12:29). To opt for tritheism would have meant disowning their Jewish faith, Bible, commandments, even the teaching of Jesus himself.

The other option was to hold onto Jewish monotheism, but to infer that if God is one, then experiences that seem to us to be the work of distinct divine Persons must be illusory. What we think of as the working of Jesus and the Spirit are simply ways of talking about the actions of the one God, viewed from different angles.

But early Christian thinkers rejected this view, and historic Christianity has always rejected it as inadequate. Why? Because it fails to do full justice to the Christian experience of Christ and the Holy Spirit – what is said about them in Scripture, and in terms of Christian experience down the centuries.

Those who reject the idea of the Trinity in effect are ironing out and simplifying a mind-boggling paradox that is inescapably at the heart of the New Testament. This paradox can be summarised in two statements:

- There is one God.
- Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are fully divine Persons in their own right, but distinct from God the Father.

Cults have always said that these two statements are incompatible, so one must be wrong. Since Jews and other sectarian groups reject the second, the biblical evidence for it needs to be outlined.

1) JESUS:

a) Jesus says things only God can say. In the Old Testament the unique, personal name of God is Yahweh (previously translated *Jehovah*: these days usually translated *LORD*). The name Yahweh is a shortened form of the Hebrew words for 'I am that I am', the words God himself says to Moses to define who he is (Exodus 3:14). This is the name of God used no less than 6,700 times in the Old Testament.

This phrase 'I am' is often on Jesus' lips (especially in John's Gospel), each time echoing the divine name. Jesus clearly takes the Name of God as his own. Jesus says: 'Before Abraham was born. I am!' (John 8:58), a clear reference back to God's own 'I am'. Time after time Jesus says 'I am': the bread of life, the light of the world, the gate for the sheep, the good shepherd, the way the truth and the life, the resurrection and the life, the true vine.

Jesus specifically identifies himself with God: 'I and the Father are one' (John 10:30). 'Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father' (John 14:9). He says to God the Father: 'Glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began' (John 17:5) ('Glory' here denotes the splendour or magnificence of God himself.) 'Do not be afraid. I am the first and the last.. I hold the keys of death and Hades' (Rev 1:17,18): this is the same language previously applied to God (Rev 1:8).

Faith in Jesus is presented as being the same as faith in God: 'When a man believes in me. he does not believe in me only.. but in the one who sent me' (John 12:44), 'Trust in God; trust also in me' (John 14:1). Jesus does not only call people to come to God the Father for salvation: he clearly says, 'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest' (Matt 11:28).

He says what only God can say, and reapplies to himself many of the metaphors applied to God in the Jewish Scriptures, such as *bridegroom* and *shepherd*. He explicitly compares himself to the Temple (which embodied the very presence of God). Jesus repeatedly presents himself as taking over the key roles of the Temple, particularly the forgiveness of sins. Jesus says to a paralysed man, 'Your sins are forgiven' (Mark 2:10), a claim to share God's right to forgive sin. This is confirmed by Jewish leaders' response: 'He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?' (Mark 2:7) Jesus was executed on a charge of blasphemy, claiming to be God (John 5:18, 19:7).

- b) Jesus does things only God can do.** He has power over the natural world, such as calming the storm (Mark 4:39). He feeds 5,000 with one small boy's picnic (John 6) and turns water into wine (John 2:7-11). He has the power to cast out evil spirits (eg Luke 4:38-40), and even raise a body which has been dead four days and has started to decompose (John 11:38-44).
- c) Jesus is described in ways only God can be described.** The early Christians tell people that if they call on the name of the Lord (ie Jesus), they will be saved (Acts 2:21, 1 Cor 1:2), a direct echo of what people say about God in the Old Testament. The word 'Lord' is the name of God in the Greek OT, and this same word is repeatedly applied to Jesus. He is 'the Lord of glory' (1 Cor 2:8), the 'King of kings and Lord of lords' (Rev 19:16). Although Paul insists there is 'one God, the Father', in the same breath he insists that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom.. we exist' (1 Cor 8:5-6). Here, he consciously uses the title by which God himself is designated in the OT (Deuteronomy 6). In other words, he uses the most exalted language available to him in Jewish religious tradition to refer to who Jesus Christ is.

Paul underlines this idea repeatedly: 'In Christ all the fullness of the deity lives in bodily form' (Col 2:9). He is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1:15-20) (note what is happening here: Adam was made 'in' the image of God, Jesus 'is' the image of God). He is 'in very nature God' (Phil 2:5,6). His is the 'name that is above every name', so that 'at the name of Jesus every knee should bow' (Phil 2:9,10). Christ is at the right hand of God, 'far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every title that can be given, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. And God placed all things under his feet.' (Ephesians 1:21, 22).

The author of the letter to the Hebrews sees Jesus as 'the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being' (Hebrews 1:3), something that can only be true if he shares the divine nature. Not only that; in the same verse, Jesus is said to 'sustain all things by his powerful word': it is hard to imagine a more God-like attribute than sustaining the entire universe by simple utterance.

Jesus is described as being worthy of worship, something rightfully due only to God (Hebrews 1:6). In fact, we see numerous occasions when Jesus actually is worshipped (Matthew 14:33, 28:17, Revelation 5), and prayed to (Acts 7:59, 1 Cor 16:22, Revelation 22:20).

Jesus is described by Paul as being co-creator of the universe (1 Cor 8:6), and the same claim is made in John's gospel: 'All things came into being through him and without him not one thing came into being' (John 1:3).

Paul identifies Jesus with the 'wisdom' of God (1 Corinthians 1, 2). In the Jewish spiritual tradition, God's wisdom is understood to be a direct expression of himself, his goodness and greatness made visible.

Less obvious, but equally compelling, is the use of the term 'dwelling' at the start of John's Gospel: 'The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us' (John 1:14). This is a reference back to Exodus, when the Israelites escaped from Egypt and God told them to build a 'tabernacle' (temple-tent), which became the place on earth where God had a special 'dwelling' (Exodus 25:8). Later, after the Babylonian exile, God says through the prophet Zechariah that he would dwell with his people (Zech 2:10). And Ezekiel sees a vision of the temple, where God says he will dwell with his people (Ezekiel 43:7). John clearly means his readers to understand that Jesus is the new tabernacle and temple: the place where God is present on the earth.

Again, John's words at the start of his Gospel: 'In the beginning' is a clear, conscious echo of the beginning of Genesis. He then goes on to explain that The Word (Jesus) was actually there with God in creation (John 1:1-3).

Several of the passages we have cited, such as the first chapters of John's Gospel, Colossians and Hebrews are clearly there to underline what theologians call a high Christology. In other words, a clear statement of the divinity of Jesus.

There are many other places where the actions of Jesus are described in terms that assert his divinity. When Jesus breathes on his followers, saying 'Receive the Holy Spirit', the phrase 'breathed on them' (as found in the Greek New Testament and the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament used in Jesus's day) is the identical phrase used in Genesis 2, when God breathes life into Adam.

In case any doubt remains, there are at least five absolutely explicit references to Jesus as God in the New Testament. Paul's letter to Titus refers to 'our great God and saviour, Jesus Christ' (Titus 2:13). John calls him 'true God and eternal life' (1 John 5:20). Thomas exclaims to Jesus in awestruck worship, 'My Lord and my God!' (John 20:28). Peter can refer to 'our God and Saviour Jesus Christ' (2 Peter 1:1). And the writer to the Hebrews applies Old Testament God-language to Jesus: 'your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever' (Heb 1:8).

In the context of Jewish monotheism, this is a staggering move. Christ is clearly and explicitly being incorporated into the worship of the one true God. And remember, this worship of Christ is from Jews with a clear understanding that God alone is worthy of praise, and an abhorrence of false gods and idols. Had they been pagan Romans, or Hindus with an expectation of many gods, it would be a different story. The early Jewish Christians knew blasphemy when they saw it. They are worshipping Jesus in the same terms that they worshipped the God of the Old Testament covenant.

Such worship also goes way beyond the respect given to great figures of Jewish history, such as Moses, David or Elijah. People in Jesus's day looked back with awe to momentous events of the remote past, such as the Exodus. The passing of time added to their significance. But Jesus had died less than 20 years before Paul wrote 1 Corinthians. The events described in the Gospels were still in the recent past. Something about Jesus had so struck his followers that they were compelled to locate him on the divine side of the rigid divine-human divide in Jewish faith – a status that would have been unthinkable for even the greatest heroes of Jewish faith.

It remains possible, of course, to claim that the New Testament writers were somehow mistaken in identifying Jesus with God so directly. What we simply can't say is that they didn't themselves think Jesus shared the nature of God. That would be to ignore the overwhelming testimony of the New Testament writings. The first and most important foundation of the Trinity lies in Jesus's own astounding claims about himself, and the extreme claims the New Testament writers made about him.

In the New Testament, then, the man Jesus of Nazareth is seen as sharing the very identity of God himself. But why, then, do we not talk about a 'duality' or a 'binity' in God, of Father and Son. Why a Trinity of three Persons?

2) THE HOLY SPIRIT:

a) The Spirit as a Person. Occasionally, the New Testament speaks as if the Spirit of God were something impersonal: poured out like a liquid (Acts 2:17, Titus 3:6), or given like a gift (Luke 11:13, Romans 5:5). If these were the only ways the Spirit is referred to, we could conclude that God is composed of two Persons, and the Spirit is an impersonal energy or force God uses to achieve his will in the world.

But more references make it clear that the Spirit is fully personal. He speaks (Acts 21:11, John 16:13), can be grieved (Ephesians 4:30), gives gifts (1 Cor 12:11), searches (1 Cor 2:10), teaches and reminds (John 14:26, 1 Cor 2:13), considers and reflects (Acts 15:28), guides people into truth (John 16: 12), and testifies about Jesus (John 15:26). In Romans, the Spirit is described as helping believers in their weakness, and interceding for them to the Father in prayer (Romans 8:26-28). Jesus repeatedly speaks of the Spirit as The Counsellor (John 14:26, 15:26, 16:7), speaking of him in personal terms.

However, some people claim that the Spirit might simply represent the personal presence of God, but still not actually be a Person distinct from Father and Son. What tips the balance in favour of a trinitarian view is this: New Testament writers have a trinitarian way of speaking about Father, Son and Spirit in parallel to each other (or, occasionally, to two of these Persons - such as Son and Spirit).

b) The Trinitarian Formula: Consider Romans, chapter 8. In v34, Paul says that Christ is at the right hand of God, interceding for believers. But just a few verses earlier, he has also said that the Spirit intercedes for believers. Since Christ is clearly a person, it follows that the Spirit is a person too. Certainly, Paul writes of the Spirit as a distinct, personal agent with his own will. The same is true when Jesus refers to the Spirit as 'the Counsellor', whom he will ask the Father to send - he means the personal presence of God, but distinct from the Father (and himself).

At Jesus's baptism we see Jesus, the Son, being baptised in the river Jordan, the Holy Spirit of God descending on him in the form of a dove, and we hear the voice of God the Father speaking from heaven (Luke 3:21, 22).

Jesus tells his followers that they are to baptise in the name of the Father, Son and Spirit (Matthew 28:19): why bother to separate out the three Persons, if they are simply modes of the Father's operation? The Gospel writers often speak in trinitarian terms: 'At that time *Jesus*, full of joy through the *Holy Spirit*, said, 'I praise you *Father*' (Luke 10:21).

Again, we see a trinitarian formula used in the words Paul uses to conclude 2 Corinthians, the blessing we know as the 'Grace': 'May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all' (2 Corinthians 13:14). Paul is here not so much arguing for a doctrine of the Trinity, as simply assuming that normal Christian experience is of a salvation from the Father, in the Son and through the Spirit. In Paul's letters alone there are over 20 significant passages which assume what he always takes for granted: that salvation is a threefold work of a triune God (eg Romans 5:1-5).

CONCLUSION:

There is only one reasonable conclusion from the historical and biblical evidence. From the very earliest times, Christian experience was thoroughly trinitarian. This was found to be the only way to do justice to the oneness of God on the one hand, and the divinity of Christ, and the full divine personhood of the Spirit on the other. True, the Bible does not contain the word Trinity as such - this was the product of later reflection. And it didn't reach definitive doctrinal expression until the creeds of Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381AD).

But the *experience* of the early church, which subsequent Christian thinking tried to encapsulate, was of a salvation worked by one God, who exists in three Persons. It is not simply that there is one God who is experienced by humanity in three different ways, as some have claimed: Trinity is who God really is, in himself.

To put it another way, there is already loving relationship in God. We are made in the image of God who is relationship in his own being. It is a profound Christian insight into human nature that we come closest to imaging God not when we turn inwards for solitary 'enlightenment', but when we build close relationships with others.

From time to time, somebody suggests that Jesus is just another religious teacher or guru, and that the Spirit is an impersonal force, or a capacity of human beings. And people concerned about inter-faith dialogue sometimes suggest that progress could be made if Christians dropped the idea of the Trinity. But for Christians this is simply not possible. The doctrine of the Trinity is the definitive way of making sense of what the New Testament says about who Jesus is, and who the Spirit is. It is God's self-revelation of who he really is.

True, not all the early church theologians agreed in every detail on how the concept of the Trinity should be formulated. There are minor differences between the ways the Eastern and Western Christian traditions have expressed things. The western church, Catholic and Protestant, has usually emphasized the *one-ness* of God, while the eastern Orthodox churches have tended to emphasize the three-ness, as in Rublev's famous icon which shows three figures in relationship with one another.

But one thing has remained a constant in the historic faith. It is the need to hang on to two sides of an apparent paradox: the unity of God, and the fact that he exists in three distinct Persons. Hold onto both sides of this paradox, even if they seem in tension and hard for the human mind to grasp, and you hold onto God. Lose either side of the paradox and you lose your grip on the God of biblical revelation and Christian experience.

Far from being a pagan intrusion into biblical faith, the Trinity was the only way to make sense of what God was doing, and what this revealed about his nature. Far from being dishonouring to God to worship him as a Trinity (as groups such as the JW's claim), it is actually the only way we come close to giving God the honour he deserves, for who he really is.

If other ancient religions grouped gods in threes, this is an interesting coincidence. Or perhaps it is more than coincidence. If the central truth about God is that he is one God, in three Persons, we should be surprised if this truth didn't 'ripple out' and find distant echoes in a range of cultures and beliefs. Truth is hard to keep to yourself!

Recommended Reading:

Gordon Fee: Paul, the Spirit and the People of God (Hodder).

Larry Hurtado: One God, One Lord (T & T Clark). (*Heavier theology*).

Alister McGrath: Understanding the Trinity (Kingsway).

Eugene Peterson: Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places (Hodder). (*On spirituality*).

Tom Smail: The Forgotten Father (Paternoster). (*Heavier theology*).

Tom Wright: What Saint Paul Really Said (Lion).

Jesus and the Victory of God (SPCK). (*Heavier theology*).