

The Doctrine of the Trinity

Part 1

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The goal of this study is to present an introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity as well as an exegesis of a specific passage that provides key facts which must be considered in any systematic treatment of the Trinity. The first part of this discussion will include the definition and importance of the doctrine, the early historical development of the doctrine, and important theological concepts relating to this doctrine. Part two will undertake an exegetical analysis of a key Scripture passage on the Trinity (John 15:26-27) in order to understand its contribution to this important doctrine.

Introduction to Trinitarianism

The doctrine of the Trinity or the Triunity of God is a unique teaching of the Christian faith, and it is a topic which is sometimes difficult for thinking individuals to understand.

In the doctrine of the Trinity, we encounter one of the truly distinctive doctrines of Christianity. Among the religions of the world, the Christian faith is unique in making the claim that God is one and yet there are three who are God. In so doing, it presents what seems on the surface to be a self-contradictory doctrine. Furthermore, this doctrine is not overtly or explicitly stated in Scripture. Nevertheless, devout minds have been led to it as they sought to do justice to the witness of Scripture.¹

It is also true that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a product of deductive logic or philosophical reasoning. The mind of man would never have conceived of such a doctrine. “It is important to realize that the doctrine of the Trinity has not been given to the Church by speculative thought. It is not an *a priori* concept, nor in any sense derived from pure reason. This doctrine has come from the data of historical revelation. In the process of history God has revealed Himself as one God, subsisting in three Persons.”²

One of the things that must be admitted at the outset of this discussion is that an absolute understanding of the Trinity is beyond the ability of the finite mind to completely comprehend. This idea has been well stated by Martin:

No man can fully explain the Trinity, though in every age scholars have propounded theories and advanced hypotheses to explore this mysterious Biblical teaching. But despite the worthy efforts of these scholars, the Trinity is still largely incomprehensible to the mind of man. Perhaps the chief reason for this is that the Trinity is a-logical, or beyond logic. It, therefore, cannot be made subject to human reason or logic. Because of this, opponents of the doctrine argue that the idea of the Trinity must be rejected as

¹ Millard J. Erickson, Christian Theology, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1985), 321.

² Merrill C. Tenney, The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), 871.

untenable. Such thinking, however, makes man's corrupted human reason the sole criterion for determining the truth of divine revelation.³

Scripture itself provides ground-rules for reasoning about complex doctrines such as the Trinity. "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:8-9). A perfect understanding of many of the truths of God are beyond the capability of the human mind. Kenneth Boa aptly remarks that "since the Bible is an infinite revelation, it often brings the reader beyond the limit of his intelligence,"⁴ and Erickson reminds us that even in the glorified state when believers will have eternal fellowship with God they will not be able to totally understand everything about Him.

The Trinity is incomprehensible. We cannot fully understand the mystery of the Trinity. When someday we see God, we shall see him as he is, and understand him better than we do now. Yet even then we will not totally comprehend him. Because he is the unlimited God and we are limited in our capacity to know and understand, he will always exceed our knowledge and understanding.⁵

God is the infinite Creator; we are, and always will be, His finite creatures. Since this is the case, what should be our approach when reasoning about the doctrine of the Trinity? The following passage of Scripture reminds us that even though many of the truths of God are beyond our complete comprehension, if they are given to us in His revealed Word then we are to work to understand everything which we are capable of grasping: "The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever" (Deuteronomy 29:29). We must be good stewards of God's revelation, ones who watch their life and doctrine closely (1 Timothy 4:16) and who correctly handle the Word of Truth (2 Timothy 2:15). As we look, then, at what the Bible teaches concerning God, it becomes clear that Scripture presupposes the existence of God but goes beyond that fundamental assumption to explain something about how He exists. Lightner provides a good summary of this point:

Holy Scripture presents God existing not only as a holy Person but also as existing in holy Trinity. The doctrine is exclusively the subject of special divine revelation in the Bible. God's revelation in nature and in humanity do not contribute to our understanding of the Trinity. Much of the written revelation of God involves mystery, yet the Trinity is no doubt the greatest mystery of all revealed truth. Though often least understood of all doctrines of the orthodox Christian faith, the doctrine of the Trinity is one of the most basic of all areas of theology. Augustine, the church father, stated well the importance of this doctrine when he wrote, "In no other subject is error more dangerous or inquiry more laborious, or discovery of truth more profitable."⁶

³ Walter Martin, Essential Christianity, (Santa Anna: Vision House, 1975), 21.

⁴ Kenneth Boa, Unraveling the Big Questions About God, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1988), 12.

⁵ Erickson, 338.

⁶ Robert P. Lightner, The God of the Bible and Other Gods, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1998), 90.

It is clear that we must carefully study and define the doctrine of the Trinity, holding to what the Scriptures reveal about the Triune God. To do otherwise would result in heresy, involving serious errors of thinking with disastrous consequences for life in this present age as well as the age to come. This is pointed out by Chafer and Walvoord: “The many indications in both the Old and New Testaments that God exists or subsists as a triune being have made the doctrine of the Trinity a central fact of all orthodox creeds from the early church until modern times. Any departure from this is considered a departure from scriptural truth. Although the word trinity does not occur in the Bible, the facts of scriptural revelation permit no other explanation.”⁷ The next important task is to clearly define the doctrine of the Trinity based on the teaching of the Scriptures, which is the topic of the following section.

General Definition of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The material or data for composing a definition of the Trinity comes from the pages of the Old and New Testaments, although the New Testament contains the most specific information from which a definition of the doctrine of the Trinity can be derived. “Though *trinity* is a second-century term found nowhere in the Bible, and the Scriptures present no finished trinitarian statement, the NT does contain most of the building materials for later doctrine....The NT presents events, claims, practices, and problems from which church fathers crystallized the doctrine in succeeding centuries.”⁸ Lightner provides a concise overview of the Biblical data regarding the Trinity, as well as an outline of the dangers to be avoided in constructing a definition:

Taking all that Scripture has to say regarding the one and only true God and the three Persons of the Godhead, we find that the stress is upon unity and diversity in unity. The Bible speaks about three Persons in a similar way. Scripture ascribes deity, personality, and individuality to each. And yet the Bible also reveals that there is but one God. The ancients expressed it well when they spoke about one essence, or substance, in God who existed in three Persons -- Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are two key truths that believers should recognize and as much as possible harmonize. The danger has always been to either fall into tri-theism -- namely, a belief in three Gods -- or to view the Son and Holy Spirit as being less than God. Those same dangers still exist today. Also, there is an additional error that must be avoided in our understanding of the Trinity. We must not assume that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are merely names or varied modes of existence for the one true God....When theologians say that God is one and that He exists in three Persons, they must be careful not to imply that each member loses His individual identity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit remain real, individual, and true Persons, even though they are one in divine essence....To sum up the biblical view, which avoids both of these dangers, Christians worship one God who exists in three Persons --

⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer and John F. Walvoord, Major Bible Themes, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974), 40.

⁸ Geoffrey Bromiley, ed., The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia: Vol IV, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 914.

God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The doctrine of the blessed Trinity is a reminder of the supernaturalness of biblical Christianity. The doctrine defies rationalization, yet it provides for the believer the answer to the unity and diversity in the world all around us.⁹

Terms Used in Discussing the Doctrine of the Trinity

Certain key terms permeate the discussion of the doctrine of the Trinity, and they are often used both in philosophical and theological ways. It is important to have good working definitions of terms when discussing a complex doctrine like the Trinity, and so the following definitions are proposed. They are taken from the *Random House Dictionary of the English Language*¹⁰, except as otherwise noted.

Trinity: The union of three persons (Father, Son, and Holy Ghost) in one Godhead, or the threefold personality of the one Divine Being.

Trinitarianism: The belief in, or doctrine of, the Trinity.

Essence: The inward nature, true substance, or constitution of anything.

Substance: The essential part or essence of a thing.

Hypostasis: The underlying or essential part of anything as distinguished from its attributes; the substance, essence, or essential principle.

Person: A self-conscious or rational being. In theology, any of the three hypostases in the Trinity, namely the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. “*Person* is, however, an imperfect expression of the truth inasmuch as the term denotes to us a separate rational and moral individual. But in the being of God there are not three individuals, but three personal self-distinctions within the one divine essence. Then again, personality in man implies independence of will, actions and feelings leading to behavior peculiar to the person. This cannot be thought of in connection with the Trinity. Each Person is self-conscious and self-directing, yet never acting independently or in opposition....Diversity manifests itself in Persons, in characteristics, and in operations.”¹¹

Subsistence: The process of substance assuming individualization, or the quality of having timeless or abstract existence.

Ontological Trinity: The ontological Trinity focuses on the personal operations of the Persons or the *opera ad intra* (works within), or personal properties by which the Persons are distinguished. It has to do with generation (filiation or begetting) and procession which attempts to indicate a logical order within the Trinity but does not imply in any way inequality, priority of time, or degrees of dignity. Generation and procession occur within the divine Being and carry with them no thought of subordination of essence. Thus, viewed ontologically, it may be said of the Persons of the Trinity: (1) The Father begets the Son and is He from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds, though the Father is neither begotten nor does He proceed. (2) The Son is begotten and

⁹ Lightner, *The God of the Bible and Other Gods*, 90-91.

¹⁰ Jess Stein, ed., *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, (New York: Random House, 1966).

¹¹ James D. Douglas, ed., *The New Bible Dictionary*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1962), 1300.

is He from whom the Holy Spirit proceeds, but He neither begets nor proceeds. (3) The Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, but He neither begets nor is He the One from whom any proceed.¹²

Economical Trinity: “The concept of the economical Trinity concerns administration, management, actions of the Persons, or the *opera ad extra* (works outside, that is on the creation and its creatures). For the Father this includes the works of electing (1 Peter 1:2), loving the world (John 3:16), and giving good gifts (James 1:17). For the Son it emphasizes His suffering (Mark 8:31), redeeming (1 Peter 1:18), and upholding all things (Heb. 1:3). For the Spirit it focuses on His particular works of regenerating (Titus 3:5), energizing (Acts 1:8), and sanctifying (Gal. 5:22-23).”¹³

Constructing a Definition of the Trinity

Many definitions or statements of the doctrine of the Trinity have been constructed. The following example is from the *Westminster Confession of Faith*, which defines the Trinity in these words: “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity; God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. The Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding: the Son is eternally begotten of the Father: the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son.”¹⁴ This brief definition is rather cryptic because it relies heavily on several technical theological terms which are not in common use, including *generation* and *procession*. A clearer definition is given by Chafer and Walvoord:

While the doctrine of the Trinity is a central fact of Christian faith, it is also beyond human comprehension and has no parallel in human experience. It is best defined as holding that, while God is one, He exists as three persons. These persons are equal, have the same attributes, and are equally worthy of adoration, worship, and faith. Yet the doctrine of the unity of the Godhead makes clear that they are not three separate gods, like three separate human beings such as Peter, James, and John. Accordingly, the true Christian faith is not tritheism, a belief in three Gods. On the other hand, the Trinity must not be explained as three modes of existence, that is, one God manifesting Himself in three ways. The Trinity is essential to the being of God and is more than a form of divine revelation.¹⁵

This definition avoids the use of technical terms and it attempts to avoid the pitfalls on either side of the concept of the Trinity, namely the tension between the oneness and the threeness of God. Ryrie does an excellent job of clarifying the problems inherent in defining the Trinity and he provides a good example definition, an explanation of each part of this definition, as well as a Scriptural illustration of the concept of the Trinity.

¹² Charles C. Ryrie, Basic Theology, (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1987), 54.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁴ Westminster Confession of Faith, (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 1958), 27.

¹⁵ Chafer and Walvoord, 40.

A definition of the Trinity is not easy to construct. Some are done by stating several propositions. Others err on the side either of oneness or threeness. One of the best is Warfield's: There is one only and true God, but in the unity of the Godhead there are three coeternal and coequal Persons, the same in substance but distinct in subsistence (B. B. Warfield, *Trinity*, The International Bible Encyclopaedia, James Orr, ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1930], 5:3012)...Positively, the definition clearly asserts both oneness and threeness and is careful to maintain the equality and eternity of the Three. Even if the word *person* is not the best, it does guard against modalism, and, of course, the phrase "the same in substance" (or perhaps better, essence) protects against tritheism. The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three Persons. John 10:30: "I and the Father are One," beautifully states this balance between the diversity of the Persons and the unity of the essence. "I and the Father" clearly distinguishes two Persons, and the verb, "We are," is also plural. But, said the Lord, "We are One," and *One* is neuter; that is, one in nature or essence, but not one Person (which would require the masculine form). Thus the Lord distinguishes Himself from the Father and yet claimed unity and equality with the Father.¹⁶

As Ryrie states above, a concise definition of the Trinity is not easy to construct, but it is possible and it is important to develop a clear Scriptural statement of the doctrine of the Trinity, as the following section will show.

Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

A correct understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is extremely important for our thinking about God and our conduct toward Him. Erickson provides an explanation of the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity in our relationship with God:

The doctrine of the Trinity is crucial to Christianity. It is concerned with who God is, what he is like, how he works, and how he is to be approached. Moreover, the question of the deity of Jesus Christ, which has historically been a point of great tension, is very much wrapped up with one's understanding of the Trinity. The position we take on the Trinity will have profound bearing on our Christology. The position we take on the Trinity will also answer several questions of a practical nature. Whom are we to worship -- Father only, Son, Holy Spirit, or the Triune God? To whom are we to pray? Is the work of each to be considered in isolation from the work of the others, or may we think of the atoning death of Jesus as somehow the work of the Father as well? Should the Son be thought of as the Father's equal in essence, or should he be relegated to a somewhat lesser status?¹⁷

¹⁶ Ryrie, 53-54.

¹⁷ Erickson, 322.

The doctrine of the Trinity also helps us to understand that God is a God of communion, fellowship, and community. Even before He created any other being there was communion, fellowship, and community taking place between the Persons of the Godhead. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it is the basis or pattern for all true relationship and fellowship in the created world. This is true because it is an expression of the very nature of God, which has its outworking in all of His creatures.

The implications of the doctrine are vitally important not only for theology but for Christian experience and life. As to the Godhead, it reveals that God is the truly living One. It removes Him from any conception of stagnation or mere passivity. God in Trinity is fullness of life, living in eternal relationships, and in never-ceasing fellowship. The fellowship that constitutes the Trinity is the basis of fellowship within the human family, within the home, within society, and more especially within the Church, where the Holy Spirit is the Agent and Medium of fellowship.¹⁸

Another reason that the doctrine of the Trinity is important is because one's beliefs concerning the Trinity have implications for many other doctrines in many other fields of theology. Ryrie provides several examples of how trinitarian beliefs impact other theological concepts:

The richness of the concept of the Trinity overflows into several areas of theology. The doctrine of redemption is an obvious example, for all Persons of the Godhead are involved in that great work (John 3:6, 16; Rev. 13:8). The doctrine of revelation serves as another example, the Son and Spirit both being involved in communicating God's truth (John 1:18; 16:13). Fellowship and love within the Godhead is only possible in a trinitarian concept of God, and that fellowship is akin to the believer's fellowship with Christ (14:17)...Prayer is practiced in a trinitarian way. Though we may address any Person of the Trinity, ordinarily, according to the biblical precedent, we address the Father in the name of Christ as the Spirit directs us (John 14:14; Eph. 1:6; 2:18; 6:18).¹⁹

Historical Development of Trinitarianism

The controversies over the Trinity during the early centuries of the church resulted in the emergence of systematic theology. The theological struggles of the early church produced the doctrine of the Trinity essentially as we know it today. Therefore, it is very important to understand the early history of the doctrine, because all of the crucial issues and ideas about the relations within the Godhead were formulated during those first centuries of the church's existence.

For the first two or three centuries after the death of the apostles Christian literature was mostly of a devotional nature...given to encouraging believers in their faith and stimulating their growth in Christ. Actually it was not until doctrinal error and heresy arose that the need for theological formulations was seen. Systematic theology arose and

¹⁸ Douglas, 1300.

¹⁹ Ryrie, 59.

developed in response to deviations and departures from the plain statements of Scripture....At first there were few attempts to harmonize portions of Scripture that appeared to be in conflict. A striking exception was in the trinitarian controversy (170-325), when the need for theological specifics and formulations was forced upon the fathers.²⁰

The earliest Christian writings emphasized the unity of God, and only gradually did church leaders feel called upon to write a defense of the faith to the culture of their day. In defending Christianity they expressed themselves using the philosophical terms and concepts that were common to that culture, and this sometimes resulted in a distortion or misrepresentation of the orthodox doctrine. Lightner expresses the situation in these words:

The literature of this early period gives overwhelming evidence of belief in one God (monotheism), as opposed to the heathen belief in many gods (polytheism)...In the second century writers placed special emphasis on defending the Christian faith against the inroads of Judaism, Gnosticism, and heathenism in general. Some outstanding men among them were Aristides, Justin Martyr, Tatian, and Athenagoras....They presented a philosophical concept of Christ not at all in harmony with the teaching of the New Testament. To them the Logos, or Word, of John 1:1 was not the eternally existing person of God the Son. They insisted rather than the Logos existed eternally in God only as divine reason, not as a person.²¹

Berkhof also describes the inconsistency and confusion in the early church regarding the doctrine of the Trinity:

The early Church Fathers had no clear conception of the Trinity. Some of them conceived of the Logos as impersonal reason, become personal at the time of creation, while others regarded Him as personal and co-eternal with the Father, sharing the divine essence, and yet ascribed to Him a certain subordination to the Father. The Holy Spirit occupied no important place in their discussions at all. They spoke of Him primarily in connection with the work of redemption as applied to the hearts and lives of believers. Some considered Him to be subordinate, not only to the Father, but also to the Son.²²

As the church fathers expanded and revised their views on the relationship and works of the persons of the Godhead, they developed concepts and terms that could be used to more adequately describe the Triune God. “The anti-Gnostic fathers believed in one God who was not only the Creator but also the Redeemer. The law was given by him, and so was the gospel. This God was one in essence but three in subsistence. Two of the most outstanding anti-Gnostic fathers were Irenaeus (ca. 130-202) and Tertullian (ca. 160-220). The latter was the first to write of the tripersonality of God and to use the term *trinity* with reference to God.”²³

²⁰ Robert P. Lightner, Handbook of Evangelical Theology, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1995), 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 37, 66.

²² Louis Berkhof, The History of Christian Doctrines, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1937), 83.

²³ Lightner, Handbook of Evangelical Theology, 38.

Erickson states that Hippolytus and Tertullian were the first to develop an “economic” view of the Trinity. “There was little attempt to explore the eternal relations among the three; rather, there was a concentration on the ways in which the Triad were manifested in creation and redemption.”²⁴ One of the first dilemmas involved maintaining the sole rule and authority of God while also holding to a belief in the deity of Jesus Christ. Several different methods of reconciling these truths were proposed, and the on-going struggle which was taking place in the church at that time is clearly described by Lightner:

The doctrine of Christ the Logos as a separate, fully divine person distinct from the Father and the Spirit was viewed as endangering the unity of God by some. On the other hand, viewing the Logos as in some sense subordinate to the Father compromised his deity. The attempt was made to maintain the sole government of God and at the same time retain belief in the full deity of Christ. Two different schools of thought arose to which Tertullian applied the name monarchianism. Dynamic monarchianism was concerned primarily with stressing God’s unity and oneness; Paul of Samosata, bishop of Antioch, was its most noted representative. Modalistic monarchianism was more influential; it laid more stress on the christological side of the issue, though the unity of God was still a point of interest. The three persons of the Godhead were conceived as three different modes of existence in which God manifested himself. Sabellius was the chief spokesman for modalistic monarchianism....He said that in the Father, God revealed himself as Creator, in the Son as Redeemer, and in the Spirit as Sanctifier. Father, Son, and Spirit were therefore not three distinct persons but roles played by one person....Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were simply different modes of revelation or manifestations of the one true God. It is usually acknowledged that Sabellianism was the first major false teaching relating to the Godhead that gained a large following in the church.²⁵

The earliest struggle regarding the doctrine of the Trinity, then, involved the place or role of Christ in the Godhead. Walvoord states that, “Historically, the trinitarian doctrine turns largely on the question of whether the Son of God is eternal, whether He has the attribute of personality and the very nature of God. The problems of the doctrine of the Trinity largely arise in the studies of Christ in His incarnate state.”²⁶ He goes on to declare, “It is safe to say that no attack on the doctrine of the Trinity can be made without attacking the person of Christ. It is also true that no attack on the person of Christ can be made without attacking the doctrine of the Trinity, as they stand and fall together.”²⁷ Lightner outlines this time in church history, including the Arian heresy and the formulation of the orthodox position:

At this time the church was searching for a conception of Christ that would maintain 1) his true and full humanity, 2) his absolute deity, 3) the union of deity and humanity in one person, and 4) the necessary distinction between his deity and humanity in his

²⁴ Erickson, 332.

²⁵ Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, 40-41, 103.

²⁶ John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1969), 32.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

person. All the christological controversies from the earliest centuries to the present stem from a failure to include all of these truths in regard to Christ. Arianism was an attempt to explain the person of Christ. Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, taught that Christ was not eternal but the first and highest creature of God, superior to man but not equal with God....He believed Christ was of another substance from the Father. The Logos had a beginning at a point in time, having been created out of nothing before the world came into being. Athanasius, archdeacon of Alexandria, opposed Arius and Arianism. He championed the unity of God and insisted on the basis of Scripture that the Son was of the same divine essence as the Father. In 325 the Council of Nicaea convened to settle the dispute....The final statement regarding the Father and the Son was: “We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, begotten not made, being of one substance [homoousios] with the Father.”²⁸

Some degree of resolution was achieved at the Council of Nicaea concerning the place of Christ in the Godhead. The next major area of controversy arose concerning the place of the Holy Spirit. Lightner describes the struggles and disputes in the church concerning the Holy Spirit, which were similar to those surrounding the issue of Christ’s place in the Godhead.

Soon after the Nicene Council, the Macedonian sect arose, named after Macedonius, who believed the Holy Spirit was a creature and thus not God. He was opposed by defenders of the Spirit’s deity....They defended the Spirit as fully God by appealing to the attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence assigned to him in Scripture....In 381 the second council that met at Constantinople added to the Nicene Council’s brief reference to the Holy Spirit. The enlargement referred to the Spirit as “the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceedeth from the Father, who, with the Father and Son together, is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.”...The Council of Constantinople did not state that the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Son but said that he proceeded from the Father. The matter of the procession of the Spirit was an attempt to describe the Spirit’s precise relation to the other persons in the Godhead. That the Holy Spirit was fully divine was settled by the Constantinopolitan Creed, but a clearer statement regarding his relation to the Father was still lacking. The Western branch of the church added the filioque (“and the Son”) phrase at the Synod of Toledo (589) to the Constantinopolitan statement. Thus the West stated that it believed the Spirit of God proceeded from, and therefore was identical to, the Father and the Son in essence.²⁹

As Lightner has stated, the “procession” of the Holy Spirit was proposed as a way of defining the Spirit’s relationship to the Father and the Son, within the sometimes obscure realm of the Ontological Trinity. Since this area is somewhat unclear and open to multiple interpretations, the doctrine of the procession of the Holy Spirit was one of the factors that resulted in the so-called “Great Schism” between the Western Church and the Eastern Church. It

²⁸ Lightner, *Handbook of Evangelical Theology*, 103, 41.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 103-4.

was the doctrinal statement of the Western Church, however, that was held to be the orthodox statement of the Trinity from that point forward in history.

In his *De Trinitate* Augustine spoke for the Western branch of the church. He stressed the unity of essence and, at the same time, the trinity of persons. Each person, he said, possesses the entire essence. Other Latin theologians, such as Roscelinus and Gilbert of Poitiers, erred either on the side of God's unity or of his tripersonality. In his *Institutes* Calvin discussed the doctrine of the Trinity at some length. In essence he defended the view set forth at Nicaea and held by the early church.³⁰

Throughout church history to the present day there have been many erroneous statements of the Trinity and many heretical views, but it is essentially the Nicene statement of the doctrine of the Trinity that stands even today as the orthodox statement concerning the Godhead.

Theological Concepts of Trinitarianism

There are several essential concepts which must be maintained in any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity. If one or more of these elements is missing or stated erroneously, then the resulting formulation could not be considered an orthodox statement of the Trinity.

The Unity of the Godhead Both the Old Testament and the New Testament make it clear that God is One, rather than many. It is a fact that monotheism is the foundation of the Hebrew-Christian tradition. Any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity must acknowledge the unity of the Godhead.

The Distinction of Three Members Within the Godhead It is especially clear in the New Testament that God exists as three distinct persons -- the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity must acknowledge that there are three distinct subsistences within the Godhead.

The Personality or Personhood of Each of the Three Members of the Godhead It must be acknowledged that each member of the Godhead possesses the essential qualities of personality. Lightner defines and explains these elements:

The intellect, the emotions, and the will are the three basic elements of personality. As a self-conscious being, God possesses intellect (the ability to think rationally) and emotion (the ability to respond with feelings)...As a self-conscious being, God possesses will (the ability to act volitionally)...The Bible abounds with evidence that God possesses the constituent elements of personality; therefore, we can say on biblical ground that He is a Person, and not a force, or an "it," or even the "ground of being."³¹

Any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity must acknowledge that each member of the Godhead has the characteristics of personality or personhood.

³⁰ Ibid., 41-2.

³¹ Lightner, The God of the Bible and Other Gods, 87.

The Deity of Each of the Three Persons of the Godhead It must be affirmed that the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Erickson states this point by saying, “Each is qualitatively the same. The Son is divine in the same way and to the same extent as is the Father, and this is true of the Holy Spirit as well.”³² Any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity must acknowledge the deity of each of the persons of the Godhead.

The Threeness and the Oneness of God Do Not Constitute a Logical Contradiction The finite human mind often perceives a logical contradiction in the simultaneous oneness and threeness of God. But Erickson points out that even the laws of logic allow for this:

Although the orthodox interpretation of the Trinity seems contradictory (God is one and yet three), the contradiction is not real, but only apparent. A contradiction exists if something is A and not-A at the same time and in the same respect. Modalism attempted to deal with the apparent contradiction by stating that the three modes or manifestations of God are not simultaneous; at any given time, only one is being revealed. Orthodoxy, however, insists that God is three persons at every moment of time. Maintaining his unity as well, orthodoxy deals with the problem by suggesting that the way in which God is three is in some respect different from the way in which he is one.³³

Any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity must acknowledge that it is possible for God to be One and yet Three at the same time.

The Members of the Godhead are Eternal Not only is each member of the Godhead fully divine, but each member has always existed. Erickson states the point this way:

There have always been three, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and all of them have always been divine. One or more of them did not come into being at some point in time, or at some point become divine. There has never been any alteration in the nature of the Triune God. He is and will be what he has always been.³⁴

Any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity must acknowledge that each person of the Godhead has always existed as a member of the divine Trinity.

The Existence of Functional Subordination Within the Godhead There are many Scriptural examples where all three persons of the Godhead defer to one another. Gruenler illustrates these relationships in the following words:

All three persons of the Triune Community are deferring to one another: the Holy Spirit to the Son, the Son to the Father, the Father to the Son’s request, and Father and Son to the Spirit in honoring him as witness and truth bearer, making the circle of divine accessibility and hospitality complete. Jesus’ promise that the divine Triunity is graciously at the disposal of the believing community describes both the inner

³² Erickson, 337.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., 337-338.

relationships that denote the essential love and deference of the persons of the Trinity to one another, and the external relationship of the Triune Community to the disciples.³⁵ The three persons of the Godhead also subordinate themselves to each other to accomplish the purpose of their will, as described by Erickson:

The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean he is in any way inferior in essence. Each of the three persons of the Trinity has had, for a period of time, a particular function unique to himself. This is to be understood as a temporary role for the purpose of accomplishing a given end, not a change in his status or essence....The Son did not become less than the Father during his earthly incarnation, but he did subordinate himself functionally to the Father's will. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is now subordinated to the ministry of the Son (see John 14-16) as well as to the will of the Father, but this does not imply that he is less than they are.³⁶

Any orthodox statement of the doctrine of the Trinity must acknowledge the existence of functional subordination within the Godhead.

Principles of Interpretation

Before analyzing a specific Scripture passage to determine its implications for the Trinity, it is important to understand the principles of interpretation that must be followed when constructing a doctrine of systematic theology. Lightner has commented, "Evangelical Christians believe in the doctrine of the triune God because of the teaching of Scripture as a whole and not because of one particular passage of Scripture."³⁷ No theological doctrine should be based on a single passage of Scripture in isolation from the whole counsel of God. McQuilkin remarks, "It will not do to determine the meaning of a passage independent of the rest of Scripture....To study only one element of a revealed truth in a single passage may lead to a distortion of that truth. Inconsistencies, omissions, and wrong emphases may go undetected."³⁸ He goes on to say: "A good theologian is one who has taken into account all revealed truth about God and has related each part to a consistent whole....A specific doctrine or theme must be related to all other teaching that might affect that particular doctrine. In this way, the various areas of doctrine are combined into what might be called a *systematic* theology."³⁹

As has been previously stated, the Scriptures do not contain an explicit trinitarian statement but instead provide many isolated building blocks for the doctrine of the Trinity. The process of building a theological system is clearly described by Ramm:

A theological system is to be built up exegetically brick by brick. Hence the theology is no better than the exegesis that underlies it. The task of the systematic theologian is to commence with these bricks ascertained through exegesis, and build the temple of his

³⁵ Royce G. Gruenler, The Trinity in the Gospel of John, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1986), 113-114.

³⁶ Erickson, 338.

³⁷ Lightner, The God of the Bible and Other Gods, 90.

³⁸ Robertson McQuilkin, Understanding and Applying the Bible, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1992), 209, 219.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 220, 230, 232.

theological system....Every sentence has implications....All the important references will be treated exegetically. Then the individual references will be used to forge the unified Biblical doctrine of the subject matter....The theologian must use his texts in view of their context, and in view of their place in the Scriptures.⁴⁰

Erickson explains that the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is a task that will put the methods and discipline of systematic theology to the test. “Since the Trinity is not explicitly taught in Scripture, we will have to put together complementary themes, draw inferences from biblical teachings, and decide on a particular type of conceptual vehicle to express our understanding....Thus formulating a position on the Trinity is a genuine exercise in *systematic* theology.”⁴¹ In the second part of this study, John 15:26-27 will be analyzed to determine which of the essential elements of the doctrine of the Trinity are supported by this passage of Scripture.

Conclusion

Part one of this study of the doctrine of the Trinity has pointed out the difficulties involved in thinking through this issue, and it has presented many of the terms which have been developed throughout church history as aids in the process of defining and describing the Trinity. It is important to keep in mind each of the theological concepts that are taught in the Scriptures which must all be reconciled into a coherent doctrine: 1) the unity of the members of the Godhead; 2) the distinctiveness of the three members of the Godhead; 3) the fact that such unity and separateness do not constitute a logical contradiction; 4) the absolute deity, eternity, and personhood of each member of the Godhead; and 5) the fact that there are relationships within the Godhead involving functional subordination among the members. A correct conception of the doctrine of the Trinity is extremely important for our understanding of God, as well as because our beliefs concerning the Trinity will have important implications for many other areas of theology. Part two of this study will focus on an exegetical analysis of a passage of Scripture which sheds light on the relationship between the members of the Trinity.

⁴⁰ Bernard Ramm, Protestant Biblical Interpretation, (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 169, 170, 172, 178.

⁴¹ Erickson, 322.