

Understanding the Trinity (though it's really hard to do!)

Three affirmations are central to the historic doctrine of the Trinity:

1. there is but *one* God;
2. the Father, the Son and the Spirit is each fully and eternally God;
3. the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is each a distinct person.¹

Though the word 'Trinity', first used in its Greek form τριάς by *Theophilus of Antioch (c. AD 180), is not found in Scripture, Christian theologians have seen adumbrations of the doctrine in the biblical narratives; in the OT, for example, the appearance of the three men to *Abraham (Gen. 18) was held by the Fathers to foreshadow the revelation of the threefold nature of God. In the NT the most influential text was the reference to the three Persons in the baptismal formula at the end of Mt. (28:19), but there are other passages held to have Trinitarian overtones, such as the Pauline benediction of 2 Cor. 13:14. From the biblical language concerning Father, Son (or *Logos), and Spirit, Trinitarian doctrine developed, as the Church's expansion led to the need for reflection, confession, and dialogue.²

Old Testament

"The robust monotheism of the OT concedes only a few hints of plurality within the One God. Principal amongst these are:

1. the enigmatic plurals in God's own speech in Gn. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Is. 6:8;
2. occasions where two separate figures appear to be addressed as 'God' or 'the Lord' (Pss. 45:6–7; 110:1);
3. the 'divine' angelic trio who come to Abraham in Gn. 18:1–22;
4. the 'word' of God active in creation (Gn. 1:3; Ps. 33:6) and redemption (Is. 55:11);
5. the creative 'wisdom' figure of Pr. 8:22–31;
6. the Spirit of God, regularly portrayed as bringing God's revelation, wisdom and empowering to his people."³

Jesus

"In the fourth gospel, Jesus claims to be: the true Bethel (1:51—*i.e.* the place where heaven comes down to earth); the true temple (2:19–21); the source of the water of life and salvation (4:10, 14; 7:37–39); the true bread from heaven (6:25–59); the light of the world (8:12), and the life of the world to come (11:25). He preexists Abraham (8:58), he descends from the Father (3:13, 31–36), and he is so much one with the Father that to see and hear him is to see and hear the Father revealed (10:30, 38; 14:6–11; *cf.* 1:18). According to all four gospels, Jesus also anticipated ascension to the Father, and (in the Synoptics) that he would sit at his right hand (Mk. 14:62 par.)."⁴

"In Jn. 15:26, 16:6 and Lk. 24:49, Jesus promises he will send/commission the Spirit to the disciples from heaven, and in Jn. 14:16–23 he teaches that the Spirit will mediate to them the presence of the

¹ M. Turner and G McFarlane, "Trinity," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209. AD anno Domini.

² F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1652.

³ M. Turner and G McFarlane, "Trinity," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

⁴ M. Turner and G McFarlane, "Trinity," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

Father and the Son (*i.e.* it is through the promised Spirit that Jesus and the Father are to make their self-revealing dwelling with the disciples). As the phrase ‘Spirit of God’ was understood as referring to God himself in action (speaking, revealing, empowering, etc.), Jesus’ implicit claim to be Lord of the Spirit goes beyond the bounds of creaturely possibility.”⁵

New Testament

“Peter’s Pentecost speech chimes well with the teaching in the Johannine Farewell Discourses. The apostle affirms, ‘This Jesus ... being ... exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this which you see and hear’ (Acts 2:32–33). Jesus is hereby declared to fulfil the promise of Joel 2:28–32 that *God* would pour out his Spirit (*cf.* 2:17). Accordingly, in 2:36, 38, Peter concludes that Jesus has become one with ‘the Lord’ of Joel 2:32 (*cf.* Acts 2:21) on whose name people should call for salvation.”⁶

“Once Jesus is seen to give his character to the Spirit, and to exercise Lordship through the Spirit, the church can no longer be content with the Jewish understanding of the Spirit as the invisible inner life of a uni-personal Father, extending into the world in action and self-revelation (lest the person now acknowledged as the Son be made Lord of the Father). For the Spirit to mediate the Father and the Son, implies his own divine personhood. Accordingly, Paul can even posit sufficient personal ‘space’ between God the Father and the Spirit to say that God ‘knows the mind of the Spirit’ who intercedes through the saints (Rom. 8:27): *i.e.* the Father knows the Spirit in the same way as he knows the Son, in intimate unity yet with a real distinction between them. It is not surprising that Paul links Father, Son and Spirit in a triadic, indeed triune pattern as for example in Gal. 4:4–6, 1 Cor. 12:4–6, Rom. 1:1–4, Eph. 4:4–6 (*cf.* 2 Pet. 1:2), and in what are probably Paul’s most often repeated words, the closing ‘grace’ of 2 Cor. 13:13.”⁷

While no NT writer fully articulates a ‘doctrine of the trinity’, the implicitly Trinitarian thought-forms of the teaching of Paul and John (especially) provide much of the basis for that later formulation.”⁸

Scripture References

4 But when the set time had fully come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, 5 to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship. 6 Because you are his sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, the Spirit who calls out, “Abba, Father.” 7 So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir. Ga 4:4–7.

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God—2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. Romans 1:1–4

4 There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. 5 There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. 6 There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. 1 Co 12:4–6.

4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Ephesians 4:4–6

⁵ M. Turner and G McFarlane, [“Trinity,”](#) ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

⁶ M. Turner and G McFarlane, [“Trinity,”](#) ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

⁷ M. Turner and G McFarlane, [“Trinity,”](#) ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

⁸ M. Turner and G McFarlane, [“Trinity,”](#) ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

14 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

The Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity

First 4 centuries:

- Theologians such as Origen, Irenaeus and Tertullian essentially continued the biblical way of thinking and speaking with little change beyond highlighting the Son's identity as cosmic logos (word).
- Church Fathers met in 325 at the Council of Nicaea to set out an orthodox biblical definition concerning the divine identity. Here it was established that the Son is homoousios (of the same substance) with the Father. God, it was affirmed, is definitely Father and Son.
- Then in 381, at the Council of Constantinople, the divinity of the Spirit was affirmed with equal explicitness, due mainly to the efforts of the Cappadocian Fathers, Basil the Great, Gregory of Nazianzus and Gregory of Nyssa. At this point in the history of Christian faith, believers were given words in which to affirm their belief in God as one, because the Father, the Son and the Spirit have the same nature, as partakers of the single reality of divine being; they are fully but only distinct in the sense that each is a different *hypostasis* (person-in-relation) within that unitary nature. Thus, when talking about God's unity Christians have used *essence* (=being, or traditionally substance) and *nature* language. When referring to that which makes God three, however, we refer to the relations or personal identities of Father, Son and Spirit.⁹

Emphasis on defining the Trinity

In the Greek/Eastern church the emphasis has always been on the personal relations of Father, Son and Spirit, the Father being understood as the personal or relational 'origin' of the Son and Spirit. The personal identity of the Son and the Spirit is determined by their relation to the Father alone: the Son is 'begotten' of the Father; the Spirit 'proceeds' from the Father. The relational and communitarian dimension of the Eastern understanding has led to a more communal and interrelated culture.¹⁰

The Latin/Western church, following Augustine and ratified by Aquinas, has habitually begun its thinking with the One not the Three, and the usual starting point for Western Trinitarianism is the divine substance. Some commentators see in the Western interpretation the seeds of present-day individualism. Stress on the oneness of God, it is argued, leads to its individual and human counterpart.¹¹

In the 11th century, the East (Constantinople, now Istanbul) and West (Rome) church split over the doctrine of the Trinity. The Eastern church believed that the Holy Spirit comes to us through the Father, while the Western church maintained that the Holy Spirit comes to us through the Father and Jesus, the Son.

⁹ M. Turner and G McFarlane, "Trinity," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

¹⁰ M. Turner and G McFarlane, "Trinity," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

¹¹ M. Turner and G McFarlane, "Trinity," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

Theological errors regarding the Trinity

- **Monarchianism:** placing the Father as superior to Son and Spirit
- **Modalism:** In the early Church a form of unorthodox teaching on the Trinity which denied the permanence of the three Persons and maintained that the distinctions in the Godhead were only transitory.¹² Modalism pictured only one divine Person who acted successively as creator, redeemer, and sanctifier.¹³ Over-emphasizing the oneness.
- **Economic Trinity:** the distinctions between the Persons depended solely on their distinct functions (or 'economies') towards the created universe.¹⁴
- **Subordinationism:** Championed by the 3rd century theologian, Sabellius, is a teaching about the Godhead which regards either the Son as subordinate to the Father or the Holy Spirit as subordinate to both. By the standards of orthodoxy established in the 4th cent., such a position came to be regarded as clearly heretical in its denial of the co-equality of the Three Persons of the Trinity.¹⁵
- **Arianism:** Arius, a 3rd century priest (likely born in Libya) raised the problem of the Trinity and monotheism. In order to defend God's radical oneness, he argued that the Son was created. This was rejected, however, on the grounds that it undermined the eternal identity of God as Father: if there was a time when the Son was not, then God's real identity cannot be that of Father. Ultimately, on Arius's view, we do not know God's real identity.¹⁶
- **Unitarianism:** A type of Christian thought and religious observance which rejects the doctrines of the Trinity and the Divinity of Christ in favour of the unipersonality of God. Unitarians have no formal creed. Originally their teaching was based on scriptural authority, but J. *Martineau (1805–1900) in England and T. *Parker (1810–60) in the USA led the way from biblical to rational Unitarianism. Hence reason and conscience have now become the criteria of belief and practice for Unitarians. Owing to their belief in the abiding goodness of human nature, they are critical of the orthodox doctrines of the *Fall, the *Atonement, and eternal punishment.¹⁷

¹² F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1104.

¹³ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1653.

¹⁴ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1652–1653. cent. century.

¹⁵ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1563.

¹⁶ M. Turner and G McFarlane, "Trinity," ed. D. R. W. Wood et al., *New Bible Dictionary* (Leicester, England; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 1209.

¹⁷ F. L. Cross and Elizabeth A. Livingstone, eds., *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 1671.