

TRINITY: DOES IT MATTER?
IMPLICATIONS FOR INCARNATIONAL WITNESS
IN THE ARAB WORLD

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“Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.”
Deuteronomy 6:4

1 Introduction

One of the key theological differences in our understanding of the Godhead is the Christian doctrine of Trinity. However, in an age where people say that all religions are equally valid, it is difficult to adhere to an orthodox Christian faith. Comments like, "There are many ways to God," or "You Christians believe in three gods, not just one," cause believers to consider why they believe this doctrine. Why do we believe in a Triune God? Does it matter? What are the implications of the doctrine of the trinity for the Christian?

2 The witness of Scripture

The OT describes a Godhead that communicates with and relates to each other, one that may manifest itself in various distinct "persons". At creation, God speaks as if in conversation, using the plural form, "Let us make man..." (Gen 1:26) References to the "Angel of the Lord" in the Old Testament are thought to represent the pre-incarnate Jesus Christ who, although visible to people, speaks in terms that are ascribed to God, and accepts worship and allegiance from man. The Spirit of the Lord is likewise mentioned in the Old Testament.

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The fullness of the Godhead as three persons in one is only complete in the New Testament revelation. Here the person of Jesus Christ is the full, complete manifestation and incarnation of the second person of the Godhead; "The Word become flesh and dwelt among us", as the apostle John says in his gospel prologue. Several key New Testament texts point out the distinctiveness of three persons of the Godhead, appearing together in space and time. One example is at the baptism of Jesus. The Son is baptized, the Spirit is present as a dove, and the Father speaks (Mat 3:16 and Luke 3:22). The Trinity is also inferred in the language of the Great Commission in Mat 28 that speaks of baptizing disciples in the "name" (singular) of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (three); three persons but one name.

3 Practical implications

But even if Scripture attests to a Triune God and we affirm this belief, does any of this matter? And if so why? Although the term Trinity itself is not explicitly used in Scripture, the teaching was accepted by the early Church, formulated in creeds (usually in response to heresy), as the most accurate understanding of the God of Scripture.

3.1 Trinitarianism matters because it offers the explanation of the complexity of our God and is distinct from other world religions.

Christians are monotheists, but we believe in a God who reveals Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This is unique and in contrast to other faiths: Jesus Christ is unique, the fullness of God dwelling in human flesh.

One practical application is that we relate to all persons of the Godhead in our salvation experience. The New Testament talks about the role of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in regard to Christ's mediating and saving work through intercession. Heb 7:25 makes very clear, "Therefore he is able to save completely those who

come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.” The Apostle Paul in Romans speaks of a similar role for the Holy Spirit in praying for the saints, “In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express. And he who searches our hearts knows the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints in accordance with God's will. (Rom 8:26, 27)

The apostle Paul's prayer in Eph 3 gives a rich image of how the Triune God saves and sanctifies and fills us. Notice that Paul is very clear who he is praying to (the Father), and what he is expecting of each person of the Godhead in his prayer.

For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom his whole family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the saints, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God. Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen. (Eph 3:14-21)

3.2 The Trinity matters also because it speaks to our need for community and connection with other believers.

Many churches recognize the role of community and small groups in church life and ministry. To some this is just an effective and pragmatic way to reach post-moderns or other specific groups, and meet people's needs. Some have said that many theologians in the early 20th century explored the possibilities of Trinitarian doctrine for connecting God more closely to the world and its sufferings, as well as for constructing human models of community. The resulting

forms of what is often called "social Trinitarianism" began to influence evangelicals late in the twentieth century, as western individualism came under ever more intense criticism. The "post-modern" urge to seek community prodded pastoral accounts of divine fellowship as not only the motivation but also the model for such human communion. Forms of the social emphasis vary widely, as do the ways theologians apply it to the church and society, but at times the appeal to relationality itself seems ubiquitous." (Treier and Lauber, page 8)

However at the very basic level, it reflects on the fact that we are created in the image of God, with capacity for conversation, relationship, and community. Tim Chester states it succinctly when he says, "We were made in the image of the Triune God. We find our identity through relationships." When we crave for intimacy and community, for relationship, it is because God has made us that way, it reflects the "community" and "oneness" of the Triune God. (Chester)

4 Possible apologetic approaches

Obviously Trinitarianism as a theological construct is a contentious issue in many settings. To the outsider, the postulation of one God revealing Himself in three Persons is difficult to grasp and explain sufficiently and adequately in words. David Shenk has properly noted, "It is impossible to adequately express the mystery of God as Trinity. All examples of what we mean do not seem quite right." (Kateregga and Shenk, page 118). Approaches to elucidate and defend this tenet of faith often rest on rational arguments, possibly extended by analogy.

A rational argument would generally require the acceptance of Scripture as an authoritative source and divine revelation. This line of reasoning and defense may be as follows. If we accept the Bible as an authoritative Holy book, then:

1. We come to understand that the God of the Bible reveals Himself progressively over time.
2. This progression culminates in the final Incarnate Word, Jesus, the Son (Heb 1:1).
3. Scriptural evidence points to the manifestation of God in three persons, and we have passages where all three Persons are present (baptism, Great Commission in Mat 28, etc).

Obviously, not only is Trinitarianism a stumbling block, but the deity of Christ as well. Furthermore, differing exegetical assumptions make what appear to be Trinitarian passages "debatable". One example is in John 16 where the other Comforter is the sent Holy Spirit of God, but in Islam would be understood as Mohammed.

The rational approach to witness may also highlight the fact that God is much more complex and beyond what the human mind can comprehend. This line of reasoning may try to use analogies that compare the Godhead with a three-dimensional sculpture that one tries to describe using one or two-dimensional media. The complexity of the Godhead becomes limited and constrained by what the mind and words can describe and ascribe. Other analogies such as three forms/states of water (ice-solid, water-liquid, gas), or an egg comprising of shell, yolk and egg white have their limitations. One erudite physicist has used the analogy of light being particle, wave, and energy to describe the Triune God. Most analogies tend to be limited in describing three Persons in relationship, co-existing in time and space, co-equal, yet functionally distinct. Again quoting Shenk, "Christians recognize that it is unwise to attempt to explain God. We need to remember that no analogy concerning God is exactly right. No one has seen God. He remains a mystery. Our attempts to explain God are never adequate. The term Trinity is an example of the inability of human language to adequately express the mystery of God who is one..." (Kateregga and Shenk, page 118). Taken to an extreme, over-reliance on forms that we can comprehend

may be regarded as a subtle way to fashion God in man's image/imagination, and may be close to violating the spirit of the first commandment although the image is verbal, not stone or wood. Perhaps it is more prudent to accept the mystery, and rely on Biblical descriptions of God, manifest as Father, as Creator, as obedient Son and Savior, as indwelling Spirit, guide and comforter for believers.

As a result of the difficulty in communicating this concept through words or word pictures, we may choose not to confront this issue in our witness, but rather to avoid it or to aim for a middle ground, an apologetic detente that accommodates disagreement but does not lead to resolution.

5 An incarnational approach

Is it possible for a new approach to communicate this theological concept - one that goes beyond words or imagery? If one of the tasks of the cross-cultural messenger is an incarnational witness, I would submit that in our Christian living we need to highlight the effect and practical outworking of our Trinitarian beliefs. This could be broadly understood in two main themes/areas: first, in how we relate to a Triune God, and secondly how our lives reflect a Triune God. We will examine these two aspects in some further detail below.

5.1 Relating to a Triune God in our spiritual practice

As noted earlier, the apostle Paul's teaching and prayers often reflect his understanding of the Triune God and how we relate and mature in Him. In the book of Jude we also see that the Triune Godhead is important to our growth and maturity as believers, as the Church. "But you, dear friends, build yourselves up in your most holy faith and pray in the Holy Spirit. Keep yourselves in God's love as you wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to bring you to eternal life." (Jude 1:20-21) What would this look like in our lives? How would we communicate this to Arab Muslims? The Father, Son and Spirit work in the life of the Christian believer in stark contrast to

what they have in Islam. They have the prophet and their writings, but we have a living God who still relates to us, working in us, forming Christ in us.

5.1.1 Prayer to a Trinitarian God - how does it look different?

Another area is in how we relate to God in/through our prayers. If we believe in Trinity, how does this affect our understanding of prayer? How do we pray to the Father? Why in the Name of the Son? How does the Spirit interact with us in our prayers? I have found that often there is confusion in how we pray, and by this I mean both in public and private settings. If we as Christians cannot keep the Godhead clear in our mind and pray to a one Person God, this is confusing to believers and non-believers. I have witnessed prayers offered to the Father without invoking Jesus Name, and other prayers to Jesus the Son in His own name. Are we able to model this such that it becomes clear to Muslims should they observe our prayer life? I am concerned that if we are not clear in this, perhaps even other Christians will be led to believe that Trinity is a good concept, but practically speaking we believe in one God (a monad), just like other religions, same-same. When Christians pray, we pray to three persons, a Triune God. Sometimes our prayers may be primarily or exclusively to one person of the Godhead (to the Father, or the Son, or the Spirit). I would propose, because we pray to a Triune God, we should be careful in our language and be cognizant of the person of the Godhead to whom we are praying. For example, when we are giving thanks for Christ's work on the cross on our behalf, we pray to the Son, not the Father. We thank the Father for sending the Son and the Spirit. As Bruce Ware points out, 'We may encourage our children, especially, to open their prayers with, "Dear Jesus," despite the fact that Jesus said to pray "Our Father in heaven..." Perhaps we do not think about prayer as we should because we do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity. As Jesus taught us, we should pray to the Father through the Son. Jesus Christ is the mediator. He is the one through whom we address the Father. He is the one who brings us

access to the Father. Our prayers bring spiritual benefit only when we pray in his name. And prayers that bring fruit in the kingdom are those offered in the power of the Spirit. We pray as the Spirit prompts and urges us to pray. Scriptural examples for prayers are generally (almost exclusively) addressed to the Father, with some directed to Jesus, like the prayer of martyr Stephen in Acts 7:59. There is no biblical injunction, or instruction, or instance of prayer directed to/at the Holy Spirit; rather we are told to pray in the Spirit (Eph 6:18; Jude 1:20), and that the Spirit intercedes for us in prayer. (Rom 8:26-27) So the pattern of Christian prayer in Scripture is praying to the Father, through the Son, in the (power of the) Spirit. "To pray aright, we need a deep appreciation for the doctrine of the Trinity." (Ware, page 18)

5.1.2 Praying in Jesus' name

When we pray, it is critical that we understand the power of the name of Jesus, especially in our Arab world context. Scripture instructs us to pray in Christ's name. (John 14:13, 15:16, 16:23-24) If we offer to pray for others, especially for healing, we must link the request and possible outcome with His Name, the Name of the Son. We have the promise of Christ and it is based in the fact that all authority is given to Him (Mat 28:18). One would not want to be overly dogmatic or legalistic about this practice, but living out Trinitarianism and its implication in our prayer lives is important to our witness among Arab Muslims.

5.1.3 Accepting and living with complexity and diversity

Another application would be in how we handle complexity and mystery. In contrast to simplicity and reductionism, Trinitarianism accepts complexity and diversity as a mark of our Creators hand. We do not need to reason, or rationalize away complex and thorny theological problems. We can live with mystery, of not knowing, and within the limitations of our minds. Yet ours should not be a similar fatalism that is characteristic of Islam, but rather awe and

wonder mixed with humility. We understand that God has chosen to reveal Himself, and desires to be known and understood, yet He is beyond our understanding and comprehension. We do not live in fear or apprehension, but in trust, faith, and hope. So, we can live with hope and peace even when our lives are complicated and we cannot figure things out. We know the character of our God, and He is loving, good and can be trusted. As the contemporary song "Trust His Heart" (by Babby Mason) puts it:

God is too wise to be mistaken,
God is too good to be unkind,
So when you don't understand,
When you don't see His plan,
When you can't trace His hand,
Trust His heart.

5.2 Reflecting a Triune God in our spiritual community

In addition to intentionally and consciously living in relationship to a Triune God, we also pattern our lives according to Trinitarian principles.

5.2.1 Living out Christian community - ours vs. theirs

Jesus' high priestly prayer in John 17 talks about the witness of the unity of believers that is clear to the onlooking world. Jesus prayed that the believers would be one, reflecting the unity in the Godhead. The mark of the New Testament church was one of shared life, to which God added to their numbers. In the Arab world context, community and belonging are high values and needs. When Christian community is non-existent or neglected, we disobey and deny the teaching of the New Testament Scripture. But the need to live in community transcends pragmatic, felt needs and Biblical injunction: it also is core to who God is and in whose image we are created. We don't need to live in community because it feels right or good and meets our social needs, as much as we are created with that innate desire. God lives in "community" as three in one. So if and

when Biblical Christian community offers something deeper, richer, and more genuine to those who have imitation "community", it presents an opportunity to talk about the Godhead and our witness. Non-believers often marvel at the depth of relationship and fellowship among Christians who have just been introduced, and will comment that there is a level of interaction that is entirely foreign to them, even among their closest friends. Increasingly, many find that the communities they belong to are wanting, and they long for true unconditional love, belonging, acceptance, and safety. Even when Christian community is marred by our own sin, shortcomings and imperfection, it still can stand in marked contrast to what they have experienced.

Tim Chester also points out that Trinitarian community stands in contrast to individualism and collectivism or socialism; "Just as there is both unity and plurality in God, so communal identity should not suppress individual identity and individual identity should not neglect communal identity. Through our union with Christ by faith, Christians are being remade in the image of the Triune God. The Church should be a community with unity without uniformity, and diversity without division." (Chester).

5.2.2 Community with threefold mark of presence, words and action

The Trinitarian community manifests itself in many ways, but perhaps one formulation would be presence, words and activity. True community must encompass all these facets of relating. There can be no community without giving of time and one's presence; no relationship without conversation and words; no koinonia without action and movement. The Godhead does not go about in isolation, each busy about one's tasks and activities. In Scripture we see several instances where all three Persons are present, speaking, active in one place. Is our community characterized by regularly meeting together and doing "life" together? (Acts 2:42; Heb 10:25) Are our times together marked by conversation and words of encouragement,

honoring God, stirring each other up to good works? (Col 3:16; Heb 10:24) Is our fellowship marked by godly action and activism? (John 5:17)

5.2.3 Relationships characterized by equality with submission and interdependence

Related to community is the practice of equality and submission within our relationships. Within the Godhead, there is equality yet functional diversity. There is submission of the desire and will of the Son to the Father's purpose. In most of our context of ministry, power and position are desired and grasped. What would happen when leadership in the Christian community is marked by service, humility, and the mind of Christ in Phil 2?

Bruce Ware says it this way, "...marvel at the social relationship of joy, fulfillment, love and unity among the members of the Trinity. There is no bickering, no fighting, and no disputing who has the right to do such and such. There is nothing but mutual support for the respective roles that each eternally has. And in those differing job descriptions for the three divine Persons there is unity and harmony of purpose, joy, peace, love, fulfillment, and full satisfaction. We must here resist the lie of our culture that says the only way we can exist happily together is if we always and only acknowledge everyone as exactly the same. Unity is not sameness, and harmony requires differences working together. If we want a wonderful example of this, we need only look at the Trinity. We should be astonished that while there is sameness in terms of the identical divine nature possessed fully by all three, there also is differentiation in terms of individual Person and relationship and role. But in and through both the sameness of nature and the distinction of Person and role, there is joyous harmony, peace and love within the Trinity." (Ware, page 130)

These need to be modeled in our marriages, families, our workplace, and our churches. When others see that as Christians our worth is not defined primarily by our roles, our gender, background,

ethnicity, nationality, but because we are all made in the image of God, it is a powerful witness. When the gathered Church is diverse and from varied backgrounds, living and working together, considering others first, it is not something that can be manufactured through human efforts; it needs explanation, and only the Gospel and the power of the Cross can offer an adequate explanation.

6 Conclusion

Our task then should be not only to have intellectual explanations of the Trinity that are accurate and informing, but we need incarnational expression that is attractive and inviting. Our goal is not only for incisive theological constructs that are irrefutable, but also for supernatural relational community that is irresistible.

In 1826, Reginald Heber wrote the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*, for Trinity Sunday while he was Vicar of Hodnet, Shropshire, England. Though much of the Arab world today is characterized by verse 3 which says, "Though the eye of sinful man Thy glory may not see," may all the words one day be true of indigenous believers of the Arab World as they worship with all the saints above and below.

Holy, holy, holy! Lord God Almighty!
All Thy works shall praise Thy Name, in earth, and sky, and sea;
Holy, holy, holy; merciful and mighty!
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!

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