

Review: Trinitarian Heresies

Arianism
Subordinationism
Modalism
Partialism

Unity, diversity, and mystery

Heresy: an attempt to remove the mystery by emphasizing unity to the neglect of plurality or vice versa.

“The temptation is to soften some aspect of the mystery in order to make it more comprehensible.” (James Dolezal)

Church Response: 325 Nicaea | 381 Constantinople

Putting grammar to groanings

Trinitarianism 101

- Is it biblical?
- Does it make sense?
- Does it matter?

Why the Trinity is Essential

1. It is the most important distinguishing doctrine of Christianity.
2. Our justification & sanctification cannot be rightly understood apart from it.
3. Our understanding and practice of worship and prayer is dependent upon it.
4. Our understanding and thus practice of community is dependent upon it.
5. We need the trinity to understand how God can be loving by His very nature.

To think of “God” as something other than a Trinity is, not only heresy, but idolatry. The greatest command is to love God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength. If we are to follow this command it means we must love the *right* God.

So not only must we believe that God is Trinity, *we must mean the same thing by the word “Trinity” as millions of Christians who have gone before us.*

What do we mean when we say God is a “Trinity?”

God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God. (Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology)

Three foundational truths for Trinitarianism

1. There is only one God
2. God is three persons
3. Each person is fully God

There is one and *only* one God

- *In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.* (Genesis 1:1)
- *To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him.* (Deuteronomy 4:35)
- *Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.* (Deuteronomy 6:4)
- *that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other.* (1 Kings 8:60)
- *“You are my witnesses,” declares the LORD, “and my servant whom I have chosen, that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor shall there be any after me.* (Isaiah 43:10)
- *Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god.* (Isaiah 44:6)
- *I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me...* (Isaiah 45:5)
- *Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that “an idol has no real existence,” and that “there is no God but one.”* (1 Corinthians 8:4)
- *You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!* (James 2:19)

God is three, distinct persons

- “The whole counsel of God, concerning all things necessary for His own glory, man’s salvation, faith, and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture...” (The Westminster Confession of Faith)

- *And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:16–17)*
- *Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit... (Matthew 28:19)*
- *But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. (John 15:26)*
- *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)*
- *according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood: May grace and peace be multiplied to you. (1 Peter 1:2)*
- *There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:4–6)*

Each person is fully God (not a third of God or part of God)

- The Son
 - *The LORD says to my Lord: "Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool." (Psalm 110:1)*
 - *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)*
 - *Then he said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe." Thomas answered him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:27–28)*
 - *For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:16–17)*
 - *For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell... (Colossians 1:19)*
 - *For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily... (Colossians 2:9)*
 - *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power... (Hebrews 1:3)*
 - *But of the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom..." (Hebrews 1:8)*

○ Unity	○ Diversity
○ <i>...the Word was God</i>	○ <i>...the Word was with God...</i>
○ <i>This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God. (John 5:18)</i>	○ <i>So Jesus said to them, “Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise. (John 5:19)</i>
○ <i>I and the Father are one. (John 10:30)</i>	○ <i>You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. (John 14:28)</i>

- The Spirit

- *Where shall I go from your Spirit? Or where shall I flee from your presence? (Psalm 139:7)*
- *But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God.” (Acts 5:3–4)*
- *these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Corinthians 2:10–11)*
- *Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Corinthians 3:17)*

Summary: There is one and only one God. He eternally exists as three persons. Each person is fully God. | If you leave out one of those sentences, you tumble off the cliff of orthodoxy into the valley of heresy.

What do we mean by words like nature, essence, and person?

- When we say that God is one nature and three persons, what do those terms mean?
- “try to explain it, and you’ll lose your mind; but try to deny it, and you’ll lose your soul.”
- “We are speaking of God, what marvel if thou do not comprehend? For if thou comprehend, He is not God.” (Augustine of Hippo)

- Our goal isn't to understand fully, but it is to understand truly.
- "Though we cannot comprehend him as he is, we must be careful to not fancy him to be what he is not." (Stephen Charnock)
- So what do we mean by nature and what do we mean by person?

What is meant by nature?

one nature (from Latin: natura), or one being (from Greek: ousia), or one substance (from Latin: substantia), or one essence (from Latin: essentia).

"why argue about names when the words amount to the same meaning." (Gregory of Nazianzus)

What all the Fathers meant was that there was only one God. There are not three different gods. Whatever the difference between Father, Son, and Spirit, it is not a difference of being or nature. So when it comes to His oneness, we can use words like nature, being, essence, or substance, as long as we understand what is meant.

What is substance?

- By substance, theologians mean an individual existence.
- God is not merely one being sharing in a larger category of God-ness. Rather, He IS the category. He is the only one or thing that is actually God.
- God is not a genus of which there are three species. He is not a species of which there are three separate individuals.
- Substance means an individual thing.
- The simplicity of God | All that is in God is God.
 - "All that is in him is himself." (John Owen)
 - "Whatever is in God is the divine essence." (Thomas Aquinas)

What is meant by persons?

"A subsistence within the divine essence." (John Calvin)

"The divine essence subsisting in an especial manner." –John Owen

"The personal properties of unbegottenness, filiation, and spiration." –Thomas Aquinas

"A relative property" –William Ames

the Church is trying to say that there is some sort of real distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit. This distinction is not just apparent, BUT this distinction is not related to substance, essence, or being.

“not in order to say precisely [what we mean], but in order not to be reduced to silence.”
(Augustine)

We have to say something. We know that there is a distinction. But we also know that the distinction is not in regards the essence or nature. So we use the word person.

So what is a person in trinitarian terms: its simply the theological shorthand for the way that we describe the difference between Father, Son, and Spirit in contrast to God’s essence.

“We also condemn all heresies and heretics who teach that the Son and Holy Spirit are God in name only, and also that *there is something created and subservient, or subordinate to another in the Trinity*, and that there is something unequal in it, a greater or a less, something corporeal or corporeally conceived, something different with respect to character *or will*.”
(Second Helvetic Confession)

person refers to relations subsisting in the godhead.

In other words, what is unique about each member of the trinity, each person, is the way that they relate to each other.

- The Father is unbegotten.
- The Son is eternally generated or begotten of the Father.
- The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.
- The Father alone is unbegotten. The Son alone is begotten of the Father. The Spirit alone proceeds from the Father and the Son.
- Except for the personal property by which each is distinguished from the other, they are one in every respect. What distinguishes the Father from the Son and the Spirit is paternity, begottenness, and procession.

So there is a real difference. Not just a difference in name. But that difference is not of substance or attributes in that substance. The difference is relational.

- The Father is unbegotten, He is the fount, the Father.
- The Son is eternally begotten, not in time, but eternally.
- The Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Unity, diversity, and mystery

- There is unity: God is one. One in nature, essence, or being.
- There is diversity. God is three. Three in person. Distinguished by paternity, begottenness, and procession.
- What exactly all of that means and how exactly that works is shrouded in mystery.

Mystery and Humility

Deuteronomy 29:29 *The secret things belong to the LORD our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.*

How does the humble person respond to that which is revealed?

How does the humble person respond to the secret things?

- *Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! (Romans 11:33)*

It is great lewdness, and also insufferable arrogancy to come to the Word of God, as conceiting already that whatever thou readest must either by thee be understood, or of itself fall to the ground as a senseless error. (John Bunyan)

Recommended Resources

The Trinity: Scott Swain

All That is in God: James Dolezal

Delighting in the Trinity: Michael Reeves

The Deep Things of God: Fred Sanders

Simply Trinity: Matthew Barrett