

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY THE TRINITY?

The Holy Scriptures make no attempt to prove the existence of God - His eternal presence is always taken for granted: the opening verse simply states "In the beginning God", and there the matter rests. The created universe (Rom. 1:20), human conscience (Rom. 2:15), and the Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16) bear united testimony to the reality of God and our responsibility towards Him.

The early nations, however, quickly turned away from the revealed knowledge of the one eternal God. Some became "Polytheists" and followed numerous "gods" of their own making; others became "Pantheists" and declared that nature was God; others again became "Atheists" and said there was no God at all:- "professing themselves to be wise, they became fools" (Romans 1:19-22).

Over against the "foolishness" of human reasoning, however, the Word of God bears witness to two vital facts concerning the nature and being of God.

1. His Unity - God Is One

The unity and Oneness of God is revealed more particularly in the Old Testament, though it is clearly taught throughout the whole of the Scriptures. Note these verses:

- "The Lord he is God; there is none else beside Him"(Deut. 4:35).
- "The Lord our God is one Lord"(Deut. 6:6).
- "There is no God but me"(Deut. 32:39).
- "I am God and there is none else"(Is. 45:22).
- "There is none other God but one"(1 Cor. 8:4).
- "To know thee the only true God"(John 17:3).
- "God is one"(1 Tim. 2:5)(Gal. 3:20).

2. His Tri-Unity or Trinity - God is Three

Thus far we have had no difficulty; that God should be "One" is both logical and reasonable. But when we turn to the pages of the New Testament we are brought face to face with the vital fact that the Lord Jesus Christ, though existing as a real man upon earth with a distinct personality of his own, yet claimed in unmistakable words equality with the one eternal God of the O.T. Thus:

- "Men should honour the Son even as they honour the Father"(John 5:23).
- "I came down from heaven"(John 6:38).
- "I proceedeth forth and came from God"(John 8:42).
- "Before Abraham was, I am"(John 8:58).
- "I and my Father are one"(John 10:30).
- "I am the Son of God"(John 10:36).
- "The Father is in me and I in Him"(John 10:38).
- "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father"(John 14:9).
- "I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last"(Rev. 22:13).

The Lord did not merely **claim** equality with God, but He **proved** his claims by the works He performed. He raised the dead and cast out demons, walked on water and stopped the wind from blowing, forgave sins and accepted divine worship. He Himself, however, was the greatest miracle of all - He was born of a virgin and arose from the dead by His own power and right - the final and greatest "sign" of His essential deity (Matt. 12:39-40). See also John 20:30, 31.

It was not to be expected that his claims to deity should go unchallenged and from the very first he ran into violent conflict with his foes; "Who art thou?" (John 2:28), "Where is thy Father?" (John 8:19), "Whom makest thou thyself?" (John 8:53), they asked in their dilemma. The correct answer to the Lord's questions "What think ye of Christ, whose Son is he?" (Matt. 22:42), "Whom say ye that I am?" (Matt. 16:15) became (and still is) the test of true discipleship.

The question is vital; for if He was not all he claimed to be, perfect God as well as perfect man, then he could not have taken the place of Redeemer and Mediator acceptable to both God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). The efficacy of his atoning death and hence the eternal destiny of our souls rests upon the deity of our Saviour for **none but the eternal God could impart eternal life**. "If ye believe not that I am he" declared the Lord, "ye shall die in your sins (John 8:24). It is not to be wondered at that the powers of darkness have contested this fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith for over 1900 years.

THE PEOPLE as a whole were frankly puzzled. "Is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know?" (John 6:42) some said. "He is a good man" (John 7:12) said others; "No", guessed others, "He is John the Baptist come alive again, or Elias, or Jeremais, or one of the Prophets" (Matt. 16:14).

HIS ENEMIES, however, were in no doubt as to the meaning of his claims; in bitter hatred they took up stones to kill him, declaring, "for a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy and because that thou, being a man, **makest thyself** God" (John 10:33); "The Jews sought the more to kill him because he ... said that God was his Father **making himself equal with God**" (John 5:18). Ultimately it became the main point of issue that brought about his death (Luke 22:70, 71; John 19:7).

HIS DISCIPLES were clear and definite in their decision, "We believe and are sure that thou art the Christ, **the Son of the Living God**" (John 6:69; Matt. 16:16). So likewise the Ethiopian, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God" (Acts 8:37), and Saul, "He preached Christ that he is the Son of God" (Acts 9:20).

DEMONS fell down before him declaring, "We know thee who thou art, the Holy one of God".

PROPHETS of the O.T. foretold his deity.

"Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name IMMANUEL" (Isaiah 7:14; Matt. 1:22, 23).

"For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: . . . and his name shall be called . . . **THE MIGHTY GOD, THE EVERLASTING FATHER**" (Isaiah 9:6).

"Prepare ye the way of the Lord (Jehovah)" (Isaiah 40:3). This verse is applied to the Lord in Mark 1:2, Matt. 3:3, Luke 17:6.

"The Lord (Jehovah), whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the Covenant (Christ) (Mal. 3:1). (This messenger, or Angel, of the Covenant is no doubt the "Angel of the Lord" who appeared to Hagar in Gen. 16:7 and to Moses in Exodus 3:2 and who in both cases is identified with God himself.)

NEW TESTAMENT WRITERS add their united testimony:

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

"Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever" (Rom. 9:5).

"God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself" (2 Cor. 5:19).

"Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God" (Phil. 2:5, 6).

"Who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature" (Col. 1:15).

"For in Him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9).

"Great is the mystery of godliness: God was manifest in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16; 1 Tim. 1:17).

"Who being the brightness of His glory, and the express image of His person" (Heb. 1:3).

"But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever" (Heb. 1:8).

"And thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: ... they shall be changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail" (Heb. 1:10-12). (These last verses are a quotation from Ps 102:26 where they refer to Jehovah but here they apply to Christ.)

NOTE

a. The above verses are all taken from the Authorised Version (the Bible most commonly used). There may be differences in translation in other versions but such will not affect the truth here stated.

b. The so-called Jehovah's Witnesses are very fond of pointing out to the uninstructed that in certain verses of the Greek N.T. the article "the" is omitted so they substitute (quite wrongly) an "a" in its place; for example, in John 1:1 they refer to the Word (Christ) as being "a" God, and in Luke 1:35 He is called "a" Son of God.

This, however, is simply a peculiarity of Greek grammar and the absence of the "the" (in Greek) merely serves to emphasize the **nature** of the subject in question, thus:

"The Word was not "the" God or "a" God but "God" in the sense that the nature or character of the Word was the nature or character of "God". So in Luke 1; That "Holy Thing" which was to be born to Mary was to be called, not "a" Son of God or "the" Son of God but "Son of God", indicating that the "sonship" or nature of "that Holy thing" was to be of GOD - not of MAN. (There are, however, several verses where the article "the" is used before the title "Son of God".)

c. This leads naturally to another question. What is meant by the term "Son of God"? Does this imply that the Lord Jesus was inferior to the Father or that he "became" the Son of God at his birth or by creation in some eternal age of the past? How could he be the "Son" of God and yet one with his Father?

This is simply explained. The word "Son" is a translation of the Greek word "Huios". But this word does not (as in English) suggest birth, natural descent, or parentage. It always has reference to the origin, nature, character, position, and dignity of the person referred to; thus (as explained above) Christ was "Son" of God only in the sense that he bore the very essence and nature of God - it implies **equality** with God not **inferiority**. He did not "become" the Son by birth or creation but ever was the Son by inherent right and position.

d. Some are troubled by the use of such terms as "begotten", "first begotten", and "first-born", all of which are applied to the Lord.

"**Begotten**" in John 1:14; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9 is a Greek noun and means unique, greatly beloved, and does not suggest birth or generation.

"**Begotten**" in Heb. 1:5; 5:5, "This day have I begotten Thee", is a Greek verb meaning to create or bring into being but it here refers to the resurrection of the Lord as is proved by comparing Acts 13:33. He was the first to enter heaven in an immortal body - a new creation.

"First Begotten" and **"First Born"** are translations of the same Greek word (Heb. 1:6; Rev. 1:5; Rom. 8:20; Col. 1:15, 18) and mean pre-eminent, foremost, in time, position, authority, dignity, etc., and do not refer to an actual beginning of existence.

Thus does the Word of God establish the Deity of the Son.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

A deeper mystery, however, now confronts us for the Bible clearly teaches the existence of a third divine "Person" who is co-equal with the Father and the Son - namely, **the Holy Spirit**. He is "the Spirit of truth which proceedeth from the **Father**" (John 15:26) and yet also "the Spirit of the Son" (Gal. 4:6).

It was the "Spirit of God (who) moved upon the face of the waters (Gen. 1:2), and who "moved" the writers of the Word of God (1 Peter 1:11; 2 Peter 1:21). He knows "the things of God" (1 Cor. 2:11) and is directly referred to as "God" in Acts 5:3-4.

What then are we to say to these things?

Some (like the Mormons) conclude that the Father, Son and Spirit are three distinct "Gods" each of equal authority.

Others (like the so-called Jehovah's Witnesses) teach that the Son is not equal with God but merely a divine being created by and inferior to the Father, the Spirit being merely "breath".

Others have taught that the Son and Spirit were merely parts or attributes of the Father having no "personality" of their own.

Others again say that the Son was a mere man having no pre-existence or divinity at all.

All of these "theories", however, are the result of man's attempt to "explain" something they cannot understand. The only reasonable attitude to take to this "apparent" mystery is to accept the obvious fact that there is ONE God who manifests Himself in THREE separate persons, each of whom is one in being with the other co-equal and co-eternal. Because the thought of a triune God is beyond our finite reason it is not necessarily "contrary to reason".

There are many passages of Scripture which bring the three together as one in their nature, power and activity, e.g.

The name given to God in Genesis 1:1, "Elohim" is a plural word. Thus in vs. 26 God said "Let **us** make man in our image and likeness". See also Gen. 11:6, 7 & Isaiah 6:5, 8.

"The **Spirit** of the **Lord God** is upon **me** (Christ)" (Isaiah 61:1).

Three persons are said to have brought Israel out of Egypt - "The **Lord** (Jehovah) . . . the **angel of His presence** (Christ) ... and the **Spirit of God**" (Isaiah 63:7, 9, 14).

"The **Lord God** and his **Spirit** have sent **me** (Christ)" (Isaiah 48:16).

So likewise in the N.T. the three are brought together in -

Matt. 3:16-17 "And **Jesus**, when he was baptized . . . saw the **Spirit** of God descending on him ... and a **voice** came from heaven".

Matt. 28:19 "Baptizing them in the name (not names) of the **Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost**".

Ephesians 4:4-6 "**One Spirit . . . one Lord . . . one God and Father** of all.

1 Cor. 12:4-6 "The same **Spirit** . . . the same **Lord** . . . the same God.

John 14:26 "The **Holy Ghost** whom the **Father** will send in my name".

2 Cor. 13:14 "The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ** and the love of God and the communion of the **Holy Ghost** be with you all".

Eph. 2:18, 22 "Through Him (Christ) we both have access by one **Spirit** unto the **Father**.

Eph. 3:14, 16, 19 "Strengthened with might by his **Spirit** in the inner man; that **Christ** may dwell in your hearts by faith . . . that ye might be filled with all the fulness of God".

2 Thess. 2:13 "**God** hath chosen you ... through sanctification of the **Spirit** ... to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord **Jesus Christ**".

Titus 3:4, 5, 6 "The kindness of **God** our Saviour . . . and renewing of the **Holy Ghost** . . . through **Jesus Christ** our Saviour".

Hebrews 9:14 "The blood of **Christ** who through the eternal **Spirit** offered himself without spot to **God**".

1 Peter 1:2 "Elect according to the foreknowledge of **God** the Father, through sanctification of the **Spirit** unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of **Jesus Christ**".

1 John 5:7 "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the **Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost**: and these three are one".

Jude 20, 21 "Praying in the **Holy Ghost**; keep yourselves in the love of God looking for the mercy of our **Lord Jesus Christ**".

Although the three persons of the Godhead have ever been and ever will be one in **essence and purpose**, yet each bears a peculiar relationship to each other which cannot be reversed, each having his own function and activity in the work of creation and redemption.

THE FATHER is the source of **knowledge** (1 Peter 1:2; Acts 1:7; Matt. 24:36) and communicates such to the Son (John 5:20). The Father "sent" the Son (1 John 1:4); gives to Him (John 6:37; 13:3); invests Him with power and authority (John 5:21, 22, 27), and has exalted Him to a position of honour (Phil. 2:9-11). The Father "elects", "chooses", "calls" and "predestinates" (Eph. 1:3, 5; Rom. 8:29, 31).

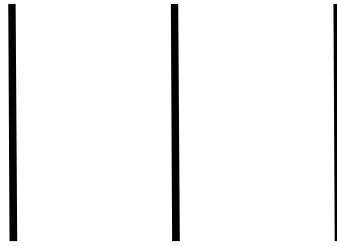
THE SON "obeys" the Father (Heb. 10:7; Matt. 26:42); He cannot and will not act apart from Him (John 5:19, 30; 8:28; 9:4; 17:4). He is voluntarily subject to the Father yet not inferior to Him. He carries out the divine counsels of the Father both in creation and salvation, thus He could truthfully say "My Father is greater than I". He alone became "flesh" and suffered as a man.

THE HOLY SPIRIT is "sent" by the Father and the Son (John 14:16; 15:26). He anoints, seals, indwells and instructs all believers (John 14:26; Eph. 1:13; 1 Cor. 2:12).

"**GOD IS LOVE**": but love in itself requires a trinity for as one has said, "If God is love, then there must be in Him, a Lover, a Beloved, and a Spirit of love, for no love is conceivable without a lover and a beloved".

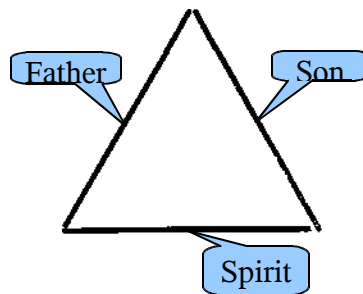
Of the various illustrations that have been given to "explain" the Trinity of God, none is better than the following:

If the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are represented by three lines, thus:



the three appear as being quite separate from each other.

But if the three are joined together thus:



we have then **One** perfect figure composed of **Three** separate lines, each perfectly united together, and dependent on, each other.

Such is the God of the Bible. Three divine Persons, yet one God. One before whom finite thought limited by time and space must bow in adoration and praise, the contemplation of whose glory will be the ceaseless delight and wonder of the redeemed in the eternal ages to come.

(J. F. Crane)