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The Concept of the Trinity and the Historical Controversy that Revolved Around it

Before anything was created, God existed. Through the centuries, many people have had various concepts about the living God, but the only One who knows conclusively what God is like is God Himself. For humans to gain an understanding of who God is, God must reveal Himself. Through divine revelation, God chose and guided individuals to write about the attributes and ways of God and His interaction with mankind. This collection of infallible and inerrant Scriptures are preserved in the form of the Old and New Testaments. Though God can be experienced by all people, the Bible provides the most accurate and reliable information about God. The Bible reveals that God is a Trinity--one God subsisting eternally as three divine persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In spite of some controversy that revolved around this concept during the conciliar era, the concept of the Trinity has remained the orthodox teaching of the church founded by Jesus Christ.

Walvoord aptly summarizes the concept of the Trinity by stating, "while God is One numerically, He subsists in three Persons, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit who are equal in eternity, power and glory, Each possessing all the divine attributes and yet having properties which distinguish Them within the unity of the Trinity" (11). Beisner condenses the statements of the Nicene Creed describing the Trinity, "In the nature (or substance) of the one true God, there are three distinct persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (24). McDowell and Larson give an excellent Scriptural summary of the doctrine of the Trinity:

> The one true God, as already established (Isaiah 43:10; Deuteronomy 6:4), is made up of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each member of the godhead is called "God" in the Bible. The Father bears the name God (Galatians 1:1; Titus 1:4; etc.). The Son, or Word (*logos*), is repeatedly called God in verses like John 1:1, 14; Acts 20:28; John 20:28; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 1:8, etc. The Holy Spirit is identified as God in various Scriptures (Acts 5:3-4; 1 John 4:2, 3; Hebrews 10:15, 16). The concept of the unity within the Trinity is seen in a verse such as Matthew 28:19, where the Father Son, and Holy Spirit comprise one "name" (singular in Greek). (17)

Beisner breaks down the doctrine into four parts: First, there is "one and only one true God," a unity; Second, "there is a person called the Father, who is also called God;" "Third, there is a person called the Son, or Christ, who is called God;" "Fourth, there is a person called the Holy Spirit who is called God" (26).

A key emphasis in the Old Testament is that God is one. The Old Testament "condemns polytheism and declares that God is one and is to be worshiped and loved as such" (Toon 1037). Deut. 6:4-5 says, "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (NASB). God spoke through Isaiah saying, "Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me" (NASB Is. 43:10), and reiterated saying, "And there is no other God besides Me, A righteous God and a Savior; There is none except Me" (NASB Is. 45:21). The New Testament shows that Jesus had a monotheistic view in Luke 4:8 and John 17:3 (Beisner 26-27). Beisner documents that the Apostle Paul proclaimed "that there is no God but one" in the context of 1 Cor. 8:4-6 and in

Scriptures such as Gal. 4:8, 1 Tim. 2:5 and 1 Tim. 1:17 (27). While God is one, the New Testament shows that the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all designated as God.

In the New Testament, the individual person of the Father is especially seen in relation to the individual person of the Son. In John 17:1-3, the Son prays to the Father as deity, "that they may know Thee, the only true God" (NASB). Deity is attributed to the Father in Philippians 2:11--"glory to God the Father" (NASB), and in 1 Peter 1:2--"according to the foreknowledge of God the Father" (NASB) (Beisner 29). The New Testament contains many other references to "God the Father" and "God our Father", including Gal. 1:1 and Col. 1:2, respectively. Beisner concludes, "the fact that the New Testament teaches the deity of the 'Father' is so well known as to be a truism" (27).

Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity, is designated as God in the Bible. Just as God is unique in that He has always existed, there also was never a time when the Son of God did not exist. He shares "the quality of eternity and infinity which characterizes God Himself" (Walvoord 22). This is shown in the Messianic prophecy of Micah 5:2, "His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity" and in Isaiah 9:6, "Eternal Father" (NASB). The Jews properly interpreted Jesus' words in John 8:58 as a claim to be the eternal God when he said, "Before Abraham was born, I am" (Holdcroft 17). The eternity of Christ, the Word, is also shown in John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God" (NASB). Although the "doctrine of the eternity of the Son of God is the most important doctrine of Christology as a whole", there are many other indications for the deity of Christ. Holdcroft lists nine evidences for the deity of Jesus Christ:

> 1. He possesses attributes of deity.
> 2. He holds the office and exercises the prerogatives of deity.
> 3. The Bible identifies Jesus with deity.
> 4. He is given divine names.
> 5. Jesus is related equally with other persons of the Godhead.
> 6. Divine worship is rendered to Him and accepted by Him.
> 7. Jesus consciously claimed to be deity.
> 8. The apostles confirm the deity of Christ.
> 9. The life of Christ validates His deity. (19-25)

McDowell and Larson show in their book, *Jesus: A Biblical Defense of His Deity*, that the Scriptures portray Jesus as God since "Jesus Christ Possesses the Names and Titles of God," "possesses the attributes of God," and "possesses the authority of God" (21-62). In summary, "every attribute related to Deity or ascribed to the Father or the Holy Spirit can also be attributed to Christ" (Walvoord 27).

The Holy Spirit is a distinct person and is designated as God. The deity of the Holy Spirit is shown in Acts 5:3-4 when Peter said that Ananias had "lied to the Holy Spirit. . . . You have not lied to men but to God." These verses also show that the Holy Spirit is personal, "for one cannot lie to an impersonal object or force" (Beisner 38). The deity and personality of the Holy Spirit is evidenced in Acts 13:2 when He said, "set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them" (38). Thus, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all personal and described as deity.

Both the distinctiveness of the personalities and the unity of their nature is shown in Scripture for the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In John 14:26, the Father sends the Spirit; In John 15:26, Jesus sends the Spirit; In John 17:8 and 20:21, the Father sent Jesus (Beisner 39). The unity of the Trinity is shown in Matt. 28:19, "baptizing them in the name [singular] of the Father, and the

Son and the Holy Spirit [plural]" (NASB) and in the doxology of 2 Cor. 13:14, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God [the Father], and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (NASB). "A triune conception of God existed from the earliest times in the Church", but controversy surrounded its formulation during the period in which the first general councils of the church were held (Beisner 41-42).

Creeds, or confessions of faith, were developed by early Christians to briefly and accurately express their faith, to express what they experienced, to make "known to prospective converts precisely what Christianity believed and taught," and to "combat what Christians thought was error" (Beisner 15). "Councils met and creeds were formed not so much to preserve unity as to defend truth" (16). According to Holdcroft, "a general church conference to discuss issues and problems" was not possible for the early Christians until "religious liberty" took effect as a result of the "Edict of Millan, signed in A.D. 313 by coregents Constantine and Licinius" (171). Since the "majority of the early Christians came from a background of Judaism" that held to the truth of monotheism (belief in one God), "they faced the problem of reconciling [Jesus'] deity with the deity of the Father, without at the same time, becoming polytheists" (171). Beisner documents in his book *God in Three Persons* that the orthodox teaching of the Trinity as found in the New Testament was accurately transmitted in the early church from generation to generation (45-65, 77-84). McDowell states that no church leader denied the deity of Christ prior to Arius in the early fourth century (80). Having misinterpreted Origen's writings that emphasize Christ's subordination to the Father, the presbyter from Alexandria, Arius, denied the deity of Christ and thus caused controversy within the Christian church (Beisner 73). Arius denied that Christ was of the same nature as the Father and believed that Christ was not eternal but was the first created being who created everything else that exists. Approximately 300 clergymen met with Emperor Constantine at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325 to determine the "relationship of the deity of Christ to the deity of the Father" (Holdcroft 171).

After the first three weeks of deliberation during the two month long Council of Nicea, the deity of Christ was affirmed and formally stated in the Nicene Creed (Beisner 108) using the phrase "of one and the same substance with the Father." The carefully chosen Greek word *homoousios*, means "of one substance" and not "of like substance." This phrase prevented the Arians from reinterpreting the Creed to support their beliefs (91, 119). Although "Arius and his two remaining supporters were expelled as heretics," Arius eventually gained the favor of the emperor and swayed much of the church on and off (McDowell and Larson 81). During the next three decades, the leader of the orthodox view, Athanasius, "was exiled five times by Arian leaders" (81). While Arianism was slowly disintegrating, Orthodoxy was being unified and they gained a spiritual victory in the Council of Alexandria in A.D. 362. "The next nineteen years were spent winning the outward victory, removing Arianism from ecclesiastical and political power" (Beisner 139). The orthodox bishops and the emperor called the Council at Constantinople in A.D. 381 to "make final and official the triumph of the Nicene faith" (140-41). From the time of the New Testament until now, orthodoxy has Biblically and conceptually held that the Trinity consists of one God subsisting in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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