

## THE BIBLE & THE DOCTRINE OF THE 'TRINITY'

The word "Trinity" does not occur in Scripture, as reference to any Bible Dictionary or Concordance will show. Nor is there any statement in the Bible that unambiguously sets out the doctrine, as understood by the mainstream Christian churches.

Thus the 1996 edition of the *New Bible Dictionary*, published by Inter-Varsity Press, has the following entry:

TRINITY: The term "Trinity" is not itself found in the Bible. It was first used by Tertullian at the close of the 2nd century, but received wide currency and formal elucidation only in the 4th and 5th centuries.

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.

Nowhere does the Bible explicitly teach this combination of assertions. It may, nevertheless, be claimed that the doctrine of the Trinity is a profoundly appropriate *interpretation* of the Biblical witness to God in the light of the ministry, death and resurrection-exaltation of Jesus - the "Christ-event".

### **History**

Clearly from the above, the 1st century Church knew nothing of this doctrine. It developed out of disputes in the 2nd century over the nature of Christ, which resulted from the encounter of Christian doctrine with Greek philosophy, particularly neo-Platonism. A number of prominent Christian "fathers", such as Justin Martyr, Clement, Irenaeus and Origen, were enthusiastic students of Greek philosophy and expounded Biblical themes using philosophical terms.

When Constantine united the Roman Empire at the end of the 2nd century, and established Christianity as the state religion, he demanded of the bishops a common doctrinal position. This was established at the *Council of Nicea* (325 AD), when, after fierce debate between supporters of *Athanasius*, patriarch of Alexandria, and *Arius*, an Alexandrian priest, the *Nicean Creed* was adopted. The disputes continued for another 100 or more years, until the ascendancy of the Roman see, led to the fullest enunciation of the doctrine in the so-called *Athanasian Creed*.

The language of the creeds is philosophical language and very complex. Thus the Nicene Creed describes Jesus as:

"...begotten of his Father before all worlds.  
God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God:  
Begotten not made.  
Being of one substance with the Father...  
And was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary..."

Notice that here Christ is "begotten" before Creation and not at his birth, which is the natural sense of begotten; instead he is said to be "incarnate" (not a Biblical word) at his birth.

The language of the 4th century Athanasian Creed is even more obscure:

"We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity: neither confounding the persons: nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Ghost. But the Godhead of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost is all one..."

There is a marked contrast between this almost completely non-Biblical language and the

simplicity of the earliest written creed, now referred to as the "Old Roman" (c.150-170 AD), which begins:

"I believe in God the Father Almighty;  
and in Christ Jesus his only-begotten Son, our Lord,  
who was begotten from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary...."

### **Bible teaching about God**

- God is firstly the Creator: Genesis 1: 1; Psalm 33:6,9; 105:5; Jeremiah 10: 10-13.
- He is eternal and alone possesses immortality: Psalm 90: 1-2; Isaiah 40:25-28; 1 Timothy 1: 17; 6: 15-16.
- In only a handful of OT passages, He is referred to as "Father" of Israel; e.g. Isaiah 63: 16; 64:8; cf. Exodus 4:22; in the promises to David, God prophesies that He will be the Father of the Messiah: 2 Samuel 7: 14.
- In the NT, following the divine begetting of Jesus, God is referred to as Father 265 times! e.g. Hebrews 1:5-6; Jesus *always* refers to God as "Father" (save in the cry from the cross).
- God is frequently *represented* by an angel who speaks in His name (as though he is God): e.g. Exodus 3:2,4, 14-15; Acts 7:30-32. He was similarly represented by the rulers of Israel: Exodus 21:8-9, where the word "judges" (KJV) is *elohim*, the normal word for "God"; see Psalm 82: 1,6-8 and John 10:34-36. This Biblical feature is summarised by the term *God-manifestation*: God was displayed or represented by angels, rulers, prophets, who spoke on His behalf.

### **Bible teaching about Jesus**

- The coming of Jesus was foretold throughout the OT, both by direct prophecy, e.g. Psalm 2; Isaiah 9:6-7; and also by type and symbol: e.g. the Passover lamb - Exodus 12:5-7; the suffering of Joseph - Genesis 37:23-24, 31.
- The work of Jesus was foreknown and planned by God from the beginning: 1 Peter 1: 18-21; Acts 2:22-24; Acts 13:32-33; Romans 3:23-25; Ephesians 1:9-10.
- His *conception* in a virgin was miraculous, by the power of the Holy Spirit, so that he was Son of God: Isaiah 7: 14; Matthew 1: 18-23; Luke 1 :30-35.
- Jesus was born from a woman in the normal way and was fully man, sharing our mortal nature: Luke 2:6-7; Galatians 4:4; Philippians 2:5-11; Hebrews 2:9,14; 4: 14-15; 5:5-9. Following his ascension to heaven, he is still man: 1 Tim. 2:5.
- Jesus was and is subordinate to his Father: John 14:28; 1 Cor.15:28. He was *made, sent, raised, and glorified* by Him: Romans 1: 1-4; Acts 2:36; 3: 13-15, 18,26; John 3: 16-17,34-35; 5:21-24; 8:42; 14:28; 17: 1-5. Jesus has been *given* all power but will eventually give all to his Father: Matthew 28: 18; 1 Corinthians 11:3; 15: 22-28; Ephesians 1:3; 1 Peter 1:3.
- Jesus is the supreme *manifestation* of the Father: John 1:1-3,14-18; 14:6-10; 2 Corinthians 4:4-6; Colossians 1:12-15,19; 2:8-9; Hebrews 1:1-3. (Note that an *image*, by definition, cannot be identical with the *object* it represents.)

### **Bible teaching about the Holy Spirit**

- The word *spirit* in both OT and NT also translates as *wind* or *breath*. It is thus a metaphor for an unseen, life-giving force or power. By His power God creates, gives life and sustains it: Genesis 1:1-2; 2:7; Job 33:4; 34:14-15; Acts 17:24-28.
- The Spirit of God inspired the prophets: 2 Samuel 23: 1-2; Nehemiah 9:30; 2 Peter 1: 19-21; 2 Timothy 3: 15-16; it expresses His mind: Isaiah 63: 9-10; Acts 7: 51.
- The terms "Spirit", "Spirit of God" and "Holy Spirit (or Ghost)" are interchangeable:

compare the three records of Jesus' baptism - Matthew 3: 16; Mark 1: 10; Luke 3:22; John 1:32. The prefix "Holy", meaning *separated* or *consecrated*, is used principally in the NT for the work of the Spirit in bringing about the salvation of men and women through God's love in Christ.

- A number of parallel passages show that the Spirit is essentially the *power* of God, or, expressed another way, *God at work*. The phrase "God the Holy Ghost (or Spirit)" does not occur in Scripture. The Spirit is not a person but is said to be "of God", "of the Lord" and "of your Father". Compare: Genesis 1:1; 1:2; 2:7; Job 33:4; Psalm 33:6; Jeremiah 10:12; Matthew 10:20; Luke 1:35.
- The angels of heaven operate by the power of the Spirit; hence they are sometimes referred to as "spirits": Psalm 104:4; cf. Exodus 3:2; Hebrews 1:7; Isaiah 63:9-10.
- Similarly the Spirit has worked in, or "inspired" men, at certain times chosen by God. This has taken two main forms:
  - The performing of miracles, wonders and signs; e.g. Exodus 4:1-9; Numbers 11:16-17;24-25,29; 1 Kings 17: 17-24; Matthew 12:28; cf. Luke 11:20; Acts 1:8.;
  - Prophesying, that is declaring the Word of God: e.g. 2 Samuel 23: 1-2; Jeremiah 1:9; John 6:63; 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21.
- The "Spirit Gifts" granted to the 1st century church, were designed to confirm the authority of the Gospel message and disappeared after the age of the Apostles: Acts 8: 14-18; 1 Corinthians 13:8-10. The words of many who claim today to speak by the Spirit (but believe different things) are refuted when tested against the true words of Scripture: 1 John 3: 1-3.

### **Passages linking Father, Son and Spirit**

Since the work of God is performed by His Spirit and is centred in His beloved Son, there are many passages linking them: e.g. Luke 1:35; Matthew 28: 18-20; Acts 2:22; 10:37-38; 1 Corinthians 8:5-6; 15:24; 2 Corinthians 1:3; 4:3-6; 13:4; Colossians 3: 1; cf. Psalm 110: 1; 1 Timothy 2:5; 2 John 3.

### **Passages used to support the doctrine of the Trinity**

Many of the verses used come from the Gospel of John. It seems strange that so important a doctrine should be so heavily dependent upon one book and it arises from placing a "philosophical slant" on John's words (see above).

- **John 1:1-3:** The common translations ignore the Greek pronouns used. It should read: "In (the) beginning was the Word, and the Word was *towards* the God, and (a) god was the Word. The same was in (the) beginning *towards* the God." In John the word "beginning" is almost always used of the start of Jesus' ministry, at his baptism; hence the immediate mention of John the Baptist (v.6). John is describing the start of the New Creation, by the Word of God (cf. Psalm 33:6), which is now revealed in Jesus; John 1: 14,18.
- **John 10:30:** The word "one" is neuter in gender; not "one being" but "one in spirit". So Jesus prays that his disciples will also be: John 14:9; 17:11,21. Jesus "manifested" or revealed his Father's character, as described above.
- **John 20:26-29:** Thomas exclaims to the risen Lord Jesus: "My Lord and my God". This is an acknowledgement that Jesus had risen from the dead, not that he was the immortal God Himself. Thomas, a Jew, was using a mode of expression common in the OT, that representatives of God are addressed as "God", e.g. Jacob of the angel at Peniel (Genesis 32:30). In the same chapter in John (v. 17), Jesus told Mary that he was to ascend to "my God and your God", clearly distinguishing himself from the Father.
- **Romans 9:5:** "...Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen." The

argument rests in the punctuation. The "amen" shows that Paul is using a doxology, similar to Psalm 41: 13, which ends Book 1 of the Psalms. Paul has listed the blessings of God to Israel (v.4,5) and concludes the list with Messiah (Christ); then praises God. The RSV translates: ". . .and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen."

- **Philippians 2:5-7:** "Jesus ... thought it not robbery to be equal with God..." is generally agreed to be a bad translation of the original Greek. The whole sense of the passage is that, although Jesus was Son of God, he did not exalt himself but assumed the lowly position of a servant. RSV translates: "He did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." In this he contrasts strikingly with Adam, who did grasp at equality with God; see Genesis 3:4-6.
- **Hebrews 1:8:** "But unto the Son he saith: Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever." See the comments on John 20:28 above. In the next verse, the apostle continues: "...therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee..." showing that God the Father is higher than the Son; see also 1 Corinthians 11:3: " . . . the head of Christ is God."

It is surely significant that no passage can be found which declares, in the terms of the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, that Christ is "Very God", or that describes in detail the "mystery of the Holy Trinity". Rather those who defend this doctrine are forced to depend upon scattered verses, taken out of context, such as those listed above,

### **Did Jesus exist before his birth?**

The idea of Jesus' pre-existence is principally linked with the doctrine of the Trinity dealt with above. However the "Jehovah's Witnesses", although denying the Trinity, believe that Jesus was a "pre-existent spirit", the first created work of God. All of these ideas presuppose that the "spirit" or "soul" of a man can exist separately from his body: that Jesus previously existed as a "spirit being" in heaven, and was then "incarnate" in a body, firstly in the womb of Mary. Is there any Biblical justification for these ideas and what does the Bible say about the nature of the Son of God?

#### **1. Man and his soul**

Adam was formed from the ground; God gave him breath and man became a "living soul" or a living being (Heb. *nephesh*), Genesis 2:7. In this he was just like the animals, Genesis 1:20,21,30: where "living creature" and "soul"/ "life" are the same word, *nephesh*.

Man is a living creature with body, soul and spirit (or breath): 1 Thessalonians 5:23. Death brings an end to the whole man: Genesis 3: 19; Ezekiel 18:4; Psalm 146:3,4. The Bible nowhere teaches that the soul of man continues to exist apart from the body.

#### **2. Christ was a man**

Although his *conception* was miraculous, his birth was like that of any other man: Galatians 4:4, (and note the similarity to Adam, who was the direct creation of God). Jesus fully shared our physical nature: Hebrews 2:9,14; cf. Psalm 8. He experienced the full range of human emotions and suffering: Hebrews 5:7,8. He also shared our mortality, dying on the cross. Exalted to heaven as our mediator, he remains truly man: 1 Timothy 2:5; Hebrews 10:12.

#### **3. Christ's Victory**

The value of Jesus' triumph is that he overcame sin in its battleground, human nature, as in the temptations in the wilderness (Matthew 4: 1-11). For this victory to be meaningful required that he should be wholly man, and not a divine spirit (incapable of sin) in human flesh; hence the parallels between Adam, who failed, and Christ who triumphed: Romans 5:

12-21. However Jesus received the strength to gain the victory and offer a perfect sacrifice for sins because God was his Father: Psalm 2:7-12; 80:17; John 8:28,29; 1 Peter 1:18-19.

#### **4. Jesus predestined by the Father**

The work of Jesus was foretold in many Old Testament prophecies, from Genesis 3: 15 onwards: e.g. Deuteronomy 18: 15,18; 2 Samuel 7: 12-16; Psalm 89:26-29; Isaiah 9:6-7; 42: 1-7. God had planned that he would be the means of man's redemption from the beginning. Thus he was predestined to be the Saviour of the world; but notice that those he would save were also predestined, or "marked out in advance": Ephesians 1:3-6; Roman 8:29,30 (and no-one suggests that the believers pre-existed in heaven!). See also: Jeremiah 1:5; Galatians 1:15; 2 Timothy 1:9.

In summary, Jesus "pre-existed" only in the mind and purpose of God. He was in every respect a true man, like us, yet equally the true Son of God. His work and ministry was planned by God from the beginning and in the fullness of time he was born into the world (Galatians 4:4) to fulfil all that had been written of him.

#### **Passages which are used to support the pre-existence of Jesus**

- **John 6:38:** "I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of Him that sent me."

Jesus was born by the direct operation of the Spirit of God, and in this unique way his origin was in heaven. In the context of this verse Jesus is comparing himself to the Manna, the bread sent "from heaven" to sustain Israel in the wilderness. (In the same passage, in spiritual language, Jesus tells his disciples they must "eat his flesh and drink his blood".) Furthermore Jesus' ways and teaching were "heavenly" not earthly (see James 3: 14-18); so he says to the Jews: "Ye are from beneath; I am from above..." (John 8:23). Notice the humility of: "...not to do mine own will".

- **John 17:5,24:** "Now, O Father, glorify thou me... with the glory which I had with thee before the world was...thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world."

This is entirely in harmony with the fact that Jesus was predestined by God, as seen above. Peter says: "[Jesus] was foreordained (lit. foreknown) before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you" (1 Peter 1.20). So also the following passage:

- **John 8:56-58:** "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day; and he saw it and was glad...before Abraham was, I am."

Jesus was the subject of the promise made to Abraham of "a seed" who would inherit the Land and already promised to Eve (Genesis 3:15; 12:7; 17:4-8; 22:16-18); this is the topic of the debate in John 8:31-40.

- **Colossians 1:16:** "For by him [Jesus] were all things created...all things were created by him and for him [literally: *through* him and *into* him]."

This is taken to mean that Jesus, rather than God the Father, is the Creator, even though he

was "*sent* by God" (John 6:38 above). Yet in v.15, Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation" implying his created beginning; and in v.18 he is "the firstborn from the dead", i.e. in the resurrection. Paul is clearly teaching that the risen Lord Jesus Christ is the beginning of the new Spiritual Creation (see Acts 26:23; Romans 8:29; Revelation 1:5).

In the grace of God, we too can become part of this New Creation, though faith in the Son of God and by sharing in his resurrection.