

## The Uniqueness of God as Trinity

Christianity holds that God is One Divine Being – but He exists in three equally Divine Persons; Father, Son and Holy Spirit. How did this ‘complex’ doctrine come about? We need to consider the following 3 alternatives:

1. Did it come about by theological reflection?
2. Did it come about by philosophical speculation?
3. Or, did it impose itself on the first Christians because of irrefutable historic encounters?

We conclude the following:

1. The first Christians were Jews and therefore strict monotheists. The Old Testament was their theological frame of reference. There were difficult passages - *Ps. 45:6,7; 110:1* - which could not be fully understood in the context of the monotheism of Jewish belief. The OT unequivocally condemned polytheism and idolatry and did not seem to allow for something is like the doctrine of the Trinity.
2. Philosophers – Western and Eastern philosophers have struggled to explain the unity as well as the diversity observable in the world. (In Greek philosophy, Heraclitus recommended pure diversity; Parmenides, absolute unity; in India, the corresponding philosophies were espoused by Madhva and Sankara).
3. We shall look at the only remaining alternative – that the doctrine is a culmination of what happened in three historic encounters of God with his people over several centuries of human history:
  - i. Every Jew would have been aware that God had encountered them at Mount Sinai – he was heard speaking to them in an audible voice (*Exodus 20:18,19*).
  - ii. The first disciples (who were all Jews and Jewesses) encounter another Person on the dusty streets of Palestine and Jerusalem. If we had joined them on this journey, we would have noticed several aspects of this Person Jesus whom we had followed for 3 1/2 years:
    - About his humanity, there is little doubt – he is tired, hungry, thirsty and in need of sleep; he shares with us his temptations; he is arrested and executed on a cross because he is perceived by the religious leaders of his day to be a troublemaker and a possible rival to their authority.
    - But we also observe the fact that Jesus addresses *Yahweh* as *Father* – this actually means that he is equating himself with God (*John 5:18*)!
    - He teaches us to address *Yahweh* as *Father* as well, but carefully excludes himself from praying the prayer that he teaches us (*Matt.6:9a; Lk.11:2a*) – he does not seem to be in need of forgiveness of sins!

- At the same time, he exercises the authority to forgive sins (*Mk.2:5 ff.*).
- He makes it clear that his relationship to God, the Father is different from ours (*John 20:17b*).
- We find Jesus implying, in a number of instances, that the Jewish Bible – the Old Testament – had predicted his coming rather accurately.
- He speaks authoritatively to a stormy sea and calms it as if he were its creator (*Matt.8:26,27*)!
- On the third day after his burial, his grave is empty – not really! - his grave-clothes are found lying undisturbed in the same position as the body but the body seems to have evaporated without disturbing the clothes (*John 20:5-8*)!
- When he ascends to heaven (*Acts 1:9*), he does not disappear in the three dimensions - ‘a cloud hides him from their sight’!

**Conclusion? - This *Man Jesus* must **also be God!****

- iii. Ten days after the ascension of Jesus, another Person of the Godhead –the Holy Spirit who fully represents Jesus Christ – confronts the disciples as they wait in the upper room according to the command of Jesus. As promised by Jesus, this mysterious Person of the Holy Spirit who was **with** them will now come to live **in** them (*John 14:16,17*); for the first time in human history, God is experienced intra-personally – **in the person of the believer** - through the Person of the Holy Spirit.

What should the first Christians – all Jews – make of these 3 historical encounters? There are two alternative possibilities that may have come to their mind:

1. These could be 3 independent ‘Gods’ similar to the ones whom Greeks and Romans are known to worship;
2. This is one Person playing three different roles.

The early Church rules out these alternatives for the following obvious reasons:

1. The Oneness of God was so fundamental to the Jewish faith and never denied by Jesus. Besides, a plurality of gods would mean that each of them is finite - these encounters did not seem to indicate anything of the sort!
2. It was surely not One Person who was playing 3 roles; the disciples heard the Father speak to the Son; Jesus clearly indicated that he would go to the Father and send the Spirit. Such language does not even remotely suggest that one and the same Person is undertaking all 3 roles!

**Conclusion?** – The eventual articulation and understanding of the Triune Godhead. The Church wrestles with this mysterious and inescapable reality. The Church thus comes to recognise that God, as One Being exists in three Divine Persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This does not mean that God is one in *one* sense and three in the *same* sense. That would have been a direct logical contradiction, thus necessarily false. The Church comes to recognise that God is Trinity – a word coined to combine the Unity of the Divine Being with the distinct identities of the Three Persons – that God is One in *one* sense and Three in *another* sense. Specifically, God is One in *substance* and Three in *persons* – colloquially, One *What* (John 10:30; 17:22) and Three *Who's* (e.g., John 16:13). (Again one must be careful not to give univocal meanings to the terms *substance*, *person*, *what*, and *who*.) The *Substance* or *Essence* unites the Three; *Person* is that which distinguishes Them. Thus the unity of the Trinity does not mean *aloneness*, nor does the distinction within the Trinity mean *dividedness*. John as well as other writers of the NT use the *masculine* gender (John 16:13) to denote Personality (not sexuality) of the three Persons of the Godhead – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. (The Son, in his Humanity, takes upon himself the masculine sex as part of his limitations as a human being). John however uses the *neuter* gender in John 10:30;17:21,22 to express the oneness of the Essence of the First and Second Persons of the Trinity through the Third Person of the Trinity.

In what follows, we shall reflect on the implications of these doctrines in 3 areas and why they are necessary to best explain reality in the following three areas:

1. Ontology – the study of *Being*.
2. Axiology – the study of *Values* such as ethics and aesthetics.
3. Epistemology – the study of *Knowledge*.

### **The ontological necessity of the Trinity**

Ontology is the study of *Being*. In Romans 1:20, Paul confidently declares that God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen being understood from what has been made. In other words, the Being of ultimate reality – God – can be understood from that of creation. We do not claim that *everything* about God can be deduced from a consideration of his creation. But Paul implies that enough of God can be seen to render humankind without excuse on the day of judgement.

Gen.1 offers the most succinct description of creation. We see a marvellous variety in the creation account of what has been made. In fact, the diversity of creation extends from the cosmos of inorganic matter to every detail of organic life – plants, animals, and human beings. God himself is seen to be separating one reality from another – light from darkness, waters above the expanse from those below, dry land from the oceans. Please also note that because God names them as distinct entities, we need to recognise that the distinctions are not illusory but real. But, we also notice that there is a unity underlying this wide diversity. The unity can be seen at several

levels – as constituted by the same physical particles or chemical elements. There is also another kind of unity in that every item of creation is dependent on another so that they all constitute a whole. In these days of environmental and ecological awareness, we have come to recognise how delicately nature is balanced. Unity and diversity in creation reflect the Unity (of Essence) and Diversity (of Persons) of the Creator! Views of God that deny diversity (Pantheism and Islam) or unity (Atheism and Polytheism) do not have the same explanatory power as Trinitarian Theism with regard to ontology.

A special instance of Unity in Diversity is the creation of the first man and wife. Gen.1:26 puts it this way – “Let Us make man (singular) in Our image.... and let them (plural) rule over the fish of the sea....”! While we may try to explain away this grammatical sleight of hand by saying that the word *Man* is intended in a generic sense, the context would not allow it. The man and the woman together would constitute a kind of oneness (Gen.2:24) that would genuinely reflect the Oneness of the Triune God! Paul makes it clear that gender distinction is anchored in the distinction between the Father and the Son (I Cor.11:3). Our teaching in favour of monogamous, heterosexual relationship should start here – not with punishment for sexual perversions!

The unity of the *Essence* of the Godhead and the distinction between the *Persons* of the Trinity provide the philosophical basis for both transcendence and immanence to exist together in the Being of God. We can say that God’s *transcendence* is a reality only because of the real distinctions within the Persons of the Trinity – the Father is not to be confused with the Son and so on. Similarly, the *immanence* of God is reflected in the interpenetration in the relationship – *perichoresis* – between the Members of the Trinity that constitutes Them as One divine Being.

The Second Person of the Trinity is also *immanent* in creation. He is the One who holds all things together by his powerful word – Col.1:17; Heb.1:3. The greatest expression of his immanence is in his incarnation. Unlike incarnation stories in other religions, the incarnation of Christ is unique because of two reasons:

- His incarnation is real and permanent and not illusory. His humanity remains with him forever – I Cor.15:28; Rev.5:6. He is the divine-human mediator at God’s right hand - I Tim.2:5; Heb.7:25. In his humanity, he is subject to the Father and so will be married to the Church – the body of redeemed human beings who are now participants in the divine nature (II Pet.1:4).
- Because God made humans in his image, Jesus could be entirely human without ceasing to be entirely God. (Imagine a perfect cube in 3 dimensions whose image in 2 dimensions is a perfect square. Should this cube choose to come into a world of 2 dimensions as a perfect square, it could justifiably tell other wonky squares in that world, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the cube”! (Cf. John 14:9). Please also note that this object would be 100% cube in 3 dimensions and 100% square in 2 dimensions. Thus, humanity and divinity are not two disparate substances like salt and sugar – the former is a subset of the latter.

The Sovereignty of God as a divine attribute should exercise us at this point. In what sense is God free in His eternal Being? The general idea of *Freedom* the secular world espouses is that one is free to do what one wants! If I want to be truly free in every sense of that word, I cannot even write this sentence – because I would like to be free from the rules of grammar and syntax of the English language. That is not freedom, is it? I will be paralysed in a wordless vacuum. But if I am related to a language through its rules, then I am free to say and write what I want – in other words, freedom, far from being a stand-alone quality is actually a relational one!

Christians tend to define freedom as the capacity to make moral choices – choosing good instead of evil. While this is good in the limited sense of the present fallen existence, it raises embarrassing questions about God and heaven! Is God free to do evil? In the new heavens and the new earth where there is no sin to choose against, will we really be free? The problem arises because of our individualist definition of freedom in the first place! A man is free to choose one woman out of several to marry, but once they are married, are they free? Is freedom to be understood only in the sense that they are faithful to each other by not sleeping with some other partners?! That would be a patently demeaning idea of freedom! Freedom, in marriage as an example, is the space that each partner gives to the other whereby the husband is free to be himself and the wife to be herself. The sexuality by which they become one flesh is also what distinguishes them from each other and gives them the freedom to be themselves! Each rediscovers his (her) identity by relating to the other! Thus freedom cannot be adequately understood except from relationships and that is supremely seen in the Triune God – the Father and the Son are One through the Spirit but simultaneously, because of the freedom (space) provided by the Spirit, They are free to be Themselves! “.where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (*II Cor.3:17*)! Consequently, in the Church, the same Spirit who calls and gifts us differently is also the One through whom we are one body! Freedom and commitment are therefore inseparable!

*How shall we respond to the ontological aspect of the Trinity?*

### **PURSUIT OF GOD**

The only appropriate response is worship. It arises out of our contemplation of this awesome Being.

*How dread are Thine eternal years, O everlasting Lord!  
By prostrate spirits day and night incessantly adored!*

*How wonderful, how beautiful the sight of Thee must be!  
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power and awful purity!*

*Meekness and Majesty, Manhood and Deity  
In perfect harmony, the Man who is God!  
Lord of eternity, dwells in humanity,  
Kneels in humility – and – washes our feet.*

*Wisdom unsearchable, God the invisible,  
Love indestructible in frailty appears.  
Lord of infinity, stooping so tenderly,  
Lifts our humanity to the heights of His throne!*

We treat our freedom with sanctity and reverence in the context of people and things where God has placed us. Our involvement in the world in evangelism, social action, home making, politics or business consequently becomes incarnational. We represent the ontology of the transcendence and immanence of the Triune God by being in the world and still being not of it! We respect people as those made in the image of God in all our relationships.

### **The axiological necessity of the Trinity**

Axiology is the study of values. It is derived from the Greek word *axios*, which can be translated as *worthy*. In philosophy, the 2 major divisions of axiology are aesthetics and ethics. Both these subjects deal with values in two different realms.

We shall briefly touch upon the subject of aesthetics. There can be no beauty without variety. The English word *monotonous* makes it clear that absence of variety can result in boredom and meaninglessness. Meaningful language requires different words to connote different things. A good painting is a creative combination of colours and shades. Symphonic music involves an array of instruments combining harmoniously to produce rapturous melody. However, variety (or diversity) alone does not constitute aesthetics – it must convey a meaningful message. Otherwise we would only have would be a noisy babble, a confusing collage, a cacophonous noise! Thus, aesthetics would require unity in diversity. The Bible in various ways portrays the God of beauty and a created world of animals, humans and flowers that display the same characteristics.

Ethics would also require a distinction between good and evil. A philosophy or religion that denies this distinction cannot provide the basis of holy living. In God, the ultimate perfection of ethics is seen as the quality of love. John 17:24 states that the Father is in an eternal love-relationship with the Son (through the Holy Spirit – Rom.5:5) from before the creation of the world. John 3:16 describes God's love for the world - the love that overflows from the table of the Trinity, so to speak! Because the world is created and finite, God's love could not have *begun* with the world – that would have rendered God imperfect before the creation of the world in need of an object to love so that he could find fulfilment. Within the Trinity, the Father is the eternal Subject who loves, the Son the Object of that love and the Spirit the Personal Medium through whom that love is communicated – It is only within the context of Trinitarian religion that there is an adequate philosophical basis for love and beauty.

In his incarnation, Jesus expressed that quality of love in his blemish less character. He lived a perfect life in total obedience to the Father, always doing those things that pleased the Father – John 8:29. He could challenge his detractors to convict him of sin – John 8:46 – and they could not produce true witnesses who would agree in their testimony against him – Mark 14:59. He knew no sin – II Cor.5:21 – he did no sin – I Peter 2:22 – in him was no sin – I John 3:5. He was tempted in all points as we are and yet was without sin – Heb.4:15. His perfection was seen in the robustness of his humanity as he recoiled from the thought of his suffering – Matt.26:39. Even a few moments before his death, he experienced real victory over possible thoughts of resentment by his unilateral forgiveness of the soldiers – Luke 23:34. In his relationship with the Father and with others, he was truly perfect God become perfect Man!

*How shall we respond to the axiological aspect of the Trinity?*

## **PURSUIT OF HOLINESS**

When Jesus was asked which the greatest of the commandments was, he responded by indicating two commandments – not one (Matt.22:37-40)! If we had asked him which of the two was the greater, he would have probably given us this answer – “Both commandments are relational. Without obeying the first – loving God – you cannot truly obey the second – loving your neighbour. But obedience to the first is intimately secret – between you and God. Obedience to the second is the evidence that you have obeyed the first”!

Our ethical life is always relational – Christianity is not an ascetic faith but is life-affirming where all relationships are reoriented because of our relationship to Jesus Christ (Luke 14:25-33). Our pursuit of holiness is relational and not just personal. Even a watching world will not know of

Christianity as a religious faith but rather as a relational one (John13:34,35)! Christians are therefore expected to steward the world by bringing out the admirable combination of truth and beauty in all of life.

### **The epistemological necessity of the Trinity**

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. This word can be best understood only in a relational sense. Knowledge, like love, requires the subject who knows, an object that is known and a medium through which the perception is made. In the event of a Unitarian understanding of God, knowledge is not possible as there is no subject-object relationship. A further danger in the present stage of our civilisation is that knowledge has been reduced to information – the relational aspect of knowledge is totally missing. Thus a boy returning from school is less likely to go out and play with his friends – he would rather sit in front of his computer and play centre forward for *Manchester United!*

Within the Trinitarian framework of the God of the Bible, knowledge is seen to originate within the Being of the Trinity - *Matt.11:27*. This verse is a clear example of how knowledge is constituted by a relationship. Further knowledge is also related to communication. It was this relationship between the First and Second Persons of the Trinity (through the Third Person) that resulted in a wise and benevolent creation – *Gen.1:1-3,26*; *Prov. 8:22-31*; *John 1:3*. In the relationship between two persons, one cannot know the other unless the other chooses to reveal himself (herself). But then, communication itself would be a meaningless babble if there were no object (person) to which (whom) the communication is made. The first three verses of the Bible constitute the first piece of communication in recorded revelation! Creation of the human race is preceded by divine consultation within the Trinity – an indication that this particular creation would express the capacity to communicate more than any other!

There is a philosophical conundrum that we have to take into account. Example: As I type out this lecture, I am coming to know this laptop. The laptop is the object of my knowledge and I am the subject. And the knower always changes as a result of the knowledge but the object does not change. If God is omniscient, he is the supreme Subject. How can he be all-knowing and still unchanging? We tend to view the omniscience of God as a fixed mass of near-infinite knowledge that cannot be dented by additional information. But this gives rise to a distant deistic god who bears little resemblance to the God of the Bible! We turn to *Matt.11:27* again for resolving this problem. Literally translated from the Greek, the second part of this verse should read, “No one keeps knowing the Son except the Father and no one keeps knowing the Father except the Son....” In other words, the infinity of God is dynamic (and not static) infinity. This may be difficult to conceptualise but a simple illustration would be this – God who from eternity knew that this lecture would take place is with us listening with a great deal of interest to what we are discussing (*Mal.3:16*)! Again, transcendence and immanence come together in this marvellous God – God can be immanent in hearing our prayers and transcendently sovereign by factoring in our movements for his ultimate glory!

In his incarnation, Jesus becomes the wisdom of God for us in terms of our salvation, sanctification and redemption – *I Cor.1:24,30*. During his life on earth, we were treated to a revelation of that wisdom both in the words that he spoke and his acts of love and power. When sent to arrest him, the temple guard returned without him - for a police force that failed to carry out an arrest, it was an astonishing excuse – “No one ever spoke like this Man does!” – *John 7:45*. No one indeed spoke like Jesus with such divine authority accompanied by an equally intense human compassion!

## *How shall we respond to the epistemological aspect of the Trinity?*

### PURSUIT OF TRUTH

“All truth is God’s truth”, said Francis Schaeffer. It is the Christian’s duty to pursue truth in God’s Word and God’s world:

- The truth of God's word is held by us and exhibited to the outside world, not only in our belief in the infallibility of the Bible. It has to be seen in our *truthfulness* in our dealing with God and with one another. It is easy to defend the truth in the abstract but it is difficult and contrary to our fallen nature to defend it in the concrete instances of our daily lives. We learn to encounter God in the reading of his word and thus to be increasingly conformed to the image of Christ (*II Cor.3:18*).
- The word of God also provides the basis of our understanding of God's world. the progress we have made in science, technology, arts, music and governance would not have been possible without the recognition, in some measure, of the nature of God and the universe created by him. Rightly does the psalmist say - "...In your light, we see light." (*Psalms 36:9*).

The intellectual, the moral and the relational aspects of God as genuinely reflected in the Church will combine to produce an apologetic that will not be easy to resist.