Perspectives on the Trinity [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Wednesday, 3 October 2012 - 22:10

Read time: 11 minutes
I think it can be honestly said that the Trinity is one of the strangest "ideas" which Christianity holds. To the Christian it is a succinct, human description of what is the true nature of the one, infinite God. For the non-Christian, it seems like a clever wordplay to justify either what the Christian does not actually understand, or to excuse their hypocrisy. In this article I hope to explain a couple of points around the Trinity about which people are often confused.

Along with the accusations already mentioned, Christians have also been accused of actually being polytheists: believing in more than one God, while trying to disguise the fact as monotheism. This misconception has perhaps been reinforced by several "real world" illustrations which have been used in an attempt to explain the Trinity in simple terms. Coming up with good analogies for the Trinity is really difficult. As I said, the true nature of the infinite God *cannot* be fully understood by finite human beings. But God has revealed certain aspects of Himself to us, which does allow us to get to grips with it to some degree. We carefully need to consider what the Bible says about God and then think about the implications thereof. I am not going to present here an exhaustive case for the Trinity. In the first two sections of this article I shall provide some introductory information about the Trinity. In the next two sections I shall address a couple of points which will help you to think about the Trinity. Along the way I shall refer to a couple of accessible resources regarding the Trinity. Lastly I have a closing section. I trust that these points will be of use to the non-Christian as well as the Christian.

What is the Trinity?

First, what do I mean by the Trinity? The Trinity refers to the three distinct *persons* of God (and only the one God): the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is true that the Trinity is never so named in the Bible. Rather, each individual person of the Trinity is named in the Bible and the ancient church fathers formulated the language used concerning the Trinity. This was done by a number of individuals and eventually settled at the Council of Constantinople in the year 360. Each of the persons can be said to be God, but one person is not another. So we have

- The Father IS God
- The Son IS God
- The Holy Spirit IS God
- The Father IS NOT the Son NOR the Holy Spirit
- The Son IS NOT the Father NOR the Holy Spirit
- The Holy Spirit IS NOT the Father NOR the Son

This is sometimes graphically illustrated by the so-called Shield of the Trinity (*Scutum Fidei*), which has been used to illustrate the Trinity since the Middle Ages.

For a brief overview of the historical background of the doctrine of the Trinity (as well as a defense of it), see this link [2].

How not to think about the Trinity

Having a correct understanding of the nature of God as He revealed Himself to us helps us to relate to Him. For some it might just be a matter of semantics, but it is actually to understand that we serve one God, not three; and that the three persons exists simultaneously and are not different forms taken on my God from time to time. Because this is such a technical concept with precise definitions, many misunderstandings and misconceptions have arisen over time. These are usually labelled as heresies, because they present a falsehood about the truth of God as a truth. Without going into too much detail, the most common heresies regarding the Trinity are

- Tritheism: the teaching that there is not just one God, but three different Gods.
- Modalism(/Monarchianism): the teaching that there is only one God with one person, who "acts out" different roles at different times (i.e. never have all the roles at the same time).
- Subordinationism: the teaching that the Son and the Holy Spirit are lesser persons than the person of the Father.

Father and Son?

Many people are put off by the language used within the Trinity: specifically that of "Father" and "Son". How, the question is often asked, does that not imply polytheism[1]? A father and a son are distinct and fathers have sons with women, which sounds very much like the polytheistic religions of the West (in particular those of Roman, Greek, Norse, Egyptian and other mythologies with which the average person in the West is, at least to a reasonable degree, acquainted).

The key to understanding this is knowing that the terms "Father" and "Son" refer to positions of authority, not heredity[2]. The Son (and the Holy Spirit) submit to the Father. This might sound like the Subordinationist heresy, but it is not: the person of the Father is equal to the person of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, but the Son and the Holy Spirit willingly submit to the Father. Think of how the law of a country would view a father and a son: it acknowledges a relationship without considering the son to be a lesser person (human being) than the father.

An Illustration for the Trinity

Coming up with an illustration for the Trinity is difficult exactly because it is such a distinct phenomenon. In fact, it was originally necessary to *invent* special language to describe the Trinity[3]! As I have mentioned, such examples often lead to describing a heresy, rather than the true nature of the Trinity. For example, take the example of water which can exist in three states (steam, water and ice), all while still being the same thing, which is H_2O (water). The problem with this illustration is that water (or at least, any single water molecule) can never be in all of these states at the same time: it is only ever one. This leads to modalism.

It is thus with understandable caution that I present my[4] illustration. But I believe that while it is an imperfect illustration, it does not lead to one of the aforementioned heresies. My illustration comes from nature. Most illustrations have as a starting point the cardinality of the Trinity, i.e. three of something, and then tries to reason from there. I believe that people can fairly easily understand the fact when we say that there are three persons in the Trinity, but struggle in understanding the dynamics which exist between the persons. So my illustration has that as a starting point and although I do not have "three of something" (I only have two), I believe that the average person would be able to generalise the concept explained in the illustration to "three of something".

If you open up your curtains during the day, you will likely see a beam of light come through the window. Everyone is able to recognise light—in fact, without light we would not be able to visually recognise anything! Light is everywhere, constantly bouncing off of things, which gives us the colours which we see. It is a fascinating thing, and when scientists started studying light, one of the questions which they asked is, what is the nature of light? Two seemingly competing theories arose:

light is a bunch of particles bouncing off of things, or light is waves which rolls around (like the waves we see in the ocean)5. Then some people did some experiments and conclusively found that light was indeed a particle. Other people did other experiments and conclusively found that light is a wave. Initially this caused a great deal of confusion, but soon scientists came to accept (and still do) the *dual nature* of light. Light is *both* a particle and a wave *at the same time*, all while being the *same thing*. But particles and waves are physically distinct things, each having its own set of properties. And neither particles nor waves are "superior" to the other: each one is vitally important for the physical universe to function as it does. We can thus summarise in saying

- Light IS a wave
- Light IS a particle
- A wave IS NOT a particle

This phenomenon looks strikingly familiar to that of the Trinity. And it cannot be said that theologians adopted this imagery from nature to try and make contradictions in their religious dogma seem coherent: rather, the example of nature was only discovered about 1500 after the theologians had to invent language to try and explain the revealed nature of God!

So if you ever find yourself in a position where you need to explain the Trinity to someone, just remember

> Again, therefore, Jesus spoke to them, saying, 'I am the light of the world. He who follows me will not walk in the darkness, but will have the light of life.'
>
> John 8:12

In Closing

In this article I discussed the holy Trinity in a non-exhaustive way. My primary goal was to clarify some points and misconceptions around it without going into too much detail. Apart from the link provided earlier, the following image is a good summary of the basics of the Trinity (as discussed in the first two sections). It also references some good resources to learn more about the Trinity. The original can be found at this page [3] and was made by Challies [4]:


[3]
Grace & peace

- 1. I think that Muslims and Jews in particular struggle with this issue. However I rarely see this objection applied to the Holy Spirit. Both of these religions affirm that God (who is immaterial) has a Spirit. So how would "eliminating" the person of the Son end the discussion? How do they reconcile that sometimes God is spoken of, and sometimes the Spirit of God?
- 2. Note that in Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:35 it is the *Holy Spirit* which conceives Jesus within the virgin Mary, not the Father, as one would expect from a story influenced by Western polytheistic religions.
- 3. For example, it is thought that Tertullian (who was a trained lawyer as well as a priest) invented the Latin word for, amongst many others, "person", and even the word "Trinity" itself.
- 4. While I did not get this idea from another source, the following illustration has actually been used before by some people, so I cannot claim absolute originality.
- 5. It has been suggested to me that this illustration can be of three things: particles, and electric and magnetic waves. Light is a type of electromagnetic radiation and has both magnetic and electric properties. However I am not keen on this expansion of the illustration.

> For one thing it makes it technically more complex. For another, I do not believe that the same duality which exists between particles and waves exist between electric and magnetic waves. Electromagnetism is (and has been for a long time) well understood. I contend that it should suffice to have only two parts in this illustration and then the audience can generalise to three.

Categories:

- Illustrations [5]
- Terminology & Concepts [6]

Tags:

- trinity [7]
- theology [8]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/177

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/177
[2] http://jacoballee.com/1/post/2012/09/the-trinity-a-brief-historical-background-defense-of-the-doctrine.html
[3] http://www.challies.com/resources/visual-theology-the-trinity
[4] http://www.challies.com/
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