

Core Theology 2 The Trinity

I would claim that the Trinity (Tri-unity) is the one doctrine that is essential to the Church. It is the one doctrine that we must have. The doctrine of the Trinity says 'that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity'. The Trinity expresses essentially what we come to know about God. It specifies a full doctrine of God the Father, a full doctrine of God the Son and a full doctrine of God the Holy Spirit.

The Trinity is a doctrine intended to defend the faith. The Trinity is not the gospel. We do not preach the Trinity as though it is the message of salvation. However, it underwrites what we think salvation is. Jesus Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life (John 14:6). Therefore Christianity is about the truth 'which sets us free' (John 8:32). That which is true will always come under the attack of the false. The truth is one position; the false is many positions. The Church has found by experience that any true teaching will come under attack from false or rival interpretations. If Christianity was about tolerating rival interpretations of its doctrines we would simply have an amalgam of agreed and disagreed positions. Nearly every aspect of the nature of God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit has been contested and will continue to be so contested. The individualism of our culture encourages private interpretations. We treat this as a democratic right.

I picture the doctrine of the Trinity as a rope around three pegs in the ground. Each peg stands for a member of the Trinity. Believers, clinging to orthodoxy (right opinion) are within the rope. When they have various experiences or revelations of the work of the Holy Spirit (or the ministry of Jesus Christ with the marginalised), they can attempt to over-emphasise the significance of that member of the Trinity and start to see God as only working that way. This becomes a distortion of the faith. For instance, if one is impressed with the holiness and distance of God one will find it difficult to accept Jesus as God. He is too local and human. Therefore an adjustment is made to say that Jesus simply was a man with divine significance. (This is called Adoptionism, whereby God adopted a man for His purposes.) Another false teaching (heresy) was Patripassionism which claimed that the Father suffered as the Son, that the Father was crucified. On the one hand, it is important not to confuse the Persons or, on the other hand, not to deny the Unity of the Godhead.

The Trinity in the Bible.

The doctrine of the trinity is not specified as such in the Bible. But the Trinity is consistent with Biblical revelation. In the OT God speaks of 'Us' (Gen 1:26, 3:22). In Gen 18 God appears as three men to Abraham (Gen 18:1-33). The three Persons of the Trinity are all mentioned in one verse in Luke 1:35. There is the baptismal formula of Mtt 28:19. The relationship between Jesus and the Father is described in John 14:9-11,25; 15:26; 16:13-15, 32; 17:1-5,24. Again the three Persons are mentioned in I Cor 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14; 1 Peter 1:2. Again the experience of the Trinity is described in Acts 16 in the direction given by God: v6 - the Holy Spirit, v7 - the Spirit of Jesus, v10 - the Lord.

The Church has formulated the doctrine of the Trinity by a circuitous route, steering its way around many heresies or false teachings. Some of these may be listed as follows. The true teaching is Jesus as fully God and fully Man. Variations can tend toward over-emphasising God or Man. The Incarnation says that God became man in Jesus Christ. That is, in Jesus Christ all the fullness of the Godhead dwelt bodily (Col 2:9).

GOD (one extreme)

Monarchianism - The unity of the sovereign God

Adoptionism - God cannot be human, Jesus adopted

Modalism - the Persons as modes or expressions of God

JESUS CHRIST - Fully God and fully Man (Orthodox position)

Nestorianism - Jesus the man joined to God

Apollinarianism - the Logos occupied rational soul of Jesus

Arianism - There was a time when Jesus was not. (A creature)

MAN (other extreme)

The Athanasian Creed.

This formulation (not written by Athanasius) appeared around 500 AD. It is an expression of Latin rather than Greek Christianity. This is saying that the form of theology developed depended on the language and culture being used. That is, Christianity is Incarnational, able to adapt its truth to various settings and cultures. Compare this with the Koran (Arabic) and the Jewish (Hebrew) texts which are associated with a particular language. Basically this formulation of the Trinity is based around three persons having one essence. The intention is to not confuse the Persons nor divide the essence. The full text of the creed, with notes, is as follows

1. Whoever will be saved: before all things it is necessary that he hold the Catholic Faith.

2. Which Faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish eternally.

(The anathema: let him be accursed, devoted to destruction. (Joshua 7:12)) This is strong language to condemn false teaching. There is always the problem of false teaching in the church and false belief in our lives. As human beings we always wrap the truth around our experience leading to distortions and personal taste in believing.

3. And the catholic Faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;

(catholic means universal.)

4. Neither confounding the Persons, nor dividing the Substance.

This is the key formula. This is diversity in unity. There are individual differences in Person but unity in Substance or Essence.

5. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son and another of the Holy Spirit.

6. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty co-eternal.

7. As the Father is, so is the Son, and so is the Holy Spirit.

8. The Father uncreated, the Son uncreated, and the Holy Spirit uncreated.

9. The Father incomprehensible, the Son incomprehensible and the Holy Spirit incomprehensible.

10. The Father eternal, the Son eternal and the Holy Spirit eternal.

This passage stresses the unity of the Godhead. Christians believe in One God. The other monotheistic religions, Judaism and Islam claim that Christianity is polytheistic (with three gods). Following the formula this is a division of the Substance. The Persons of the Godhead are described as equal in glory and co-eternal in majesty. Whatever the character of One then so is the Other. The Godhead is uncreated, incomprehensible (beyond human understanding) and eternal.

11. And yet there are not three eternals but one eternal.

12. As also there are not three incomprehensibles, nor three uncreated: but one uncreated and one incomprehensible.

This is typical of the desire to compensate for possible distortions one way or the other.

13. So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty and the Holy Spirit almighty.

14. Yet there are not three almighties but one almighty.

There is a distinction here between almightiness and omnipotence. Omnipotence says that God can do anything, which can immediately raise logical problems (conundrums) such as Can God create a stone too heavy for God to lift? Can God create a problem God cannot solve? Can God solve unsolvable problems? To say No limits omnipotence. How can God create something that God cannot do? Almightyness suggests that God does whatever is consistent with God's nature. If God could do anything then God could be evil. But this is not God's nature.

15. So the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God.

16. And yet there are not three Gods but one God.

17. So likewise the Father is one Lord, the Son is Lord and the Holy Spirit is Lord.

18. Yet there are not three Lords but one Lord (1 Cor 12:6).

19. For we are compelled by the Christian truth to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be God and Lord.

20. So we are forbidden by the catholic Faith to say that there are three Gods or three Lords.

There follows a passage making clear the distinction between the Father as uncreated, the Son as begotten and the Holy Spirit as proceeding. This procession and ordering is significant.

21. The Father is made of none, neither created nor begotten.

22. The Son is of the Father alone; not made nor created but begotten.

23. The Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son, neither made, created nor begotten but proceeding.

24. So there is one Father not three Fathers; one Son not three Sons; one Holy Spirit not three Holy Spirits.

25. And in the Trinity none is before nor any after; none is greater and none less than the other.

26. But all three Persons are co-eternal together and co-equal.

27. So that in all things, as has been said, the Unity in Trinity and Trinity in Unity is to be worshipped.

28. He therefore that will be saved must so think on the Trinity.

The Incarnation.

A major concern is the proper understanding of the nature of Jesus Christ. Is Jesus simply a very good man caught up into a divine character? Or was He really God who only appeared to be human and therefore could not really die or suffer? The Incarnation (= in the flesh) is essential Christian teaching: Jesus is fully God and fully Man.

29. Furthermore, it is necessary to eternal salvation to rightly believe the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ.

30. For the right Faith is that we believe and confess that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man.

The problem becomes How do you express this? Cults, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses entirely avoid the Trinity.

31. God of the Substance of the Father, begotten before all worlds; and Man of the substance of His Mother, born in the world.

32. Perfect God and perfect Man, living with a reasonable soul and human flesh.

33. Equal to the Father as touching His Godhead and inferior to the Father as touching His Manhood.

34. Who, although He is God and Man, yet He is not two but one Christ.

35. One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh, but by the taking of the Manhood into God.

36. One altogether, not by confusion of the Substance but by unity of the Person.

37. For as the reasonable soul and flesh is one man, so God and Man is one Christ.

This has become the Church's experience of Jesus Christ. This is the mechanism by which we can say the most about Him.

38. Who suffered for our salvation, descended into hell, rose again from the dead on the third day.

39. He ascended into heaven. He is sitting on the right hand of the Father, God almighty; from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.

40. At whose coming all men shall rise again with their bodies and shall give account for their own works (2 Cor 5:10).

41. And they that have done good shall go into eternal life, and those that have done evil shall go into eternal fire (Rev 20:15).

All this is based on past and future history.

42. This is the Catholic Faith, which unless a man believes faithfully, he cannot be saved.

So the intention of the creed is to maintain a balance between certain elements of the Faith. These elements such as the manhood of Jesus Christ, or the Divinity of a sovereign God, or the power of the Holy Spirit can be accentuated (because of our experiences) creating a distortion of the faith. We are not judged for what we believe, but false belief must lead to wrong behaviour which is judged. There is a very strong connection between what we believe and what we do, because we only do what we can believe. We only permit ourselves to do what is believable for us. The Trinity allows a maximum understanding of God.

Summary

We worship God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. We do not confound the Persons nor divide the substance. The Godhead is One, glory co-equal and Majesty co-eternal.

Each Person of the Godhead is uncreated (which means that there is no time when they were not). Each Person is incomprehensible, eternal, almighty and Lord. 'Incomprehensible' means not fully understood but still expressible. (We can talk about Love and not fully understand. Yet we think we know it when we have it.)

The Father is Unbegotten, the Son is Begotten and the Spirit is proceeding. The Incarnation says that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully Man not by conversion of Godhead into flesh but by the taking of Manhood into Godhead.