

THE DIVINE TRINITY

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I. Methodology

- A. Investigate the activities of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (as well as statements about them) in passages where they are mentioned together, thus observing interaction in real circumstances.
- B. Examples of relational activities are clearer than abstract statements about relationship. That procedure minimizes problems created by figurative language, the various meanings that words like “one” can have, and the possibility of accommodation to our mode of thinking and being.
- C. Start with passages that talk about the three and then study the texts that use the word *one*. The word *three* is clearer than *one* because *one* can be understood in more than one way.
- D. Make sure to read the material before and after verses that might seem confusing. Doing so establishes the sense in which unclear statements are meant.

II. Clusters of New Testament Passages

- A. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Matthew 3:16-17 (= Mark 1:10-11; Luke 3:21-22); John 14:16-17, 25-26; 15:26-27; 16:7-15; Matthew 28:19; Acts 2:29-36; 7:55; 20:28? (“*... the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers to feed the church of God/Lord [manuscript variation] that he purchased with his own blood.*”); Romans 15:30?; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 1:21-22; 13:14; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; 1 John 5:4-8. Note also Revelation 1:4-5: “*Grace ... from [a] the one who is and who was and who is to come and from [b] the seven spirits that are before his throne and from [c] Jesus Christ ...*”; perhaps the “seven spirits” means the Holy Spirit, who is called “seven spirits” as a way to stress completeness (*i.e.*, the full presence of the Spirit).

Plural pronouns are sometimes used for deity in the Old Testament: Genesis 1:26; 3:22*; 11:7; Isaiah 6:8. In Genesis 18:1 “*the Lord*” appeared to Abraham at Mamre. When the patriarch looked up from the door of his tent, he saw “*three men*” (18:2). In 18:9 they say to him while in 18:10 the narrative continues with “*I will surely return to you.*” Could this be a manifestation of the trinity?

- B. Father and Son: Matthew 10:40; Luke 23:46; John 3:16, 35; 8:17-18; 14:6, 28; 16:28; 17:1, 3, 5, 18; (2 Thessalonians 3:5); 1 Timothy 2:5
- C. Son and Holy Spirit: Luke 1:35; John 1:33-34; 16:7, 13-14

III. Passages Emphasizing Distinction Within the Trinity

A. Concepts of Son and Holy Spirit

1. The Holy Spirit conceived the Son (?): Luke **1:35**.
2. The Holy Spirit descended on the Son: John **1:33-34**.
3. The Son will send the Holy Spirit: John **16:7**.
4. The Holy Spirit will not speak of himself, but of the Son: John **16:13-14**.
5. The Holy Spirit will glorify the Son: John **16:15**.

B. Father and Holy Spirit

1. The Father sends the Spirit: John **14:26**.
2. The Spirit proceeds from the Father: John **15:26**.
3. The Holy Spirit intercedes for people to God: Romans **8:26**.

C. Father and Son

1. The Father loves the Son and gives everything into his hand: John **3:35**.
2. The Son does the Father's will: Luke **22:42** (= Matthew **26:39**; Mark **14:36**); John **6:38**.
3. The Son knows the Father and *vice versa*: Matthew **11:27-30**.
4. The Father glorifies the Son: John **12:28; 17:1**.
5. The Son prays to the Father (John **12:28**) and is answered (Matthew **17:5**).
6. The Son is with the Father: John **1:2; 17:5**.
7. The Son goes to the Father: John **14:28**.
8. The Son intercedes between people and God: John **14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5**.
The ministry of intercession here is in the post-incarnate state.
9. The Father bears witness to the Son: John **8:16-18**. The Father and the Son make two witnesses.
10. The Father sent/gave the Son: Matthew **10:40** (cp. John **20:21**); **3:16; 8:16-18; 17:3, 18**.
11. The Father said, "Hear him": Matthew **17:5**.
12. 2 Peter **1:2** suggests that when not otherwise qualified, "God" means the Father or the godhead undistinguished: "*Grace to you and peace be multiplied in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.*"

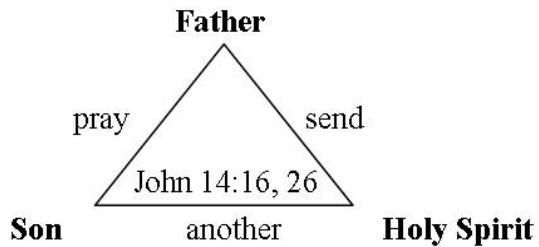
IV. Passages and Concepts Emphasizing Identity Within the Trinity

- A. The Great Commission: Matthew **28:18-20**
- B. Father-in-Son and *vice versa*: John **10:38; 14:10, 11, 20; 17:21, 23**
- C. Seeing the Son is [as good as] seeing the Father: John **14:7-10; 15:(23-)24**.
- D. Oneness of the Father and the Son: John **10:30, (33)**.
- E. 1 John **5:4-8**

V. Key contexts

- A. The baptism account: Matthew **3:16**; Mark **1:9-11**; Luke **3:21-22**; John **1:33f**

B. The procession of the Spirit: John 14:16, 26



C. Intercession (note Galatians 3:20)

VI. Suggested models (objective trinity)

*A. Ideal marriage: Genesis 1:26-27 + 2:24

1. Proposal: the twoness-in-oneness of marriage in humankind reflects the threeness-in-oneness of the trinity in deity—the image of God in its broad sense.
2. Observations on parallelism in Genesis 1:26-27
3. Effects of the proposal
 - a. Captures both the distinctness and the oneness within the Godhead
 - b. Maintains the personal element in deity
 - c. Maintains the same nature
 - d. Complementary roles
 - e. Different order/rank/levels of “hierarchy”
 - f. Compénétration
 - g. Full range of life
 - h. Common values and purposes
 - i. Simultaneous threeness-in-oneness
4. Caution: the distinctive fleshly nature people have does not pertain to the parallels because God as spirit has no consort as often is the case in pagan religions.

B. Ideal church: John 17:11, 20-23 (note 15:10; Ephesians 5:22-33) and the body imagery for the church (Romans 12:4-5; 1 Corinthians 10:16-17; 12:12-30; Ephesians 3:6; 4:4, 16-17)

C. Compare 1 John 5:8: “*There are three that bear witness, the Spirit and the water and the blood, and the three are one [in agreement].*”

D. The trinity should be understood in terms of persons in relationship: interpersonalism.

1. Interpersonalism captures both distinctness and oneness at the same time, the three in one total picture.

2. Interpersonal trinity shows how both difference and oneness relate to each; it shows the sense in which they are three and one. The distinctness and relationship

between the Father, Son, and Spirit is an interpersonal one: the Son prays to the Father and the Spirit is another comforter (John 14:16).

The trinity is not just any kind of threeness-in-oneness; it is interpersonal threeness-in-oneness and contemporary threeness-in-oneness. That point is important because it can account for the somewhat overlapping character of even personal identity. Who we “are”—in a psychological sense at least—is the sum of all our aspects of being, action, and relationship. Interpersonal threeness-in-oneness can also take into account the *plural, reciprocal, transactional, complementary, and compenetrating* features of personal relationship.

Other three-in-one situations are significantly inadequate, because they lack this interpersonal element even though they do have contemporary threeness-in-oneness. That is the fundamental problem with emanationism, tritheism, manifestative/economic trinity. They do not involve the kind or degree of distinction, on the one hand, or oneness, on the other, that characterizes interpersonal oneness.

Speaking of interpersonal threeness-in-oneness avoids the verbal entanglements associated with saying “the Father, Son, and Spirit are separate,” “they are together,” “they are one,” and so on. Such statements have at least one term that can carry more than one meaning; consequently, people spend a lot of time sorting through those options to clarify which they mean. The result is a cacophony of confusion filled with subtle distinctions that leave the hearer cold. “Trinity” ends up dying a death of a thousand qualifications. Non-interpersonal models do not get at interpersonal gestalt, and they do not naturally incorporate complementariness.

Texts like those above in II and III show that during history Father, Son, and Spirit have interpersonal threeness-in-oneness. Before and after history they have interpersonal threeness-in-oneness. Strictly speaking, we cannot show that they have eternal threeness-in-oneness even though that makes the best sense given what we know about personal and interpersonal identity. Of course, it cannot be shown either that somehow they become one person at some time in the future.

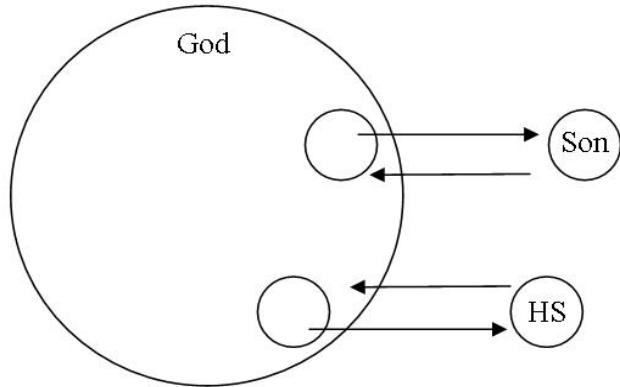
VII. General approaches

- A. Three permanently distinct beings (trinity and tritheism)
- B. Three temporarily distinct beings. The idea that part of God was drawn aside and incarnated and will ultimately return to the one: 1 Corinthians 15:28 is sometimes appealed to (note the *all-in-all* expression; note also the *a-in-b-in-a* idea).
- C. Three emanations (Origen)
- D. Three beings with first creating the second as functional deity and creating the third as divine energy
- E. Three manifestations of the same individual

VIII. Alternatives set aside

- A. Monarchianism (God as a single individual): Isaiah 43:11; Deuteronomy 6:4
 - 1. Modalistic (dynamic; economic trinity)

- 2. Adoptionistic: Jesus is God's adopted son.
- B. Emanationism: Origen's doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son (like a ray of light continuously generated by the sun)
- C. Tritheism (polytheism) *vs.* trinity contrasts in the way a man and a woman contrasts with a husband-and-wife relationship and operation.
- D. Manifestative trinity: the idea is that Father, Son, and Spirit are three roles or manifestations in which God presents himself. (But see John 1:2; 17:5.)



E. Other models

1. Three cookies from the same dough
2. Three points of one iceberg
3. Three corners of one triangle
4. Three states of one chemical: gas, solid, liquid
5. Three members of one committee
6. Three functions of one mind: memory, reason, will
7. Three relationships by one person: one person who is a son, a father, and a brother
8. The white, yolk, and shell of one egg (cp. cherry pie: crust, cherries, and thickening)

F. The supposition that deity does not conform to the categories of finite intelligence (*e.g.*, the idea that deity is such that "opposites" may both be true)

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IX. Passages raised as difficulties for the above view

The Gospel of John has the most Christological material of any gospel. Revelation, Hebrews, and Philippians also have “high Christology.”

The texts that have caused the most misunderstanding are in John’s gospel. Interpreters often take them as disallowing distinctness of persons between Father and Son; yet **14:16** is the clearest text in the whole Bible on the distinctness between Father, Son, and Spirit.

A. John **10:30**: “*I and the Father are at one*”

The statement means “same” in kind and purpose; we are “*at one*” (note: **10:31-39**). The Son equals the father in that he does the Father’s works, is in the Father and *vice versa*; and the Father sanctified and sent him (cp. 1 John **5:8**). The following verse brings up the Son of God, which involves distinction from the Father.

B. John **14:7-10; 15:24**: “*Seeing me is seeing the Father.*”

The preceding and succeeding contexts mention all three (**14:7, 9**). “*The one that has seen me has seen the One who sent me.*” There must be distinction between sender and sent, yet he says seeing the sent is seeing the sender. So, the expression is a way of saying, “. . . is as good as.” Sending the Son was for revealing/declaring the Father (cp. John **1:18**). In seeing what the Son is like, we see what the Father is like insofar as deity can be manifested in the material realm. Perhaps the passage is best read with an emphasis on me rather than on seen: “*Have I been so long time with you, and you have not seen me? If you have seen me, you have seen the Father*”; that is, “*If you have seen me, you have seen [what the Father is like].*” The reader should also note that in **15:23** Jesus says, “*Hating me is hating the Father too,*” which implies distinction between them.

Should we make any connection between “seeing God” in this context and Jesus’ comment in Matthew **5:8** that the pure in heart will see God? John **12:44-45** is interesting in connection with the present topic: “*He that believes on me believes not [only] on me but on him that sent me. And he that beholds me beholds him that sent me.*”

When you (or Moses) ask to see the Father, you really want to know what the Father looks like. If you have seen Christ, you have seen what he looks like. They look just alike. “*Like Father; like Son.*” The Son “looks just like” the Father. Compare also the English expression, “*If you have seen one, you have seen them all.*” What Christ is like is the closest thing people can have of seeing the Father, because in his own nature no one has seen or “can see” God (1 Timothy **6:16**).

C. John **14:12 + 18; 14:28**; “*I’m going away . . . and I’m coming to you,*” taken to mean the coming of the Spirit is the next form (spiritual) of the Son (physical).

Compare 14:3 with 14:18: a. = the Son's second coming, not the Spirit's coming.

or

b. = the Spirit's representative coming for the Son

or

*c. = the Spirit's representative coming is the proleptic presence (earnest) till the Son's second coming. He comes representatively through the Spirit (on the day of Pentecost) until he comes personally in the end (parousia).

The Father will send the Spirit in Christ's name (14:26).

D. John 14:10, 11, 20: "*The Father is in the Son, and the Son is in the Father.*"

Note 10:28; 14:20; 17:21-24.

A-in-b-in-a means close identification (via love?), not identicalness. There is mutuality and reciprocity. In a rougher analogy, interpersonal influence and love are like interpenetrating gases blown into the same container.

E. Deuteronomy 6:4: "*The Lord our God is one Lord.*"

1. It must mean "solicity" (uniqueness), not singleness. Singleness would not afford a reason to love him; a person may love God whether God is single or triune. "God is not a unit but a union/unity."

2. "One": see Ezekiel 7:5; Job 23:13; cp. תְּמִימָן בָּהּ; ("only son"; Genesis 22:16)

F. Isaiah 43:11: "*I, even I, am Yahweh; and there is no savior besides me.*"

It is easier to understand passages about oneness in light of passages about prayer, sending, intercession, and so on, than it is somehow to understand these last activities as instances of singularity.

X. General Observations

A. The trinity is not a mathematical absurdity; *they* are not three in the same sense as *they* are one. The threeness and the oneness are not at the same level; the threeness is within the oneness.

1. Three as to individual personalities

2. One

a. Uniqueness: from all others proposed as gods (kind in contrast within a category)

- b. Commonality: of the same nature and purpose (kind in comparison within a category). In Galatians 3:28 Paul says there is no bond or free, male or female; but all are one in Christ. *One* here does not mean “united” or “the same one,” but everyone is viewed as the same (kind) in Christ.
 - c. “Loneness”: only Yahveh is in the category of deity: he is the “only one.”
 - d. “Corporateness”: a whole is bigger than the sum of its parts (unity within the category). His prayer in John 17 could include oneness in a corporate sense, or
 - e. “Unicity”: complementariness; they complement each other’s work; or
 - f. “Unity”: Jesus’ prayer in John 17 records Jesus’ prayer that his disciples would be one as he and the Father are one. In such a context, “one” can mean “united.” They are “at one.”

B. Most models neglect the unity at the expense of the distinctness and *vice versa*.

C. Understanding of the trinity is through divinely chosen models.

The reason for sticking with divinely chosen models is that if we do not do so, we may construct something that does not parallel the reality at crucial points. The idea of a son who is later a father who is later a grandfather is a model that gets three and one, but it fails to have them at the same time, the mark of Father-Son-Spirit in John 14:16 and other places.

D. Knowledge of the trinity is partial.

Within the trinity there is distinction during time and before time. The oneness of a bucket of water (before time) from which a cup of water is later taken (during time) does not explain John 10:30, where Jesus says that he and the Father are one and says it during the incarnation, when supposedly a monarchianist must admit there was separateness. That same thing is said of their relationship before time. Consequently, the question becomes one of where we get the idea that relationship was any different before time from what it was in time. Likewise, we have to ask why there is some problem with their being distinct before as they were in time.

XI. Reasons for Interest in the Trinity Discussion

- A. Desire to understand what God has revealed to us about himself
- B. Missions to Jews and Muslims: We must understand the issue sufficiently to articulate it to non-Christians and remove unnecessary stumbling blocks to their accepting the Christian message.
- C. Christian unity: some groups within Christendom as well as individuals in more “mainline” movements object to the traditional formulation of trinitarianism. We have to decide whether the alternatives they adopt are sufficiently objectionable to warrant separation, division, and withdrawal of fellowship. We may find it possible to maintain fellowship to the extent of agreement while not putting them in leadership positions

Concluding Summaries

The trinity involves an interpersonal threeness-in-oneness. The distinctness between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit takes place within their larger oneness. That threeness-in-oneness is at the same time rather than at different times.

1. They have the same nature: deity; that is, they are not of different kinds or different degrees within a kind—homoousia (of the same kind, ὁμοούσια) rather than homoiousia (of a similar kind, ὁμοιούσια).
2. They serve complementary roles: they are not three clones, doing the same thing, or working in parallel, or working against one another.
3. They have different rank: they have order within the whole rather than being of equal authority.
4. They are objectively distinguishable.

There is (1) plurality, (2) contemporaneousness, (e) complementariness, and (4) compenetration.

- a. John **14:16** shows the distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit at least during time.
- b. John **1:1-2**, and so on, show the distinction between Father and Son before the incarnation.
- c. Revelation shows the distinction between Father and Son after the ascension.

It is difficult to prove conclusively the eternal pre-existent and eschatological distinction between them. It is also difficult to disprove the createdness of the Son, but it is not positively taught either. The burden of proof is always on the affirmative.