

# The Role of the Trinity in Creating and Sustaining the World

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## Areas we will address:

- An overview of the Trinity from a biblical perspective – using Old Testament and New Testament texts
- History of Theological Affirmation
- How do we understand it, or explain it? *If we could explain God, then He would not be God.*
- Is Christ in the Old Testament?
- The necessity of affirming the Trinity in creation.



We approach the topic of the Trinity, with an affirmation that God Himself is a mystery that is beyond grasp with our finite minds. The vastness of God simply defies human reason. A “mystery is not an irrationality... it overwhelms the capacity of human reason.” (McGrath)

We approach the topic of the Trinity with an affirmation of its truthfulness as a Central Christian doctrine and an acknowledgment of our inability to fully comprehend it.

We approach the topic of the Trinity with an affirmation of the clear and explicit biblical basis for its tenets, and with an acknowledgment of our inability to adequately explain it.

We approach the topic of the Trinity with an affirmation of our ability to intellectually state it, but ineffectually explain it.

## A Definition of the Trinity

“We may define the doctrine of the Trinity as follows: God exists eternally as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God.” (Grudem: 226)

“We teach that the Godhead eternally and co-equally exists as Father, Son, and Spirit. The doctrine of the Trinity neither teaches there are three Gods, nor that the one God reveals himself in three different forms. Rather, the doctrine teaches that in the one being that is God there eternally exists three distinct persons all of whom share one divine essence.” (Doctrinal Statement - Piedmont Divinity School website)

Note that both of these include three very important statements in some form, as do virtually all orthodox understandings and definitions:

- ▶ God is three persons
- ▶ Each person is fully God
- ▶ There is one God

## Nicene Creed 325 AD

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, of all that is seen and unseen. We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father; God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God; begotten not made, one in being with the Father.

1. God in Three Persons: God is of one essence and each person retains the one essence. The persons are Homoousios (of the same essence) not Homoiousios (of similar essence). It is very important to recognize that the use of distinct “Persons” is critical rather than assert that God is one person in three forms or manifestations (which is the heresy of modalism)

2. Each Person is Fully God: each person of the Trinity is fully God and retains all the attributes of God without limitation or inhibition. These incommunicable attributes include His eternal existence; infiniteness and timeless and outside of spatial dimensions; unchangingness; omnipresence; omnipotence; and omniscience. These attributes are fully found in all three persons.

3. There is One God. He is not only the one true God, but He is God alone. The monotheism of the OT and NT is clear that God is One, and that our worship of God is not the worship of three Gods, but one. This statement is importantly distinct from the concepts of polytheism or pantheism. We also are distinct from the monotheism of Judaism in that we acknowledge three Persons, and affirm the full deity of Jesus Christ as God.

So how does this work and how does Scripture make the distinctions of the three persons... One God, but three persons?

## I. Function and Person

- ▶ The manner in which the one God relates to the world He has created can be understood through functions, sometimes referred to as activities. This functioning of the Godhead/Trinity is also referred to at times as the “economy of the Trinity” (Grudem 248) in which the Persons work in the world.
- ▶ These functions are revealed in Scripture and can be demonstrated by a number of textual concepts: The Father spoke the world into existence (Genesis 1), and John 1, Colossians 1:16, and Hebrews 1:2 indicate that it was through him (by Him and for Him) that the creative activity was effected. Some other examples would include:
  - ▶ The Father commands, directs, and sends (Ephesians 3:14-15)
  - ▶ The Son obeys, reveals God to us, and is himself called the Word of God (John 1, Phil 2:5-11)
  - ▶ The Spirit guides, comforts, empowers (John 14 et al)
- ▶ “The only distinctions between the members of the Trinity are in the ways they relate to each other and to the creation.” (Grudem 250)

So how does this work and how does Scripture make the distinctions of the three persons...

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## II. Person as distinctive

- ▶ But importantly the concept of persons is in focus as a distinctive:
  - persons is often described using concept of the Greek persona, and many significant theologians point to this use of the masks of Greek theater.
- ▶ However, this is not totally adequate since we have the specific view of the deity of Christ as presented in the incarnation.
  - the incarnation advances the reality of Christ in “flesh”. The Gospel of John and the letter of 1 John presents the reality of God incarnate.
  - The NT affirms strongly the hypostatic union of Christ: He was fully God, and fully man.



## Scriptures which identify the Trinity:

### God is One:

- ▶ Deuteronomy 6:4 Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!
- ▶ Galatians 3:20 Now a mediator is not for one *party only*; whereas God is *only one*

### The Deity of Christ:

- ▶ Matthew 3:16-17 After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold a voice out of the heavens said, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased."
- ▶ John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- ▶ John 1:14 And the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as on the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

## Scriptures which identify the Trinity:

- continued-

- ▶ John 8:58 Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am."
- ▶ John 20: 28 My Lord and my God! (the confession of Thomas)
- ▶ Hebrew 1:8 But of the Son, He says, 'Thy Throne, O God is forever and ever...'"
- ▶ Hebrews 1:3 And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature...
- ▶ Titus 2:13 ...looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.

## The Spirit:

- ▶ Isaiah 48:16 “Come near to Me, listen to this: From the first I have not spoken in secret, From the time it took place, I was there. And now the Lord GOD has sent Me, and His Spirit.”
- ▶ Acts 5:3-4 But Peter said, “Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back *some* of the price of the land? While it remained *unsold*, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not under your control? Why is it that you have conceived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men, but to God.”

## Trinitarian benedictions or sayings:

- ▶ 1 Cor 1:3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
- ▶ 1 Peter 1:2 ... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood: May grace and peace be yours in the fullest measure.
- ▶ Matthew 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit,
- ▶ 2 Corinthians 13:14 The grace of the Lord, Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Spirit, be with you all.
- ▶ Matthew 28:19 Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

## Analogies:

Analogies are helpful because they provide a way of correlating an unknown concept to one that is known or a complex concept to one that is simple. Analogies are limited since there is not normally a one-to-one correspondence between all parts of the concepts used for comparison. Thus, analogies break down at some point due to their inability to fully explain every property or function of the concept.

In the case of the Trinity, which is beyond our comprehension to fully explain, analogies only provide inadequate correlations.

Some examples of helpful analogies, but which are also inadequate.

1. The three properties of H<sub>2</sub>O: water, steam, ice – are not all three at the same time
2. The various relationships of a person such as Father, Son, Husband (among others such as uncle, boss, friend etc.) problem: only one person in three modes or relationships – not three persons
3. The three petals or leaves of a clover – problem: each petal is just one part of the clover, but could not be identified as a whole clover in and of itself
4. The parts of a single tree: roots, trunk, branches – the same issue as a clover and leaf
5. Shadows that flow from various light angles – problem: only one person, not three

## Common errors or heresies attributed to the concept of the Trinity

Arianism – named after Arius, an early church leader (early 4<sup>th</sup> century AD), whose views were renounced and reputed at the Council of Nicea 325 AD)

- ▶ relegates the Son and Holy Spirit to less than full deity, they were brought into existence by God
- ▶ i.e. - the Son was created by God and did not exist pre-eternally with God
- ▶ The Holy Spirit was also not pre-eternally with God
- ▶ They do not retain all the attributes of God

Adoptionism – teaches wrongly that Jesus only became God when the Spirit fell upon him at his baptism. This error alludes to Jesus as only a mortal man who was then given this special significance or supernatural power.

## Common errors or heresies attributed to the concept of the Trinity

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Subordination – the thought that while the Son and the Holy Spirit are deity and existed always with God, they do not possess the full characteristics or attributes as the Father and are not equal to Him. In essence, the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> persons of the Trinity are inferior to the 1<sup>st</sup>.

Modalism – asserts that the Godhead is actually one person but who is expressed in three modes or forms. Thus, there is no internal relationship between God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. At times this is called Sabellianism (named after Sabellius who lived in Rome, early 3rd AD), modalist monarchianism, or the oneism movement – Oneness Pentecostalism.

Tritheism – asserts there are three Gods, not one who is expressed in three persons.

## The Trinity in Creation:

What does Genesis 1-2 teach us:

- ▶ Genesis 1 identifies the agent of Creation as God Himself
- ▶ The term for God in 1:1 is Elohim – a plural form that we will discuss later.
- ▶ The presence of the Spirit of God is noted in 1:2 accounting for the third person in the Trinity.
  - ▶ And the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the<sup>2</sup>surface of the deep; and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters.
- ▶ The immediate conclusion is that we have at a “minimum” now the inclusion of two persons of the Trinity.

## The importance of Genesis 1:26-27

Genesis 1:26 “Then God (Elohim) said, ‘Let us make man in Our image, according to our likeness, and let them rule over...’”

Genesis 1:27 “And God created man in His own image...

- ▶ The use of the plural noun is significant, but even more significant is the use of the plural verb (let us make). It's the Qal Imperfect 1 cpl form. This takes on a unique nuance when we associate the earlier use of a singular verb form in Genesis 1:1. In the beginning God (plural – Elohim) created (Qal P3ms) Genesis 1:26 intentionally chooses a plural verb form to express the action of the actor.
- ▶ Not only so, but note the subsequent phrases “our image” and “according to our likeness” where the 1cpl pronoun is used to emphasize the earlier action of the verb.



Bryan Murphy offers the following possibilities:

- The mythical view – whereby the use of the plural is borrowed from other ANE creation myths. Its retention in the text is a lack of a thorough editorial redaction. This view is completely unacceptable.
- The majestic view – whereby the text uses the plural of majesty to conform to plural for Elohim found here. This view is insufficient since it doesn't provide an adequate explanation for why in other places a verb in singular form is found – ie most profoundly as in Genesis 1:1
- The Deliberative View – that God is deliberating with himself in the form of a “royal we.” However, this is inadequate since there are no other OT or NT parallels to support this. An ancillary to this is that God is addressing the earth in a passive “rhetorical” manner to join in the act of creating. Likewise, this is not demonstrated elsewhere, and God retains full authority for the creation of the heavens and the earth.
- The Angelic view – that God is including the angels or a heavenly council in his creative work. There are examples of a heavenly council such as Job 1-2, and according to Job 38:4-7 the angels may have been present at creation, but the verses do not indicate the angels had a role in creation other than to praise its occurrence. Another issue is that mankind is not made in the image of angels, but of God in his image and likeness.
- The plurality view – denies a trinitarian approach and asserts the plurality of gods.
- The Trinitarian clearly provides the best answer and is furthermore entirely congruent with the remainder of scripture and the affirmation of one God in three persons.

(Bryan Murphy, The Trinity in Creation. MSJ 24/2 (Fall 2013) 167-177)

So what about Elohim?

אֱלֹהִים

It is a plural form and is one of the two most common words for our God in the OT – the other being Yahweh.

Importantly Elohim is used in Genesis 1:1 and it introduces God's creative activity using this form.

This is actually regularly debated and discussed with good intent on both sides.

But what could it mean if we think about the logic of inspiration and a logical hermeneutic?

- We affirm the scriptures are inerrant and infallible, and a high view of inspiration means that each word has intention, purpose, and significance. This is true of word choice as well as grammatical construction.
- A humorous but stunning example of how important a single word is: note in 1631 a printed version of the commandment from Exodus 20:17 "Thou shalt commit adultery" or from 1761 "The fool hath said in his heart, there is a God."



- With a proper understanding of inspiration, we would affirm that an important name such as “Elohim” would be guided by the Spirit to reflect all that is true about God.
- In addition, it would make sense that if God was to be highlighted among the other gods, he would indicate for himself the highest expression that incorporates all of who He is. The scriptures would claim for Him, what could not be claimed for the others – one God, only God.
- In addition, while God’s name is occasionally referenced as the singular form EL, it is usually coupled with a descriptor which identifies one of his characteristics such as El Roi – the God who sees. El was a form used by other mythical religions.
- Then, of course, we have Genesis 1:26-27 which identifies Elohim as not just a plural form, but indicates the word contains the concept of the Trinity.

To this point, we can recast the following:

- ▶ Genesis 1 identifies the agent of Creation as God Himself
- ▶ The term for God in 1:1 is Elohim – a plural form that is further emphasized by Genesis 1:26-27, and
- ▶ The presence of the Spirit of God is noted in 1:2 accounting for the third person in the Trinity.
- ▶ The ultimate conclusion is that we have all three persons of the Trinity identified in the creation.

But is there more? Absolutely!

From the NT we have the specific inclusion of the Son as an active agent in creation. Note the following verses:

- ▶ John 1:1-3 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.
- ▶ Colossians 1:16-17 For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities — all things have been created <sup>2</sup>by Him and for Him. And He <sup>is</sup> before all things, and in Him all things hold together.
- ▶ Hebrews 1:3 He is the exact radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power.
  - ▶ Radiance = ἀπαύγασμα - brightness or radiance, qualified here by “His glory” indicating Christ reveals the very essence of God’s glory. Light is not seen without its connection to the source.
  - ▶ Exact representation = χαρακτήρ – character, from Greek χάραξ indicating here the same etching

## Excursus: Genesis 18

I believe we find a similar occasion as demonstrated in Genesis 18 when the three men approach Abraham to tell him of the birth of Isaac in about a year.

- At first Abraham may not have recognized them for who they were, but the text tells us clearly that these men had qualities beyond human capacity.
- First, “they” in plural form ask where Sarah is?
- Second, “he said” to Abraham that in about a year a child would be born – a predictive event
- Third, verse 13 now identifies the speaker as the “Lord” who asks why Sarah was laughing. He has knowledge of what she is saying and thinking.
- Fourth, verse poses the famous saying, “Is anything too difficult for the Lord?” The verb is in the niph'al form and in this state tends to mean: “to be treated as unusual, inappropriate, or too difficult.” (HALOT). This verse could be the Lord speaking in 3<sup>rd</sup> person about himself or even to himself.

## Excursus: Genesis 18

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- But the significant verse is 17, where the Lord said, “Shall I hide from Abraham what I am about to do?” which is an incredible display of the Lord conversing with himself – ie the internal dialogue among the Godhead. Some might suggest that the Lord is conversing with the other men – who we know are going to be identified as angels in 19:1, but that assessment is improbable in that He the Lord doesn’t consult angelic beings for his counsel. And since they are identified as angels in 19:1 we have a clear distinction between the three “men.”
- Continuing on that line of thought, the men (the two) turn toward Sodom in verse 22 while the Lord remained and Abraham was standing before him. Here we have a presence of the Lord, which is often described as the angel of the Lord – not meaning one such as the other angels, but one who is the physical presence of God, likely understood as the pre-incarnate Christ.

## Excursus: Additional Scriptures

Exodus 20:11 For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea and all that is in them, and rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day and made it holy.  
Note also Exodus 31:15-17

Psalm 33:6-9 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,  
And by the breath of His mouth <sup>c</sup>all their host.  
He gathers the waters of the sea together <sup>1</sup>as a heap;  
He lays up the deeps in storehouses.  
Let all the earth fear the LORD;  
Let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of Him.  
For He spoke, and it was done;  
He commanded, and it <sup>1</sup>stood fast.



## Excursus: Additional Scriptures

Psalm 136:5-9 To Him who made the heavens with skill,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting;  
To Him who spread out the earth above the waters,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting;  
To Him who made *the* great lights,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting:  
The sun to rule by day,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting,  
The moon and stars to rule by night,  
For His lovingkindness is everlasting

## Excursus: Additional Scriptures

Jeremiah 10:12 *It is* He who made the earth by His power,  
Who established the world by His wisdom;  
And by His understanding He has stretched out the heavens.

2 Peter 3:5-8 For when they maintain this, it escapes their notice that by the word of God *the* heavens existed long ago and *the* earth was formed out of water and by water, through which the world at that time was destroyed, being flooded with water. But the present heavens and earth by His word are being reserved for fire, kept for the day of judgment and destruction of ungodly men. But do not let this one *fact* escape your notice, beloved, that with the Lord one day is as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.

## Excursus: The Attributes of God

- I. Incommunicable – those attributes of God that only He possesses or for which we can only possess to a lesser degree.
  - ▶ Independence – God doesn't need anything
  - ▶ Unchangableness (Immutability) – “God is unchanging in His being, perfections, purposes, and promises...” (Grudem 163)
  - ▶ Timeless, Omnipotent, Omnipresent – these stand outside of our spatial dimension and capacity
  - ▶ Unity – God's wholeness, completeness, and essential unity
  
- II. Communicable – those attributes that clearly are expressed fully in God, but also that may be evident in his people
  - ▶ Goodness
  - ▶ Faithfulness
  - ▶ Love
  - ▶ Mercy, Grace
  - ▶ Holiness