

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE TRINITY

Abstract

The doctrine of the Trinity, and the related doctrine of the Incarnation, are difficult, and present problems for many people. The scriptures on which these doctrines are based are re-examined with a view to easing these problems. In the light of this re-examination, a new way of formulating the doctrines is proposed.

Keywords: Trinity, Incarnation, God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit, Jesus, Messiah

Introduction

The doctrine of the Trinity is difficult.¹ It has generated many different heresies in Church history. Muslims completely reject it, along with some Christian sects. Many modern Christians find it difficult to accept. The formula ‘one God in three persons’ confounds them. This applies too to the related doctrine of the Incarnation and the formula ‘both God and man’.

Here I attempt to ease these problems by re-examining the scriptures on which these doctrines are based. I do this carefully, mindful that I am on holy ground.

The oneness of God

The oneness of God is stated by Moses and affirmed by Jesus in the words of the commandment, ‘Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD [is] one. And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might’ (Deut. 6:4–5, Mark 12:29–30).² The background to this is the polytheism of surrounding nations. Moses insisted, ‘the LORD, he [is] God; [there is] none else beside [him]’ (Deut. 4:35, 39).

In the NT, Paul invoked the oneness of God in his letter to the Romans. As part of his argument that the gospel of Christ is for everyone, ‘both to the Jew first and also to the Greek’ (Rom. 1:16–17), he writes, ‘[is he] the God of Jews only? [Is he] not also of Gentiles? Yes, also of Gentiles, if indeed God [is] one, who will deem [the] circumcised

¹ There is a vast literature on this subject. For an introduction, see the article on ‘Trinity’ in *NBD*. For detailed surveys, see Peter C. Phan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity* (Cambridge University Press, 2011); Gilles Emery, O.P., and Matthew Levering, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity* (Oxford University Press, 2012). Recent studies include: Roger E. Olson and Christopher A. Hall, *The Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002); Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 2004); Damon W.K. So, *The Forgotten Jesus and the Trinity You Never Knew* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010); Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012). See also: Fred Sanders, *Embracing the Trinity: Life with God in the Gospel* (Nottingham: IVP, 2010); Michael Reeves, *The Good God: Enjoying Father, Son and Spirit* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2012).

² This and other texts are translated as literally as Hebrew and Greek idiom will allow.

righteous by faith [in Christ] and [the] uncircumcised through [this] faith' (Rom. 3:29–30).

The Holy Spirit

On one occasion, Jesus spoke of casting out demons 'by [the] Spirit of God' (Mat. 12:28). On a parallel occasion, he spoke of doing this 'by [the] finger of God' (Luke 11:20). This description is figurative and anthropomorphic, but it points to the Holy Spirit being *part* of God. This is consistent with the Spirit falling on more than one person at the same time, as on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4), a different 'finger' coming down on each disciple. Jesus's picture is also consistent with John's reference in Revelation to 'the seven spirits which [are] before his [God's] throne' (Rev. 1:4), these being 'fingers' of the 'one' Spirit (Eph. 4:4–6).

After the Last Supper, Jesus called the Holy Spirit 'another Helper' (John 14:15–17):

¹⁵If you love me, you will keep my commandments, ¹⁶and I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, that he may be with you for ever, ¹⁷the Spirit of the truth, which the world cannot receive, because it neither sees it nor knows [it]; you know it, because it dwells with you [in me] and shall be in you.

The word translated 'Helper' is *paraklētos*. Jesus uses it also in verses 25–26 and 16:7–11. It literally means 'one who comes alongside' and has a variety of senses. Commentators infer from it that the Holy Spirit is a *person*. This is supported by Jesus's reference to 'another Helper', he himself being the first Helper. Jesus also refers to the Helper as 'he'.³

On the other hand, Jesus speaks of the Helper as a spirit, 'the Spirit of the truth' (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13), and goes on to refer to this as 'it',⁴ telling his disciples 'it dwells with you and shall be in you' (John 14:17). He had previously likened the Holy Spirit to a wind (John 3:8) and running water (John 7:37–39). He later spoke of his disciples being immersed in the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:5) and of the Holy Spirit coming upon them (Acts 1:8). Most significant of all, John tells us that, on the day of his resurrection, he *breathed* on his disciples, and said to them, 'Receive Holy Spirit' (John 20:22).⁵ In using the word 'Helper', therefore, Jesus is not so much presenting the personhood of the Spirit but the *function* – teaching the disciples (John 14:26) and

³ Agreeing with *paraklētos* (masculine).

⁴ Agreeing with *pneuma* (neuter).

⁵ This could have been a symbolic act, anticipating Pentecost, or a partial bestowal of the Spirit to enable his disciples to make the judgments he goes on to ask them to make ('If you forgive the sins of anyone, they have been forgiven to them; if you retain [the sins] of anyone, they have been retained', v. 23). Either way, the action makes 'Holy Spirit' to be not so much a person as a spirit.

convicting the world through them (John 16:7–11). This explains his description ‘Spirit of the truth’.

The Messiah

Isaiah conceived of the Messiah as a king, in the line of David, upon whom the Holy Spirit would rest (Isa. 11:1–9):

¹And there shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit; ²and the Spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. ...

Isaiah further conceived of the Messiah as God’s Servant who would bear the punishment for our sins (Isa. 52:13–53:12):

... ¹Who has believed what we have heard, and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed? ²For he grew up before him like a suckling, and like a root [sprouting] out of dry ground [i.e. weak]. [He had] no stature or majesty that we should notice him, no appearance that we should be drawn towards him. ³[He was] despised and forsaken by people, a man with pains and suffering illnesses, and like one from whom [people] hide [their] faces, he was despised, and we put him out of our thoughts. ⁴But in fact he has borne our illnesses and carried our pains. And yet we thought he was being stricken, smitten by God and humbled. ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions; [he was] bruised for our iniquities. The chastisement required to bring us peace [was] on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶All we like sheep have gone astray, we have each turned to our own way, and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ...

Here Isaiah brings out the Servant’s humanity, but also describes him as ‘the arm of the LORD’ (53:1). Isaiah uses this image frequently in his writing,⁶ mostly to portray God’s powerful action in the world, as when he delivered his people from Egypt. Here, however, Isaiah uses it of God’s Servant.⁷ Like ‘finger of God’, the image is figurative and anthropomorphic, but it points to the Messiah being in some sense *part* of God. We will return to this later.

⁶ Isa. 30:30; 40:10; 51:5, 9; 52:10; 53:1; 59:16; 62:8; 63:12. Cf. Luke 1:51, Acts 13:17.

⁷ Cf. J.A. Motyer, ‘Messiah’, *NBD*, 1st edn. (1962), 816¹.

The humanity of Jesus

The humanity of Jesus is shown most clearly in his birth as a baby to Mary, and on the cross where he cried out, in the words of Psalm 22, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mat. 27:46). This is a cry of a human being to God.

That the Messiah had to be human to save human beings from their sins is explained by the writer to the Hebrews (Heb. 2:10–17):⁸

¹⁰For it was fitting for him, because of whom [are] all things and through whom [are] all things, in leading many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. ¹¹For both the [one] sanctifying and the [ones] being sanctified [are] all of one; for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brothers, ¹²saying, ‘I will declare your name to my brothers, in [the] midst of [the] assembly I will sing your praises’ [Psa. 22:22]; ¹³and again, ‘I will [like my brothers] be trusting in him [God]’ [Isa. 8:17]; and again, ‘Behold I and the children God gave to me’ [Isa. 8:18]. ¹⁴Since therefore the children have partaken of flesh and blood, he himself also in like manner shared the same things, in order that through [his] death he might destroy the [one] having the power of death, that is, the devil, ¹⁵and release all those who, through fear of death, were subject to slavery for all their lives. ¹⁶For of course he takes hold not of angels [who are not so subject], but he takes hold of [the] seed of Abraham. ¹⁷Therefore he had to be made like [his] brothers in all things, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest [in] the things relating to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.

Jesus taught that angels are not subject to death (Luke 20:36). It is striking that the writer presents Jesus as living by faith in God (v. 13).

Jesus performed miracles. As we have seen, however, he did this ‘by [the] Spirit of God’ (Mat. 12:22–32). When he cast out an unclean spirit that his disciples were unable to do, and they asked him why not, he told them that to do this required faith, prayer, and fasting (Mat. 17:14–21, Mark 9:14–29). In other words, in performing miracles, he did not use his own powers, but drew on God’s. This is how other human beings in the Bible will have performed miracles, e.g. Moses, Elijah, Peter, and Paul.

⁸ In verse 16, I have given *epilambanō* its usual meaning of ‘take hold of’ as at 8:9. Early scholars took the meaning here to be ‘take the nature of’, but the next verse (‘Therefore ...’) does not follow logically from this. Modern scholars take the meaning to be ‘help’, but the writer could have used *boētheō* for this, as in verse 18.

God as Father and Jesus as Son

Jesus thought of God as Father from when he was a boy until the end of his life. When, at the age of twelve, he went to Jerusalem with his parents, he stayed back in the temple, explaining that he had to be ‘about the [affairs] of my Father’ (Luke 2:41–52). And on the night before his death, in the Garden of Gethsemane, he prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, take away this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done’ (Luke 22:39–46). He even managed to say on the cross, ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing’, and, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit’ (Luke 23:34, 46).

Conversely, God spoke of Jesus as his Son, first at his baptism and then at the Transfiguration. At his baptism, a voice came from heaven which said, ‘You are my Son, [my] beloved; in you I am well pleased’ (Luke 3:21–22). At the Transfiguration, a voice came out of a cloud saying, ‘This is my Son, [my] chosen; listen to him’ (Luke 9:28–36).

The terms ‘parent’ and ‘child’ imply both procreation (of a child by a parent) and relationship (care of the child, respect for the parent). They can, however, just signify relationship. Jesus, speaking to his mother and a disciple at his crucifixion, said to his mother, ‘Woman, behold your son’, and to the disciple, ‘Behold, your mother’ (John 19:25–27).

In this narrower sense, Jesus taught his disciples to pray, ‘Our Father in heaven’ (Mat. 6:9–12). And he told Mary Magdalene, after his resurrection, ‘go to my brothers and say to them: I am ascending to my Father and your Father, and [to] my God and your God’ (John 20:17). In a similar way, God, speaking to David, called Solomon his son: ‘I shall be to him for a father, and he shall be to me for a son’ (2 Sam. 7:12–16). This came to be applied to Jesus (Heb. 1:5), but in its original context, it applied to Solomon.

However, Jesus was Son of God in a special sense. This comes out at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28–36). At this he appeared with Moses and Elijah (v. 30). Peter evidently saw the three men as being equally great men of God and wanted to treat them all the same (v. 33). But while he was speaking, a cloud came, and a voice out of the cloud saying, ‘This is my Son ... listen to *him*’ (v. 35). The disciples then found Jesus on his own (v. 36). They learnt from this that, great men of God though Moses and Elijah were, Jesus was greater. He was God’s *Son*.

This is how Jesus thought of himself. He called himself ‘*the* Son of God’ (John 5:24–27), and accepted his followers calling him this (John 1:43–51, Mat. 16:13–17, John 11:17–27). When he was arrested and brought before Caiaphas, the high priest, and Caiaphas charged him, ‘say to us if you are the Christ, the Son of God’, he replied, ‘You have said’ (Mat. 26:62–64).

Jesus's claim to be the Son of God led his contemporaries to threaten to stone him for blasphemy. He answered this by citing Psalm 82 (John 10:34–36):

³⁴... Is it not written in your law, 'I said you are gods'? ³⁵If he called them 'gods', to whom the word of God came, and Scripture cannot be broken, ³⁶do you say [of him] whom the Father sanctified and sent into the world, 'You blaspheme,' because I said, 'I am [the] Son of God'?

Jesus evidently takes 'gods' in this psalm (vv. 1, 6) to refer to rulers and judges in Israel ('to whom the word of God came'). If Scripture could call these 'gods', he can call himself 'Son of God'.

Relationship between the Father and the Son

Jesus spoke of his relationship with the Father as being very close. For example, when the Jews criticized him for healing an invalid on the Sabbath, he explained to them that all that he did came from the Father: 'Truly, truly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of himself, except what he sees the Father doing; for whatever things the latter does, these also the Son likewise does. For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that he does ...' (John 5:19–30). He later told them, 'But *you* do not believe because you are not of my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me, and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall seize them out of my hand. My Father, who gives [them] to me, is greater [than] all, and no one can seize [them] out of my Father's hand. *I and the Father are one*' (John 10:26–30). Again, when Philip said to him, 'Lord show us the Father,' Jesus replied, 'Have you been with me so long a time, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father?" Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I speak not from myself, but the Father dwelling in me does his works' (John 14:7–11).

These references point to a unique relationship between Jesus and the Father. We must note, however, that Jesus spoke of his disciples having a close relationship with the Father. For example, he prayed after the Last Supper that they, and all who believe in him through them, 'may be one as we [are] one; I in them and you in me, that they may be perfected into one ...' (John 17:11, 20–23). Again, he told Judas son of James, 'If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make [our] abode with him' (John 14:22–24).

Jesus's pre-existence

On two occasions, Jesus spoke as if he had existed long before he was on earth. The first was when he was debating with Jews about his claim to be 'the light of the world' (John 8). He told them, 'Your Father Abraham rejoiced that he would see my day' (v. 56). This led them to retort, 'You are not yet fifty years [old] and have you seen

Abraham?', to which he replied, 'Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham came to be, I am' (vv. 57–58).⁹ They then took up stones to cast at him (v. 59).

The second occasion was when he prayed after the Last Supper (John 17). He began, 'And now you, Father, glorify me with yourself, with the glory that I had with you before the world was' (v. 5). He continued, 'Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given to me, may be with me where I am, that they may behold my glory, which you have given to me because you loved me before [the] foundation of [the] world' (v. 34).

John 1

In the prologue to his gospel, the apostle John sets out who he came to believe Jesus to be:

¹In [the] beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was $\frac{\text{God}}{[\text{a}] \text{god}}$. ²This one was in [the] beginning with God. ... ¹⁴And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of [an] only-begotten [son] from [a] father, full of grace and truth. ... ¹⁸No one has ever yet seen $\frac{\text{God}}{[\text{a}] \text{god}}$; [the] only-begotten $\frac{\text{God}}{\text{god}}$, who is in the bosom of the Father, that one made known.

Here (1) I have rendered *theos* with the article as 'God' and without the article as either 'God' (as in Rom. 8:33 etc.) or 'god' (as in Acts 28:6). The choice between these two meanings is widely discussed, especially in relation to verse 1, but no definite conclusions have been reached.¹⁰ I shall assume that the meaning is determined by the context. (2) I have rendered *monogenēs*, 'only-begotten'. Some commentators prefer 'one and only', but the word literally means 'only-begotten', and in the context ('only-begotten from a father'), this meaning is more likely. (3) In verse 18, I have adopted the reading in the earliest manuscripts ('only-begotten $\frac{\text{God}}{\text{god}}$ ') and supplied a definite article to tally with 'only'; later manuscripts have 'the only-begotten Son'.¹¹

In this passage, John is evidently drawing on his experience of the life and teaching of Jesus. John was present at the Transfiguration (Luke 9:28). He heard the voice out of the cloud saying, 'This is my Son', leading him to describe Jesus as 'only-begotten from a father'. He also heard the voice say, 'Listen to him', hence his description of Jesus as

⁹ Many commentators take 'I am' (*egō eimi*) to be a reference to the divine name in Exodus 3:14, either directly (though the Greek is different from the Septuagint) or via its use in the Septuagint of Isaiah 40–55 [see, e.g., D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: IVP/Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991): 342–4, 358]. However, the phrase could have its ordinary meaning ('I am' with emphatic 'I') as at 9:9.

¹⁰ See, e.g., C.F.D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1959), 115–6.

¹¹ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1971), 198.

‘the Word’ – God’s spokesperson.¹² He combined this with what he heard Jesus say about his pre-existence, writing: ‘*In the beginning* was the Word ... and the Word *became* flesh and dwelt among us’.

He may also have noted Jesus’s reference to Psalm 82. This is if verse 1 means ‘the Word was a god’ and verse 18, ‘[the] only-begotten god’, the former referring to the latter. Most commentators avoid this interpretation by taking *theos* to mean ‘God’ and rendering these verses, ‘the Word was God’ and ‘[the] ^{only-begotten}_{one and only} [One], [himself] God’.¹³ Most go further and take *theos* to be adjectival, meaning ‘in nature God’¹⁴ or ‘divine’¹⁵. There is, however, an adjective that means ‘divine’ (*theios*), and, while verse 1 can be read ‘in nature God’, reading verse 18 in this way strains the Greek text (it treats the adjective *monogenēs* as a noun and the noun *theos* as an adjective). Some commentators resolve the problem by preferring the alternative reading, ‘the only-begotten Son’. The reading I have adopted, however, is better attested, and, being more difficult, is less likely to be secondary.

Following most commentators, I take the first *theos* in verse 18 to mean ‘God’, the lack of article reinforcing its emphatic position at the beginning of the sentence. I also supply an object (‘him’) to ‘make known’ as elsewhere in the NT (Luke 24:35, Acts 10:8 etc.). The logic of verse 18 is then:

No one has ever yet seen God; the only-begotten god [the Son], who is in the bosom of the Father, that one made him [the Father] known.

This ties in with Jesus’s words in John 14:9, ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’.

The problem of translating *theos* in verses 1 and 18 as ‘god’ is eased by John’s description ‘only begotten’. In Hebrew thought, a father begetting a son involved part of the father coming out of him and forming the son (2 Sam. 7:12). NT writers talk about a son being ‘in the loins of’ a father (Acts 2:30; Heb. 7:5, 10). This is very much holy ground. God’s begetting of his Son will not have been the same as human begetting. But John’s use of the word points to the Son as being *part* of God, a part that, ‘before the world was’, came out of him and formed the Son. If this is right, it means that the Son is not another god. He is part of God and closely tied to him (John 5:19–30 etc.). He is so closely tied that John describes him as being ‘in the bosom’ of the Father.

This understanding of the nature of the Son makes sense of the many occasions when Jesus and the Father were distinct. At his baptism, for example, Jesus is in the water and the Father speaks from heaven. But they are not completely distinct. The

¹² For a full discussion of the meaning of ‘Word’, see Carson, 114–7.

¹³ Metzger, 198; Carson, 134, 139.

¹⁴ Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St John*, 3rd edn. (Cambridge and London: Macmillan, 1892), 172–3.

¹⁵ James Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible*, revised edn. (New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1935).

Father says, 'You are my Son, my beloved; in you I am well pleased' (Luke 3:22). The two are tied together.

Thomas's profession

When Jesus appeared to Thomas after his resurrection, Thomas said to him, as usually rendered, 'My lord and my God' (John 20:28). Some commentators suppose that Thomas is speaking to God, but the context does not support this. Our discussion of John 1, however, allows us to render Thomas's words, 'My lord and my god', the 'god' being 'the only-begotten god' of 1:18. Note that Jesus accepts Thomas's profession (v. 29).

Philippians 2

In his letter to the Philippians, Paul calls on Christians to imitate the way Jesus humbled himself in coming down from heaven to be a human being (Phil. 2:5–11):

⁵Have this attitude [of humility] among yourselves, which [was] also in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, [though] existing in [the] form of God, did not deem equality with God something to be clung on to, ⁷but emptied himself, taking [the] form of a slave, becoming like human beings. And having found himself like a human being in appearance, ⁸he humbled himself, becoming obedient even to death, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God indeed highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ...

In verse 6, *aragmon* is variously translated, but the above rendering brings out the sense. Paul presents Jesus as being willing to let go of his status in heaven to become a human being. This involved him in living by faith in his Father as the writer to the Hebrews tells us (Heb. 2:13). This applied particularly at the stage he was conceived by Mary and grew up as a child. At this stage he was totally dependent on his Father to ensure that the character and personality he developed as a human being were the same as those he had previously had in heaven.

Conclusion

- There is one, and only one, God.
- The Holy Spirit is part of God.
- Another part of God is the Son, whom God begot 'before the world was'.
- The Son is distinct from the Father, but intimately tied to him.
- The Son became a human being, Jesus of Nazareth.
- The Holy Spirit has many parts, carrying out God's will in different locations.

The key word here is ‘part’. This requires some discussion as there has long been resistance to using this word in respect of God. A reviewer of an earlier version of this article described it as ‘heretical’ and ‘simply wrong’.

But is it so wrong? While the Bible does not use ‘part’ in respect of God, it does use words that imply this. We have seen that Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as the ‘finger’ of God, and that Isaiah spoke of the ‘arm’ of God. There are also references to the ‘hand’ of God (e.g. Luke 1:66, 23:46). In the 2nd century, Irenaeus spoke of the Son and the Holy Spirit as ‘hands’ of the Father (*Against Heresies* 5.6.1). These words all imply ‘part’.¹⁶

The traditional word used of the Trinity (‘person’)¹⁷ is problematic: it suggests that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are completely *separate* individuals.¹⁸ The word ‘part’ overcomes this, and eases the problems identified in the Introduction. The formula ‘one God in three persons’ is difficult, ‘one God in three parts’ much easier. Likewise ‘both God and man’ is difficult, ‘both part of God and man’ easier.

¹⁶ A better word would be ‘member’ in its original sense (‘part of a body’), but its modern meaning is different (‘one of a group of persons or things’).

¹⁷ Latin *persona*, representing the Greek *hupostasis*.

¹⁸ R.A. Finlayson, ‘Trinity’, *NBD*, 1st edn. (1962), 1300¹.