

Is the Trinity in the Bible? January 6, 2021

I recently did a webinar discussing the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity. It's an issue that I am often asked about. Where did the idea come from? How does it work? If God the Father is God, Christ is God, and the Spirit is God – how is it that Christians don't have three Gods? And if they have three Gods, aren't they polytheists? On the other hand, if Christians want to insist there is only one God, and that they are monotheists, how can they say that Jesus and God are both God, let alone the Spirit? If they are both, or all three, God, then there is not just one God! So what's going on with this Trinity business?

It's an involved question, and I've decided to make a series of posts on the question. Let me start by making sure we are all on the same page when it comes to what the doctrine of the Trinity involves. This is important because a lot of people assume that if they see a passage in the Bible which mention God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit all in one verse or one passage (e.g., Matthew 28:19-20), or at least they infer the presence of all three in one passage, as Christian readers have long done, even in rather unexpected places – for example, the very first chapter of the Bible! (Genesis 1:1-2, 26) – that this is the doctrine of the Trinity. But no, it is not.

The Trinity is much more than just having these three beings named at once. It's a distinct way of understanding the three in themselves and in relation to one another. The doctrine states that the Godhead is made up of three distinct persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These are not all the same person. They are three people. Moreover, each of these three persons is fully God. In fact, they are all equal to each other (no one is "superior" to the others) and they are made up of the "same substance." And together, the three of them are the one God. That's the doctrine. These three are one.

It is easy for non-Christians to laugh and call it nonsense. But the people who came up with the doctrine were not idiots. Most of the serious theologians who developed the full logic in the fourth and fifth centuries were deep thinkers and highly trained in philosophy. Many of them were smarter, frankly than you and me. Or at least me. They understood that the doctrine did not pass the normal standards of logic. And that applying those standards to it could not yield sense. If one of them were alive today and you suggested they were an idiot for believing an obviously contradictory view, they may well ask you how well versed you were in quantum physics.

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I'm not going to support the doctrine, obviously. I don't believe in a God at all, let alone a Triune one. But it's not nonsense. It's far deeper than I'm going to be able to explain, partly because I don't go that deep philosophically. But I will say that on the other hand, if anyone thinks they fully understand the doctrine, they almost certainly do not understand it. And all the analogies you hear (if you hear any) simply do not encapsulate the idea; the Trinity is like water: it comes in three states, liquid, gas, and

solid – but they are all the same H₂O; or it is like a toaster; or it is like an egg, or it is like.... Yeah, no it's not really. The best theologians would consider the doctrine a mystery, not a logical equation. You don't believe in mystery? Well, on one level either do I. But I don't think you have to be an idiot to believe in it.

OK, so to start, I need to make a categorical statement about the doctrine of the Trinity, which may come as a surprise to some people: the doctrine is not explicitly taught anywhere in the Bible, and in fact is never even mentioned in the Bible. That doesn't mean it's not theologically true, or even metaphysically true. And it doesn't mean that the Bible proved irrelevant to developing the doctrine over time. It still could be true: the Bible doesn't teach *most* of the things that are true!). Moreover, it still could be based on the Bible: lots of things that Christians insist are true can be based on the Bible even if they are not explicitly stated there. Some Christians insist the Bible opposes abortion; others insist the Bible supports a woman's right to choose; some Christians claim that the Bible teaches that the Kingdom of God arrived on earth on the Day of Pentecost, other Christians say the Bible teaches it will arrive in 2021, others say it ain't comin' at all; some Christians insist that the Bible teaches that God will send the majority of people who have ever lived to eternal torment in hell, other Christians claim that the Bible teaches that in the end all will be saved.

These various views are necessarily deductions from various passages of the Bible that are interpreted differently. The odd thing is that all Christians use the same Bible, and many Christians are so convinced that their interpretation is right and the others wrong that they literally cannot see why others don't see it that way. Must be misled by the Devil. Or their own evil natures. (Unlike me...) In almost no instance is there a direct statement that could settle the issue, such as "Thou shalt allow a woman to terminate her pregnancy up to the sixth month," or "God's Kingdom will arrive on earth on March 9, 2021," or "Thou shalt overlook all the other passages that suggest otherwise: in the end, all people will be given an eternal reward in heaven, even a man who shall be named Hitler."

Doctrines, ethical norms, and, well, other views, normally have to be teased out of biblical passages if they are to be used in support. Pick your doctrine: the full deity of Christ; American exceptionalism; opposition to slavery; the Rapture; women's right to preach; and ... the Trinity. And if you respond to one of these by saying, LOOK! It's right here! And quote me a Bible verse ... Then I'm going to respond by repeating what I said above: this seems so obvious to you that you don't seem to realize the verse(s) don't actually say that. You are interpreting them that way. But there are other ways to interpret them. And often far better ways.

So back to my point. There is nowhere in Bible that we have an explicit reference to the doctrine of the Trinity, that there are three persons in the godhead, and the three are actually one. With an exception. The doctrine of the Trinity DOES seem to be explicitly taught (or nearly explicitly taught) in 1 John 5:7. Here is what it says:

There are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, and these three are one.

Right! There it is. That's just about as explicit as can be. There are three. They are in heaven (meaning they are divine beings). They are God the Father, and the "Word" of God (i.e., Christ), and the Spirit. And those three are one. So the Trinity is indeed taught in the Bible, right?

It will take me two posts, but I'm going to explain why this verse was not originally in the New Testament. It was added by a later scribe. This is not a disputed point among biblical scholars – except for some rather hard-core fundamentalists. The evidence is so overwhelming that I agreed the verse wasn't original back when I myself was a rather hard-core fundamentalist.

After I explain the situation in the posts that follow, and I will then move to the bigger question, of where the doctrine of the Trinity actually came from.