EXPLORING THE TRINITY



ONE GOD ...
OR THREE?

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pace is amazing; its sheer vastness is incomprehensible to the human brain.

In 1996, astronomers pointed the famed Hubble Space Telescope into a part of the sky that seemed relatively empty to regular earth-bound telescopes. To the human eye, the little patch of sky, adjacent to the Big Dipper, seemed no bigger than a grain of rice held out at arm's length.

Scientists kept the Hubble pointed at that spot for ten consecutive days. What it captured on its ultra-sensitive lens astounded researchers. The image produced by the data was one of the most profound and humbling in human history—every dot was an entire *galaxy*, a fiery pinwheel of light, each containing hundreds of billions of stars. Beginning in 2004, using much improved equipment, they pointed the Hubble toward a seemingly empty spot in the constellation Orion over a period of nine years. There, in the "blackness" of space known as the Ultra Deep Field, they found another 10,000 galaxies. It was the farthest into space that humans have ever peered.

One of the galaxies they found—called "Sombrero" because it looks like, well, a sombrero—is more than 31,100,100 light years away. That means that traveling at the speed of light (186,000 miles per second), it would take 31,100,100 years to get there. Sombrero itself is 50,000 light years

across, meaning that it would take 50,000 years to go from one end of the galaxy to the other at the speed of light!

How do we wrap our minds around sizes and distances like these? It's simply beyond our comprehension. Yet the Bible says God can do it: "He counts the number of the stars; He calls them all by name" (Psalm 147:4). How humbling!

But, if all this weren't mind-boggling enough, astronomers now tell us that the vast universe we can see is only *four percent* of what is actually out there. That's right—just four percent! We still understand so little about the cosmos.

Think about this for a moment: With all the amazing breakthroughs in technology and space exploration, especially over the past two centuries, the universe is still full of mysteries, of things humans cannot see and cannot fully understand. How much more so would that be true about God, the one who created that universe?

It's a logical principle that a creator is greater and more complicated than whatever it has created. Rembrandt, for instance, was more complicated than his painting *The Storm on the Sea of Galilee*. Michelangelo was more complicated than his sculpture *David*, even though it was his timeless masterpiece.

Well, how deep, how vast, how powerful, how mysterious must be the God who created

the universe? And if we can't fully understand the nature of that universe, how can we expect to fully understand the nature of the God who made it?

THE MYSTERIES OF THE MAKER

The simple answer is that we can't, and we shouldn't expect to, which is why perplexity over God's nature is nothing new.

Since the Creation, people have sought to fully understand Him and to fully explain Him, no matter how difficult that task is.

In the book of Job, Zophar uttered the cry of every human heart when he declared, "Can you search out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limits of the Almighty? They are higher than heaven—what can you do? Deeper than Sheol—what can you know?" (Job 11:7, 8). And no wonder the Lord says, "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts" (Isaiah 55:9). Paul says God's ways are "past finding out!" (Romans 11:33).

Thus, when we study God and His nature, even as revealed to us in the surest way we can know Him—that is, through the Word of God—we must realize there are still things about Him that we are not going to fully understand. We are

finite beings with sin-infected minds. It would be arrogant to think otherwise.

Therefore, we need to approach the mystery of His nature with a large measure of reverence and humility. As did Moses when he came into God's presence, we must take off our shoes, "for the place where you stand is holy ground" (Exodus 3:5).

Yet God has given us the Bible, and in it He has revealed to us truth that He has not revealed anywhere else. And it's to the Bible that we turn—as peering through a magnificent telescope of truth, we explore the greatest and deepest mystery there could ever be, the nature of the God who created all that is.

ONE NAME?

One of the most important scenes in the Bible, one that impacted the history of the world, is found in Matthew chapter 28.

Jesus had been raised from the dead after His crucifixion, just as He told His followers would happen. Though at first they doubted the stories of His resurrection, when He finally appeared to them in person, their faith in Him as the Messiah was affirmed and they were ready to do His will, wherever it would take them.

At the end of Matthew's Gospel, when the risen Jesus is with His followers, He gives them what

is commonly known as the "great commission." He said,

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age (28:19, 20).

The question is, do these verses teach us anything about the nature of God?

The disciples, leaders of the early church, were to go to the whole world and baptize people in the "name" of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Converts were not to be baptized in the name of the Father only. Nor in the name of the Son only. Nor in the name of the Holy Spirit only. No, they were to baptize in "the name," the singular name for all three; the Greek word for "name" here, *onoma*, appears in the singular. All three under a singular name? This text shows, indeed, the close relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

AGE-OLD QUESTIONS

What is the nature of that close relationship? Is God the Father the only "one God"—or is the Son, Jesus, God too? If so, do Christians

worship more than one God? Is that not polytheism, as some suggest? Is God the Father superior to Jesus? Did Jesus come after the Father? Was there a time when the Father but not Jesus existed?

And what about the Holy Spirit? Is He God too? If so, do Christians worship three gods, as Muslims claim we do? And just what or who is the Holy Spirit? How are we to understand the Holy Spirit in relationship to the Father and the Son? Is the Holy Spirit divine, or merely an impersonal force emanating from God?

From the early days of the Christian church to this very day, the subject of the Trinity has caused contention in the church. And no wonder, the church is made up of fallen finite beings trying to grasp the nature of a perfect and eternal God.

As we've discussed, even if God wasn't a triune being, it would be difficult to understand the full nature of God, a being who spoke—spoke? the world into existence. How do we even begin to grasp His power and personhood, trinity or no trinity? And if, as we believe, we're going to spend an eternity learning about God, we shouldn't be surprised if some things about Him remain hard for us to comprehend now.

Yet this is a deep and important subject that this short book seeks to explore. By laying aside our preconceived ideas, opinions, and training, we can go directly to God's Word and learn what He

has revealed about Himself. Even though we may not be able to comprehend all aspects of this topic, we should try to understand the scriptural teaching regarding it.

After all, the Bible has spoken to us directly on the nature of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It has also said, as we will see, a lot on this topic. I believe this means that God does, indeed, want us to understand, to the degree that finite beings can, what He has revealed to us in His Word. Otherwise, why put it in the Bible?

AN ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY ISSUE

It was a meeting of influential Christian leaders and theologians. They had come together to debate a serious topic: the relationship between Jesus and the Father. That is, they were discussing the Trinity. (We'll look at this specific term a little later.)

One church leader argued passionately, with what he believed to be incontrovertible evidence, that the Father was the supreme member of the Godhead and that Jesus was subservient to Him. After that speaker, another rose and spoke on the same topic. Yet he argued, contrary to the first one, and with what he believed to be indisputable evidence, that Jesus and the Father possessed equality—that Jesus was not subservient to the Father.

Those who know church history might think this is a depiction of the famous council of Nicea in AD 325, when church leaders were debating the relationship between Jesus and the Father. But that's not the case. Instead, what you read was a ...

"... brief synopsis of the proceedings of one study group of the Evangelical Theological Society, meeting in Washington, D.C., on November 16, 2006. Although the specifics of the debate were quite different from that which took place 1,681 years earlier, there are some interesting parallels. While the doctrine of the Trinity has been discussed throughout the history of the church, controversy on the subject has broken out anew-and among persons who hold the same basic view of the Bible's authority."

Thousands of years after Jesus left the planet, Christians are still asking questions and disagreeing about this topic.

Even among members of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the nature of the Trinity has become an issue of fierce debate. It is true that, in the church's earliest days, some Adventist writers took what is known as an "Arian" position regarding

¹ Millard Erickson. Who's Tampering with the Trinity? An Assessment of the Subordination Debate [Kindle Locations 59-62]. Kindle Edition.

the Trinity. This view claims that Christ hasn't always existed; after He was brought forth, however, His divinity was given to Him by the Father. If this view were true, it would mean that Jesus is inferior to the Father—a view with which the Seventh-day Adventist Church has long disagreed.

Still, many Adventists are now trying to resurrect the views of those early pioneers, arguing that the doctrine of the Trinity comes from pagan Rome, an example of how Protestant churches have been infected by Roman Catholic heresy. Hence, all the more reason we need to accept, they argue, the position of those early Adventists who rejected the Trinity.

What should the church do?

THE DOCTRINE

Considering its outlier position among popular denominations, the Adventist Church today takes a rather mainstream position on the Trinity. In its official statements of beliefs, Belief Number 2, titled "The Trinity," states:

There is one God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a unity of three coeternal Persons. God is immortal, all-powerful, all-knowing, above all, and ever present. He is infinite and beyond human comprehension, yet known through His self-revelation. God, who is love, is forever

worthy of worship, adoration, and service by the whole creation.²

This agrees with most of the Christian world. In the work *Systematic Theology*, influential author and theologian Wayne Grudem writes, "God eternally exist as three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."³

God is one in essence yet three in person. How, though, can all three persons be "fully God" yet there be just one God? As I've stressed already, it's not going to be easy for us to fully grasp the nature of God. Nevertheless, there's a good reason that most Christians accept this teaching—because it is, indeed, found in the Bible. (And what rule declares that everything in the Bible, especially when it comes to the nature of God, must be easily understood?)

Some within the Adventist Church argue that just because other churches believe this doctrine, it's no reason that we should. After all, hasn't God raised up the Adventist Church to counter false teachings found in other churches, such as the immortality of

² www.adventist.org/en/beliefs/god/trinity; the official Seventh-day Adventists Believe also states unequivocally that all three persons of the Godhead—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—are each fully and eternally God. See pages 23–77. Published by General Conference Ministerial Association, 2005.

³ Zondervan, 1994, p. 226

the soul or Sunday sacredness as the replacement for the seventh-day Sabbath? Hence, why should we believe in the Trinity just because others do?

But that's not why the church officially embraces the Trinity doctrine. Of course, just because others teach it doesn't make it correct. And yes, I believe that God raised up the Adventist Church to preach against error. But this doesn't mean that *everything* other churches teach is wrong. Many churches teach doctrines that we as Adventists fully accept, such as Christ's substitutionary death, His bodily resurrection, and salvation by faith alone.

My point in showing that other denominations believe in the Trinity isn't to prove that the belief is right, but to suggest that we are not alone in seeing it, and that other Christians also see a biblical foundation for the Trinity doctrine.

And the fact that the Roman Catholic Church also teaches the Trinity does not mean that it must be wrong. The Roman Church believes, for instance, that Jesus died on the cross to save humanity from its sins. Do we reject that doctrine just because Rome teaches it?

"TRINITY"

Another commonly heard argument is that the term "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible. That's right—it doesn't.

One of the most crucial concepts in Scripture is the idea of Jesus taking upon Himself humanity, a truth powerfully expressed by the apostle Paul in Philippians:

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross (2:5–8).

One of the essential doctrines of Christianity is the idea of Jesus, from conception to death and even beyond, assuming our humanity. Jesus was fully human *and* fully God—another crucial doctrine that is hard for us to grasp. And yet this idea, called the "Incarnation," is never called the "Incarnation" in the Bible, yet the Incarnation is central to Christian theology.

We make the same claim for the Trinity. Though the term itself is not in the Bible, the concept is. And not just in the New Testament, where it is distinctly taught, but in the Old Testament as well. Hence, we believe in the doctrine of the Trinity not because others do, but because the Bible teaches it.



OLD TESTAMENT

TO TEAR A PAGE OUT OF THE BIBLE

An evangelist once came to a town in order to hold an evangelistic series. Part of his advertisement had the following announcement:

COME HEAR A SERMON ON THE ONE PAGE THAT NEEDS TO BE TORN OUT OF THE BIBLE!

As you could imagine, the ad caused quite the controversy—even if, in terms of promotion, it was genius. Many people came to the meeting the night that this particular sermon was to be preached.

The evangelist stood before the crowd, picked up the Bible, and held it up in front of everyone. They all sat transfixed, wondering what this preacher was going to do. Would he really tear a page out of the Word of God?

With the Bible in his outstretched hands, he said, "I am now going to rip out a page out of the Bible that does not belong there." The crowd collectively held its breath. He then opened a Bible before them, tore out a page, and held the ripped paper in the air.

"Yes," he said to the stunned audience, "this page, the page separating the Old Testament from the New, should have never been in my Bible!"

Whatever you might think of the theatrics, the evangelist had a point. The Christian church has a tendency to downplay the importance and relevance of the Old Testament. Many centuries ago, an important figure in the early church, Marcion of Sinope, rejected the God depicted in the Old Testament and would affirm only the God revealed in the New Testament. He argued that the God in the Old Testament was a mean, hateful, and vengeful deity in contrast to the loving, forgiving, and gracious God of the New Testament, especially as revealed in Jesus. Though Marcion's views were rejected early on, the idea behind it, that the Old Testament is inferior to the New Testament, finds tacit support among many Christians today.

Yes, the New Testament is, in many ways, a fuller revelation than the Old Testament. But the Old Testament forms the foundation of the New Testament. Of course, when we say that the New Testament is fuller, we mean its teachings are more fleshed-out expressions of the truths first revealed in the Old Testament.

Hence, to better understand the great truths found in the New Testament, we must see how they were first taught in the Old Testament. From Creation, to sin, to redemption—they're all there, revealed in the Old Testament by the Hebrew prophets. And among the great truths first

DO CHRISTIANS WORSHIP MORE THAN ONE GOD?

From the earliest history of the church to our present time, the doctrine of the Trinity has been hotly contested among sincere Christians. But does the Bible actually support the Trinity concept—even though it never uses the word? Is the Father the one and only God? Was there a time when Jesus did not exist? Is the Holy Spirit a person or simply the power of God?



Pastor Doug Batchelor tackles these questions and many more in this simple yet profound and biblical guide, unpacking what the Scriptures reveal about the nature of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Discover answers that will settle your heart and give you a better picture of the God who truly loves you.



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