

SOME COMMENTS ABOUT THE TRINITY

A. BRIEF SUMMARY

- ❑ **1. God in Three Persons.** The Bible teaches that one true and living God is not a single person, but is revealed in three Persons; called the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- ❑ **2. Coequality of the Persons.** Each of the three Persons is true God; none of them is less truly God than the Others; each is to be honoured, worshipped, and glorified as God. To express this it is said that they are "coequal".
- ❑ **3. Distinctness of the Persons in Scripture.** The New Testament clearly shows the distinct personal identity of each Person of the Trinity: for example, at the baptism of Christ (Matt. 3:16-17, Mark 1:10&11, Luke 3:21,22): the Holy Spirit descends as a dove and rests on Christ, while the Father speaks from heaven. Here all three persons are present and are clearly distinguished from one another. Other passages give clear distinctions between two of the persons; for example, Matt: 17:1-5, Mark 9:1-8, Luke 9:28-36, John 11:41& 42, John 12:27 & 28, John 17.
- ❑ **4. Unity and Harmony of the Godhead.** The New Testament teaches that there is one God, not three (Jude 25, James 2:19, 1 Tim. 2:5, Eph. 4:1-6). This unity is a unity of perfect harmony, intimacy, and love in the relationship of the Three Persons; it is spoken of clearly in the prayer of Jesus Christ, John 17. "*All the mind in heaven is one.*"

*"All the Father's counsels claiming
Equal honour to the Son;
All the Son's effulgence beaming
Makes the Father's glory known".
(John 5:19-23, Col. 1:15, Heb. 1:3)*

Not only does Jesus speak often of the unity of purpose and will and power between the Son and the Father, but He also speaks of the Holy Spirit as "*proceeding from the Father*" and "*speaking of what is mine*". (John 15:26 & 27; John 16:12-15). The unity is a unity of perfect harmony.

- ❑ **5. Subordinate in Function.** The New Testament also teaches that not only are the Persons distinct, but the relation and revelation of God to the creation and to man is different in each person; furthermore, in these relationships there is a subordination or order or hierarchy (As is suggested by the very names Father, Son, Spirit). Christ spoke often of being subject to the Father's will, of being sent by the Father, and so on (cf. the gospel of John); Note also 1 Corinthians 15:24-28; the Spirit proceeds from the Father, and is sent in Christ's name. Because of this subordination of relationships or functions among the Persons; Father, Son and Spirit are sometimes called First, Second, and Third Persons of the Trinity, but this in no way means that they are in any way unequal in nature or character; each is truly and fully God.

- ❑ **6. An Ancient Formula.** dating to the early centuries of the Church, says: *“As regards their nature and character, each of the persons of the Godhead is co-equal, fully and truly God; but there is a subordination in their relationships and activities as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”*

B. SPECIFIC NEW TESTAMENT REFERENCES TO THE TRINITY.

- ❑ **1. "Trinity" is a “coined” word.** The word "Trinity" does not occur in the Bible. Like modern words, such as television, it is “coined” to express an idea that had no suitable word in a non-Christian vocabulary; made up from the Latin for three and a unity: tri-unitas, trinitas; trinity. When the New Testament writers speak of the Trinity, they prefer to do so by naming each of the Persons in the course of a single thought pattern. Once or twice a word translated as “the Godhead” is used; literally it means *“God—ness”* or *“God—nature”*; thus, Col. 2:9 *“In Him (Christ) the fullness of the Godhead dwells bodily”*. When this word is used, it is correct to say that it means the Trinity seen as a unity, the Godhead.
- ❑ **2. Baptismal Formula, Matt. 28:19.** It is interesting that not only are the three persons present at the baptism of Christ, (see above), but Christians are to be baptized in *“the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit”*.
 - a) Though Christ is the direct object of faith (and in Acts we find believers baptized *“in the name of Jesus Christ”*) here it is taught that Christians are to be baptized in the name of all Three Persons.
 - b) Each of the Persons is distinctly and separately named and (except for the processional order of their appearance) there is no suggestion of hierarchy or degree of importance whatever. This passage therefore teaches the co-equality of the Persons; each is equally and truly God.
 - c) A deeper meaning of the passage is that a proper relationship to God involves all the three Persons; a Christian is to experience and to know relationship to each of them.
- ❑ **3. Ephesians 2:18** is an example of a text which teaches the subordination or ordering in function of the Persons. *“Through Him (Christ) we have access in one Spirit to the Father”* (note the three prepositions). The whole Epistle to the Ephesians is devoted to explaining more fully what that brief sentence means; Through Jesus Christ, men are brought together in (or by the power of) the Holy Spirit, to a close relationship to the Father (*“from whom every family in heaven or upon earth is named”* 3:15)
- ❑ **4. Ephesians 4:1- 6** develops one aspect of this relation to the Persons, in connection with the unity of the Spirit. In addition to other unities, one Spirit (the Holy Spirit), one Lord (Jesus Christ), and one God and Father are named. Note also the echo expressed in the prepositions in verse 6; One God . . . who is above all (Christians are obedient to the Father’s authority) and through all (Christ’s image the expression of God in believers’ lives) and in all (by the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit).
- ❑ **5. The Blessing II Corinthians 13:14.** Here the three Persons are “drawn together” by name, and again their co-equality is evident; the order is Son, Father, and Spirit; each Person is identified with a specially characteristic mark of His Person, a way in

which that Person reveals God uniquely. Also, in each case Paul has already spoken in the Epistle about each of these three traits:

a) "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: II Corinthians 8:9 --a clear reference to the Cross and its revelation of the glory of God.

b) "The love of God the Father: II Corinthians. 5:16-20 - - the reconciling love of God is portrayed, God in Christ, reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses.

c) "The communion (fellowship / participation) in the Holy Spirit". II Corinthians 3:18 Here the Spirit is shown in a ministry, we all with unveiled face beholding the glory of the Lord, are changed into His likeness . . . even as by the Lord the Spirit" (cf. Isaiah 40:5: *"the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together"*).

❑ **6. 1 Peter 1:2.** Here again the functional aspects of the Trinity are emphasized: the Father chooses and destines, the Spirit sets apart (sanctifies), the Son is Lord and Saviour.

❑ **7. Mystery of the Trinity, Luke 10: 21 & 22** (The parallel passage in Matthew 11:25-27 lacks the reference to the Holy Spirit). One of the most remarkable Gospel texts, in a setting of unbelief and rejection by men, Christ lays exclusive claim to the full knowledge of the Godhead unity: *"No one knows the Son but the Father; and no one knows the Father but the Son, and he to whom the Son pleases to reveal Him"*. ' The meaning is that the person of the Son is an inscrutable mystery: no man can claim to analyse Him. All attempts to define the Person of Christ in human terms are bound to fail. Anyone who claims to understand Jesus; anyone who tries to separate Him from God, to explain Him as an angel (Heb. 2), or to show that the name "Son of God" makes him less than *"God of God, Light of Light, True God of True"* is ignoring this claim of Christ. Jesus claims to be infinite, beyond human grasp:

*"The higher mysteries of Thy fame, the creatures grasp transcend:
The Father only (glorious claim!) the Son can comprehend.
Worthy, O Lamb of God, art Thou, that every knee to Thee should bow"*

Matthew records that Jesus then said *"come to me all that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest"* Who but God Himself, with infinite love and power, could dare to give men such an invitation?

❑ **8. 1 John 5:6-12.** (Verse 7 of the King James Version has no authority in the original manuscripts, and is thought to have been inserted later). In verse 8, the *"three that bear witness."* does not refer to Trinity. However, John speaks of all three Persons in the passage: God, the Father sending His Son and giving us life in the Son, and bearing witness to this by the Spirit which He has given us. There is an evident connection with the apostles' own introduction to Christ by the Baptist: John 1:29-42 (John was the other disciple present with Andrew).

- ❑ **9. Ephesians 1:11-14, Galatians 4:6 & 7; Romans 5:9-17**, and other like passages, mention all three Persons within a short space, and they or their work are mentioned in the course of other teaching, but there is probably no direct intention to introduce the Trinity as such; however, such passages show that the apostles found it quite impossible not to think in terms of the Trinity, when speaking of God's work. A continuous and free reference to the Three as God's a hallmark of the New Testament teaching, and there is no significant portion of the New Testament which does not constantly weave in references to all of them. A person who does not seem to see this probably does not want to see it.

C. SOME USEFUL ITEMS, BIBLICAL AND OTHERWISE.

- ❑ **1. The Doctrine of Trinity** was not invented by theologians, but is the interpretation of the Church's firsthand experience of God's revelation.
 - a) They knew God above them, the God of their fathers; Jesus Christ taught them that He is the Father.
 - b) They were confronted with the Word made flesh, dwelling among them; their hands handled, they saw, they heard: "Immanuel, "God with us". They learned that He too is God, the Son.
 - c) At Pentecost and afterwards, they knew the living God within them, indwelling them, God the Holy Spirit.
 - d) This three-fold relation to God was explained and described by the Lord Jesus in some detail, on the night He was betrayed: John, Chapters 14-17. Teaching concerning the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit, and the relation of the believer to each, is clearly given, and the Passage ends with the prayer of Christ expressing the perfect unity of God.
- ❑ **2. The "Flatland Analogy"** This is a useful picture which helps us to understand why the doctrine of the Trinity is not a "contradiction"

Suppose we imagine a 2-dimensional world, called Flatland. Everything in Flatland has length and width, but not height; a "Flatlander" could not conceive of a "third dimension". Now, how would you show a Flatlander what a 3-dimensional object is like? Remember, all that you are allowed to give him is 2-dimensional pictures. The best you could do would be to make a set of drawings or pictures, projections like those a draftsman makes. Each projection would be a complete 2-dimensional object in Flatland, as complete as a Flatlander could even grasp. At least three different and distinct views (top, side, front) would be necessary to give the Flatlander anything like a complete picture, in terms he could grasp, of our 3-dimensional reality. Can you imagine how puzzled he would be when you also tell him that nevertheless these three distinct objects are all one? How very difficult it would be for him to think of them as one, or to avoid concentrating on one of the projections to the exclusion of the others. This analogy shows us that our problem in understanding the Trinity results from our finiteness as creatures; God has an "extra dimension" which, we simply cannot grasp. To argue that the Trinity "is a contradiction as some try to do, is to try to put God on our own level. God is telling us truth about Himself in the only way we can understand it.

- ❑ **3. God Speaking: A Biblical Analogy.** A picture of God which reveals some aspects of the Trinity, and is used by the Bible from beginning to end, in the Old Testament. as well as the New Testament, is that of God speaking. When a man speaks, three things are present: He is communicating something unseen and unheard (thought) to do so he expresses thought by words as the images or carriers of thought; and words are uttered by the power of his breath. Now, both In the Old and New Testaments we hear of the WORD of GOD, and of the BREATH of God.

a) Jesus Christ is the Word of God (John 1:1-14, 1 John 1:1 & 2, Hebrews 4:12 & 13, many other New Testament Passages); He is the "*out-bursting of the glory of God, the express image of His Person*"; God has spoken to us "in His Son" (Heb 1:1-4)

b) The Holy Spirit is the Breath or wind of God; in the Old Testament the Hebrew is literally "*ruach Jahweh*" --- breath or wind of the Lord. In the New Testament the connection is also unmistakable (John 3:8; John 20:22; Acts 2:1-4).

- ❑ **4. Biblical Terminology as to Relationships.** The New Testament distinguishes quite carefully between the relationship of the Son to the Father, and of the Holy Spirit to Father and Son.

a) Christ is called the "only-begotten" Son, that is, He is Born of the Father. This means that He Is one in nature, glory, and character with the Father, and that this glory is objectively manifest, God seen and heard, the express image, visible image of the invisible God; He is the object of the Father s love, heir of all things, "firstborn of all Creation" (this last phrase does not mean that He is a creature; it means that according to a pattern manifest in the nature of Christ, God's Son, all creation takes its form and order from Him – in Him, all things hold together).

b) Of the Holy Spirit, it is said that He "proceeds"from the Father (and the Son); He is sent from the Father and the Son. Like the wind, His presence is manifested by its actions and consequences. He is not born, does not speak of Himself; He Is the Spirit from God, Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ. He is breathed of God, the living God. He is Lord (2 Corinthians 3:17& 18) and the giver of life (Rom. 8:11)

D. Is the Trinity in the Old Testament?

We cannot say that the Old Testament clearly and specifically teaches the doctrine of the Trinity; it is a New Testament revelation. However, it is important to realize that the teaching of the Old Testament is not contrary to it (as the Jews or Jehovah's Witnesses might say) and that the Old Testament points to a fuller revelation of God beyond its own message. Also, in the Old Testament, certain lines of expression and thought clearly suggest it, when interpreted from the vantage point of New Testament revelation.

- ❑ **1.Plural names and. usages of God.** Many places in the Old Testament, especially in Genesis, the first person plural "we" - or - "us" are used when God is speaking ("*let us make man In our image*"). In Genesis 1– 3, the name "Jahweh Elohim", translated "LORD GOD is used; Elohim is a is plural word meaning "Gods"
- ❑ **2.We have already mentioned the "Word" and "Breath" of God.** At times these have a rather distinct identity in the Old Testament.
- ❑ **3.The Divine Name.** By far the most important Old Testament doctrine about God is connected with the Name, "Jahweh" or "Jehovah" the "I AM". For the Jew this name

spake of:

a) the unity of God,

b) the infinite nature of God,

c) the inscrutability of God. He could not be described by any image or picture; the name "I AM" tells us nothing descriptive, but emphasizes the absolute freedom and sovereignty of God. The glory of Jahweh could not be described or understood;

Isaiah (Isaiah 6) gives us a detailed picture of the seraphim but says nothing about Jahweh of Hosts who sat upon the throne. But the Old Testament says that Jahweh will be known in the future; to this all the 'prophets bear witness: *"The glory of the Jahweh will be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."* In other words, the Old Testament says that it's revelation of Jahweh is not complete and that a full revelation is coming, in which the glory of the I AM will be clearly seen; the New Testament says this revelation is in Jesus Christ. Careful reading of the prophets leads to the conclusion that :

a) God would be manifest on earth, probably as a man;

b) the Spirit of God would dwell with men and give them knowledge of God (Jeremiah 31:33; Isaiah 44:5; Joel 2:28 & 29, for example). Thus we have excellent grounds for believing that the great teaching of the Old Testament about the God of Glory, the I AM, in fact leads on and is not in contrast to the New Testament doctrine of the Triune God. In this connection we should never forget that Jesus Christ Himself made this connection clear, John 8:58, when he said to the Jews in terms that unmistakably claimed to be God, *"Before Abraham was, Jahweh, I AM"*.