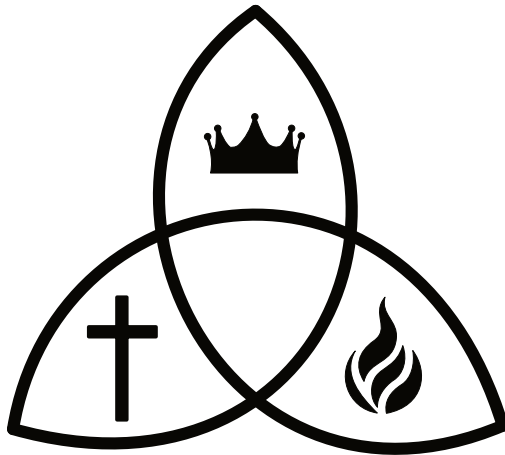


Understanding The Trinity



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Preface

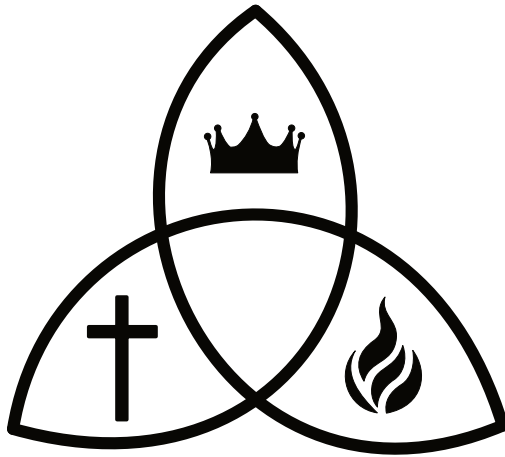
The Trinity can be one of the more complex Christian doctrines to understand. When teaching religious studies, this was the most difficult topic I had to teach across any of the different year groups. If you put this across simplistically, such as a plant like a three-leaf clover, it becomes too simplistic. If you tried to explain it in other ways, it sounded like you were describing a polytheistic religion. However difficult the doctrine of the Trinity is to understand, it should be one of the most important pieces of knowledge that we have. We should know and be able to explain who the persons of the Trinity are and be able to explain their relationship to each other. If we cannot, then it will simply hinder our own understanding of the triune God that we worship.

Part 1 of the text is a modern reworking of a classic article written by B. B. Warfield in 1915, and was originally included in the International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia Volume V. Warfield was a prominent theologian of his time, and as such, his work is as relevant now as it was then. Bringing this article up to date into contemporary language, with additions to make the text clearer, allows the modern reader to access an understanding of the Trinity that at times can seem incomprehensible. Part 2 of this book then gives a short timeline of the development of the Trinity and includes the texts of the main creeds used in the Christian Church. Finally, part 3 includes a short study guide to allow individuals or small groups to reflect upon the doctrine.

I hope that understanding the Trinity in greater depth will help all believers to have a closer relationship with God, and help believers explain to others the mystery of the triune Godhead.

Rev'd Andrew Walmsley

Part 1



The Trinity

1. The Term “Trinity”

The word “Trinity” doesn’t actually appear in the Bible, and when we define it as the belief that there is one true God who exists as three co-eternal and coequal Persons—united in essence but distinct in personhood—we’re not using biblical wording. Still, it’s right to call this a biblical doctrine, because what matters is the meaning of Scripture, not just its exact words.

In other words, the definition of the Trinity may use philosophical or theological language that isn’t found in the Bible, but that’s in order to protect and clearly express the truth that is found in Scripture. The Bible presents the reality of the Trinity, though not in a ready-made formula. Instead, it gives us hints, glimpses, and scattered references. When we gather these pieces and see them together as a whole, we’re not moving away from the Bible—we’re actually grasping its full meaning more deeply.

So while the doctrine is expressed with technical terms that come from later reflection, the truth itself is thoroughly biblical.

What seems a complicated start is Warfield simply outlining his opening position.

He makes it clear from the beginning that the term ‘Trinity’ is not a biblical term used anywhere in the Bible. The term only began to be used in the late second century. Theophilus of Antioch possibly used the first reference, “In like manner also the three days which were before the luminaries, are types of the Trinity, of God, and His Word, and His wisdom.”¹ From that point various theologians, (Plotinus, Origen, Tertullian) begin to use variations of the term.²

¹ To Autolycus 2.15.

² William Greenough Thayer Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Pub., 2003), 229.

In the next three sections (2-4) Warfield starts to consider the Trinity from a different angle before coming back to discuss the Trinity in the Old and New Testament. In these sections Warfield first explores that the Trinity is (2) Purely a Revealed Doctrine, before moving on to discuss that there is (3) No rational proof for it and finally comes back to the theory being (4) Supported by Reason as though the doctrine cannot be provable by reason, it is not irrational as the theory aligns with broader theological and philosophical frameworks.

2. Purely a Revealed Doctrine

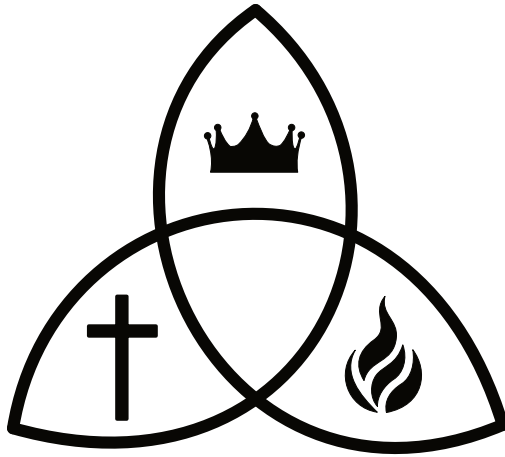
The doctrine of the Trinity is something revealed by God—it's not something people could ever discover on their own through reason or philosophy. Human searching has never been able to uncover the deepest truths about who God is. That's why no religion outside of Christianity has ever arrived at the idea of the Trinity, nor do their beliefs of the divine come close to resembling it.

A revealed doctrine such as the Trinity would be described as a teaching that comes from God working through scripture and not from human reason or experience. This does not mean that humans 'work out' the doctrine as these could be changed or altered by human decision. Rather, revealed doctrines are generally considered fixed and unchangeable, which implies that there is a specific divine message that God has imparted to humanity. Often this revelation does not come from specific passages in the Bible, but are gathered from various sources across the whole breadth of Scripture.

Natural reason is the reference to the human ability to think, understand and make judgments and interpretations based upon logic and observation without regard to the divine.

It's true that many polytheistic religions have groups of three gods, but these "triads" came about for very different

Part 2



Historical
Development of the
Trinity

Historical Development of The Trinity

We have already seen that the New Testament writers, such as the Apostles, had no problem talking about the Trinity. This was not the case in the following centuries. The early church writers took time to get to grips with what the Trinity meant, and how they should view the persons of the Trinity. To help show how the doctrine of the Trinity developed, the following history outlines the development and understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity through time.

*Old Testament Era*¹⁷

The analogy of the dimly lit room used in Part 1 is about looking through the lens of the New Testament (with a knowledge of the Trinity) and seeing the Trinity within the Old Testament texts. What we see in the Old Testament is not a clear image but shadows and faint outlines. Many passages highlight this.

One God

Deuteronomy 6:4 (NIV) “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” - which highlights the uniqueness of God when cultures around Israel believed in polytheism.

God as plural

- Genesis 1:26 (NIV) “Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness...”
- Isaiah 6:8 (NIV) “And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, “Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?” ...”

References to God as three persons:

¹⁷ Lycans, Zachary. “The Trinity in the Old Testament.” In *Lexham Survey of Theology*, edited by Mark Ward, Jessica Parks, Brannon Ellis, and Todd Hains. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018.

Some passages speak of God in more than one person. For example, Abraham's three visitors in Genesis 18:9-33, or in Genesis 1 God creates, the Spirit hovers over the water.

New Testament Era - 1st Century (c. 30-100 AD)

There are many references in the New Testament that give a clear indication of God as Trinity.

The Gospels:¹⁸

- Christ's baptism where all three persons of the Trinity are present. Matthew 3:16-17 (NIV) "As soon as Jesus was baptised, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.""
- The beginning of John's Gospel makes it clear that there is a difference between the 'Word' and 'God'. John 1:1 "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Other passages have just two persons of the Trinity present. See 1 Corinthians 8:6.
- The Great Commission is where Jesus makes clear the threefold nature of God as three persons. Matthew 28:19 "Go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit..."

The Epistles:¹⁹

- Paul expresses clearly this in 2 Corinthians 13:14 "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all."
- Paul also uses the three elsewhere where he refers to the

¹⁸ Lycans, Zachary. "The Trinity in the New Testament." In Lexham Survey of Theology, edited by Mark Ward, Jessica Parks, Brannon Ellis, and Todd Hains. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018.

¹⁹ Gerald Bray, The Doctrine of God, ed. Gerald Bray, Contours of Christian Theology (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 138–151.