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God is a Triune Being

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GOD IS A TRIUNE BEING

- The word Godhead occurs three times in the scriptures with all three mentioned by the Apostle Paul to stress three vital truths:

A. First, that all things were made *by* God

“Therefore, since we are the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like gold or silver or stone, something shaped by art and man’s devising” (Acts 17:29).

B. Second, that all the world stands guilty *before* God

“For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse” (Rom. 1:20).

C. Third, to identify the One who *is* God

“For in Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily” (Col. 2:9).

- The very essence of the term Godhead indicates a plurality of some sort. In short, it is a reference to that mystery of all mysteries—the Trinity! It has been said that if you try to understand it, you’ll lose your mind, but to deny it can mean you’ll lose your soul!
- Various biblical authors must have been pondering this mystery when they wrote the following:

A. Job

“Who does great things, and unsearchable, marvelous things without number” (Job 5:9)

“He does great things past finding out, yes, wonders without number” (Job 9:10).

B. David

“Many, O LORD my God, are Your wonderful works which You have done; and Your thoughts toward us cannot be recounted to You in order; if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered” (Psa. 40:5).

“Great is our Lord, and mighty in power; His understanding is infinite” (Psa. 147:5).

C. Isaiah

“Who has directed the Spirit of the LORD, or as His counselor has taught Him? With whom did He take counsel, and who instructed Him, and taught Him in the path of justice? Who taught Him knowledge, and showed Him the way of understanding? Have you not known? Have you not heard? The everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth, neither faints nor is weary. His understanding is unsearchable” (Isa. 40:13, 14, 28).

D. Paul

“Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ‘For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor?’ ‘Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him?’” (Rom. 11:33-36).

- At this point consider the words of two theologians and four confessions of faith:

A. The two theologians:

1. B. B. Warfield

*“There is only one God, but in the unity of the Godhead, there are three eternal and co-equal Persons, the same in substance, but distinct in subsistence” (James Orr, ed., *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 5, p. 3,012).*

2. Robert Culver

Two expressions have been traditionally employed to designate certain inner relations between the Father and the Son, and the Father and the Son with the Spirit. These two expressions are the eternal generation of the Son by the Father and the eternal spiration (or procession) of the Spirit from the Father and the Son. They began to be employed about the time of Nicea (A.D. 325). They expressed in Scriptural language the idea that the Son and the Spirit were eternally with the Godhead. John 1:14 refers to our Lord as the “only begotten of the Father.” John 14:16, 26 and 15:26 speak of the Spirit as “proceeding from the Father and the Son.” (*The Living God*, p. 96)

B. The three confessions of faith:

1. In the unity of the Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost: the Father is of none, neither begotten, nor proceeding; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father; the Holy Ghost eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son. (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 1643)
2. We believe that there is one, and only one, living and true God, an infinite, intelligent Spirit, whose name is JEHOVAH, the Maker and Supreme Ruler of heaven and earth; inexpressibly glorious in holiness, and worthy of all possible honor, confidence, and love; that in the unity of the Godhead there are the three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit; equal in every divine perfection, and executing distinct and harmonious offices in the great work of redemption. (*New Hampshire Baptist Confession*, 1833).
3. There is one and only one living and true God. He is an intelligent, spiritual, and personal Being, the Creator, Redeemer, Preserver, and Ruler of the universe. God is infinite in holiness and all other perfections. God is all powerful and all

knowing; and His perfect knowledge extends to all things, past, present, and future, including the future decisions of His free creatures. To Him we owe the highest love, reference, and obedience. The eternal triune God reveals Himself to us as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with distinct personal attributes, but without division of nature, essence, or being. (Southern Baptist Convention, 2000)

- False views concerning the Trinity – There are serious errors about the doctrine of the Trinity.

A. The error of tri-theism:

This says that the Trinity consists of three separate (but cooperating) Gods.

B. The error of modalism:

According to this view there is but one God who simply reveals Himself through three different modes, or roles. For example, a particular man could be considered a husband to his wife, a father to his children, and an employee to his boss.

While this is certainly the case on the human level it is light years removed from the truth in the spiritual realm. In fact, if indeed it is Jesus speaking on occasion as the Father or the Holy Spirit, then many of the New Testament passages would be reduced to total nonsense. To explain:

A. In regard to the baptismal account (Matt. 3:13-17; Lk. 3:21, 22):

In this account we see Jesus praying as He comes out of the water, hearing the voice of His Father, and experiencing the Holy Spirit as a dove coming down upon Him.

But according to modalism Jesus (speaking as the Father) says: *I am the beloved Son in whom I am well-pleased.*

Then as the Holy Spirit, Jesus would have to ascend into heaven and come down upon Himself! Really? Finally, to whom was Jesus praying? Himself?

B. In regard to Matt. 11:27:

“All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

Here’s how this verse would have to be translated according to modalism: *I have delivered all things to myself.*

C. In regard to Matt. 12:31, 32:

According to modalism: *Whosoever speaketh a word against me should be forgiven, but whosoever speaketh a word against me shall not be forgiven!*

D. In regard to Matt. 26:39:

“He went a little farther and fell on His face, and prayed, saying, ‘O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will.’”

According to modalism: *“Oh me, if it be possible let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not my will but my will be done.”*

E. In regard to Matt. 27:46:

“And about the ninth hour Jesus cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?’ that is, ‘My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?’”

In regard to modalism: *“ . . . Myself, myself, why have I forsaken me?”*

- Proposed illustrations demonstrating the Trinity

Throughout church history various illustrations have been offered to demonstrate the Trinity:

A. Unscriptural illustrations

1. A three-leaf clover:

Each leaf enjoys the same stem, but this is a poor illustration of the Trinity because these leaves can be separated one from the other, and you cannot separate the Trinity.

2. The three states of water (liquid, vapor, and solid):

In its natural form, water is liquid. When boiled it turns into vapor, and when frozen, it becomes solid. This, too, is a poor illustration of the Trinity.

3. The threefold nature of man (body, soul, spirit):

Man possesses body, soul, and spirit, but they can be separated. At death the body is buried; the soul (the spirit) goes to be with the Lord. You cannot separate the Trinity. Therefore this, too, is a poor illustration.

4. The three parts of an egg (shell, white, yolk):

These three parts can be separated, thus making a bad illustration.

B. Possible (but limited) illustrations

1. The nature of light, consisting of three kinds of rays:

a. Chemical rays – Rays that are invisible, and can neither be felt nor seen

b. Light rays – Rays that are seen, but cannot be felt

c. Heat rays – Rays that are felt, but never seen. Some have said this is a good illustration of the Trinity, because chemical rays are invisible and could illustrate a type of the Father (can neither be felt nor seen). Light rays can be seen but cannot be felt, thus illustrating a type of the Son. Heat rays illustrate a

type of the Holy Spirit because they are felt but never seen. This is a possible illustration of the Trinity.

2. The dimensional example – A book has height, width, and length. This is my favorite example of the Trinity because these three factors cannot be separated, yet they are not the same.
3. A triangle – This is a fairly good example of the Trinity because it has three sides, and yet, it is a triangle.
4. Fire – A fire must have three things to exist. They are not the same, but if any ingredient is absent the fire ceases to be. These are: fuel, heat, and oxygen.
 - a. Remove the fuel and the fire goes out.
 - b. Lower the heat and the fire goes out.
 - c. Take away the oxygen and the fire goes out.
5. Time – Consisting of the past, present, and the future

Think about this for a moment. It is simply impossible for the human mind to conceive of the one entity, time, without thinking of three distinct aspects, namely, past time, present time, future time. Although different, they cannot be separated. This is to say one cannot have one without the other two! In fact, the last sentence you just read occurred in time past. This one, in time present, and the next one in time future!

6. The number 1 example:

$1 + 1 + 1$ of course equals 3 ... BUT –

$1 \times 1 \times 1$ still equals ... 1!

- Perhaps it will prove helpful here to compare the Trinity to that of the incarnation, in relation to the *whos* and *whats* involved. To explain:

A. The Trinity:

The three “*whos*” – the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit

The one “*what*” – each Person possesses absolute deity

B. The incarnation:

The one “*who*” – Jesus Christ

The two “*whats*” – Jesus was (and is) both fully human and fully divine, two natures in one Person.

Or, stated another way:

Jesus Christ is fully and completely *divine*.

Jesus Christ is fully and completely *human*.

The divine and human natures of Christ are *distinct*.

The divine and human natures of Christ are completely *united* in one Person.

- Old Testament passages regarding the Trinity

- A. The usage of the Hebrew word Elohim:

The very first verse in the Bible contains God's great name Elohim (Gen. 1:1):

"In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth."

1. Elohim is a plural name; however, when used in reference to the one true God, it is constantly joined with verbs and adjectives in the singular.

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" (Deut. 6:4).

"See not that I, even I, am he" (Deut. 32:39).

2. In many Old Testament passages Elohim is plurally used:

"And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen. 1:26).

"And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil" (Gen. 3:22).

"Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language" (Gen. 11:7).

3. Certain variants of Elohim are plural – Often one must go back to the original Hebrew translation to see that certain variants of Elohim are plural, although the more current writing would indicate that they are singular.

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth" (Eccles. 12:1).

In the original, this is literally *"thy Creators."* *"For thy Maker is thine husband"* (Isa. 54:5). Here, Maker should be translated "Makers."

- B. The triune conversations in Isaiah:

"Also I heard the voice of the Lord saying, Whom shall I send, and who will go for us? Then said I, Here am I; send me" (Isa. 6:8).

This passage is a reference to the Trinity.

"Come ye near unto me, hear ye this; I have not spoken in secret, from the beginning; from the time that it was, there am I; and now the Lord God, and his Spirit, hath sent me" (Isa. 48:16).

In this passage the "Son" is speaking about the "Father" who sent Him, and the "Holy Spirit."

"In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled, and vexed his holy Spirit; therefore he was turned to be their enemy" (Isa. 63:9-10).

In this passage there is a reference to the "Father," the "Son," and the "Holy Spirit."

- C. The conversation between the Father and the Son in the Psalms:

“The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord, and against his anointed, saying, Let us break their bands asunder, and cast away their cords from us.... I will declare the decree: the Lord hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee” (Psa. 2:2-3, 7).

“The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool” (Psa. 110:1).

- New Testament passages regarding the Trinity

- A. The baptism of Christ:

“And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water; and lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo, a voice from heaven saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Matt. 3:16-17).

- B. The temptation of Christ:

“Then was Jesus led up of the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted of the devil” (Matt. 4:1).

- C. The teachings of Jesus

“And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever” (John 14:16).

The Greek word here translated “another” is *allos*, meaning another of the same kind. *Heteros* is the Greek word for another of a different kind. It is never used in referring to the Trinity.

“But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you” (John 14:26).

- D. The baptismal formula:

“Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world. Amen” (Matt. 28:19-20).

- E. The apostolic benediction:

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Ghost, be with you all. Amen” (2 Cor. 13:14).

- A scriptural summary of the Trinity

- The Father is God:

“No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day” (John 6:44).

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom. 1:7).

“Elect according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through sanctification of the Spirit, unto obedience and sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ: Grace unto you, and peace, be multiplied” (1 Pet. 1:2).

The Son is God:

“For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6).

“In the beginning was the Word [Christ], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1).

“And Thomas answered and said unto him [the Son], My Lord and my God” (John 20:28).

“Looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2:13). “But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever” (Heb. 1:8).

The Spirit is God:

“But Peter said, Ananias, why hath Satan filled thine heart to lie to the Holy Ghost, and to keep back part of the price of the land? While it remained, was it not thine own? and after it was sold, was it not in thine own power? why hast thou conceived this thing in thine heart? thou has not lied unto men, but unto God” (Acts 5:3-4).

“How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Heb. 9:14).

Actually, Reginald Hernber, the great songwriter, put the doctrine of the Trinity in poetic form when he wrote the beautiful hymn:

*Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty,
Early in the morning, our song shall rise to Thee;
Holy, Holy, Holy, merciful and mighty,
God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.*

One final observation: As almost everyone knows, the three great monotheistic religions in the world today are Muslim, Judaism, and Christianity. Each strongly believes in but one God. However, the Christian religion parts company, holding that there actually are three Persons in the Divine Godhead, but not three Gods. This has of course resulted in no end of confusion. A personal example: In the spring semester of 1982 I had the honor of serving as a visiting professor at the American Institute for Holy Land Studies in Jerusalem, Israel. While there I became acquainted with several Jewish professors who taught either at Hebrew University or at Tel Aviv University. One such individual was named Ron. Ron was an orthodox Jew and one of the most gentle and gracious gentlemen I had ever met. On one occasion during a very pleasant lunch at the King David Hotel the following conversation ensued:

Ron: "May I assume that, if the right circumstances permit you will share your faith with a Jewish person?" I nodded my head in agreement.

Ron: "Permit me then to offer this practical piece of advice – don't employ the phrase 'Christian Jew,' for in the orthodox mindset, this is an oxymoron. I mean it would be like saying someone is a Christian atheist."

HLW: "Yes, I understand the problem of being a Christian atheist, for if one is a Christian, he's certainly not an atheist, and, if an atheist, not a Christian. But why is it an oxymoron to speak of a Christian Jew?"

Ron: "Here's the logic involved. An orthodox Jew is, above all, a staunch monotheist. In fact, our battle cry is. 'Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God is one LORD.' But as we understand it, a Christian is one who believes in three Gods, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. So you see the problem. How can someone claim to be both a monotheist and a polytheist at the same time?"

I, of course, immediately saw the apparent contradiction.

Thus, all the above serves to emphasize just how important it is to explain (as much as we can) the doctrine of the Trinity to our Jewish and Muslim friends!

In essence, the Trinity may be viewed as a mighty trunk, supporting and upholding all the limbs, branches, and leaves on the tree of Truth!