UNDERSTANDING AND EXPLAINING THE TRINITY:

A CONCISE OVERVIEW

A Paper

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INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Trinity has been a subject of confusion and misunderstanding throughout the history of the church. It is a doctrine that is difficult to understand and virtually impossible to explain. However, the doctrine is a foundational truth and a necessary element of a Christian’s faith despite the opacity of the Trinity. What makes the Trinity important? Fred Sanders stresses that our identity as Christians is found in the concept of the Trinity:

Personal evangelism, conversational prayer, devotional Bible study, authoritative preaching, world missions, and assurance of salvation all presuppose that life in the gospel is life in communion with the Trinity. Forget the Trinity and you forget why we do what we do: you forget who we are as gospel Christians; you forget how we got to be like we are.¹

Nevertheless, if the Trinity is indispensable, why did Jesus not teach his disciples about it? How come the Apostle Paul did not elaborate on it? Any answers to such question could only be mere speculation. On the other hand, the doctrine of the Trinity was significant to the early church fathers; they were aware of the concept prior to the development of the creed. Polycarp (70-155 A. D.), who also was a disciple of the Apostle Paul, indirectly reveals a Trinitarian belief with his proclamation: "I praise you for all things, I bless you, I glorify you, along with the everlasting and heavenly Jesus Christ, your beloved Son, with whom, to you and the Holy Spirit, be glory both now and to all coming ages. Amen"²

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the necessity of the doctrine of the Trinity and how it is an essential element of the Christian faith throughout the history of the Church. This paper will begin with the concept of the Trinity in Scripture and with the early fathers;


² The Martyrdom of Polycarp 14.5.
church fathers, follow with a view of heretical teachings that prompt the early church to develop the doctrine, and finally more recent views of the doctrine.

**THE REVEALING TRINITY (Heading 1)**

In order to for the Trinity doctrine to have any real substance or value, it must be rooted in Scripture first. In the same matter, the Trinitarian doctrine needed to have an impact on the early church and the Fathers. This section will analyze how the Trinity is found in the Bible and in the early writings of the church.

**In Scripture (Heading 2)**

The word ‘trinity’ is not found in Scripture. However, the Trinity doctrine is spread throughout the pages of the Bible. At the core of the doctrine is the monotheistic belief of one God of the Israelites. The worship of ‘one’ God separated the nation of Israel from other nations around them. The oneness of the nature of God is revealed in the Shema: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Deut. 6:4, ESV)³ Millard Erickson explains that the word one “…is drived from a verb form meaning to unify, that is figuratively, to collect (one’s thoughts).” The numeral derived from this means properly, united, that is, one.”⁴ In the New Testament, Jesus echoes this proclamation also: “Jesus answered, ‘The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one’” (Mark 12:29). In order to begin to comprehend the Trinity, the foundational truth that there is only one God needs to be established. At the same time, Scripture also makes known that one God is in three persons – God the Father, God the Son, God the Spirit.

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³ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical passages referenced are in the *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

Many would not object to the fact that the Father is revealed as God in Scripture. Of all three persons of the Godhead, the Father has been widely accepted as deity. The Apostle Paul in virtually all his letters use the phrase “God our Father” (Rom. 1:7, Gal. 1:3, Phil. 1:2, etc…) and the Apostle James and Peter themselves use the idiom ‘God the Father’ (Jas. 1:27, 1 Pet. 1:2). Likewise, the Apostle John makes it clear in his gospel that Jesus is God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). The Apostle Paul adds: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily…” (Col. 2:9). The Bible clearly portrays Jesus as God also. On the other hand, God the Spirit, has been the most difficult to identify as God. Nevertheless, Peter tells Ananias, in speaking about the Holy Spirit, that he has lied to God. “Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to man but to God” (Acts 5:4). Many attributes associated with God are also in the Holy Spirit – such as creating man. “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4). To conclude, even though the actual word is not found in the Bible, the Trinity is saturated in Scripture. In the same manner, the early church fathers also reveal a doctrine of the Trinity.

In Early Church History (Heading 3)

Tertullian (155-240 A. D.) has been credited with coining the term ‘trinity’. In Against Praxeas, Tertullian explains the Trinitarian doctrine and how it has been evident since the apostolic age. Tertullian also held the belief that that Trinity is found in Scripture: “All the Scriptures give clear proof of the Trinity, and it is from these that our principle is deduced...the distinction of the Trinity is quite clearly displayed.” For example, in reference to Genesis 1:26 and 3:22, Tertullian explains why God speaks in the plural: “…it was because already there was attached to Him his Son, a second person, his own Word, and a third, the Spirit in the

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5 Tertullian Against Praxeas 11.
Word....one substance in three coherent persons. He was at once the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. 

Prior to Tertullian, however, there were glimpses of the Trinity doctrine in other early church father’s writings.

In 190 A.D. Clement Of Alexandria (150-215 A.D.) stated, "I understand nothing else than the Holy Trinity to be meant; for the third is the Holy Spirit, and the Son is the second, by whom all things were made according to the will of the Father." 

Clement was not alone in acknowledging – and at times struggling with – a Trinitarian union between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. In the Fragments of Melito of Sardis (165-175 A.D.), The Father is referred to God, The Son’s nature is revealed as deity, and the Spirit is described as the tongue and finger of God. 

Also, Roger Olson and Christopher Hall in discussing Origen’s (180-255 A.D.) tidbits of the Trinity, confirm the complexity in declaring the mystery of the doctrine: “Origen serves as an apt model, perhaps because of his creative, innovative mind, of the struggle of the fathers to say enough about the Trinity, but not too much.” Consequently, the Trinity idea became more than a concept that was difficult to present or express, it became a doctrine that needed to establish because of confusion and false teachings.

THE NECESSARY TRINITY

The Trinitarian theology, in many ways, is a confluence of the monotheistic society of the Israelites and the polytheistic view of the Greco-Roman society. As the early church process this crossing point of ‘three yet one’ concept, there arouse heresies that required church leaders to

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6 Ibid., 12.

7 Clement The Stromata, Or Miscellanies 5.14.


congregate and develop the doctrine of the Trinity. Consequently, this section will concisely overlook three such heresies – Modalism, Adoptionism, and Arianism.

**Against Heresies**

The term ‘modalism’ is not familiar with Christians today, yet, as Harold Brown points out, “…it is the most common theological error among people who think themselves orthodox.”

Sabellius, who was a third century priest and theologian, promoted Modalism in his time. It is not a denial of the deity of God but the denial of God in three persons at once. In general, modalism is the belief that God cannot be three at the same moment. In other words, God was a shape shifter, of sorts. Brown indicates that in modalism, “…God reveals himself under different aspects or modes in different ages – as the Father in Creation and in the giving of the Law, as the Son in Jesus Christ, and as the Holy Spirit after Christ’s ascension.”

Another heresy was Adoptionism and its proponent was Paul of Samosata. In Adoptionism, Jesus was born a human and remained in His finite state until God ‘adopted’ Him as the Son of God – at which point Jesus was elevated into the Godhead. Paul Tillich indicates that Paul of Samosata believed Jesus is a man inspired by the power of God and that “…the more Jesus developed in his own being, the more he received of the Spirit. Finally he achieved eternal union with God, and then he became the judge and received the status of God.”

Lastly, Arius was from North Africa who was a presbyter in Alexandria. At the heart of Arianism was that Jesus was a created being who was made out of nothing. Robert Letham summarizes Arius claims:

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11 Ibid.

1. God is solitary, the Father unique
2. The Son had an origin ex nihilo (out of nothing). There was a time when he did not exist.
3. God made a person (Word, Spirit, Son) when he wanted to create. In short he created by an intermediary
4. The Word has a changeable nature, and he remains good by exercising his freewill only so long as he chooses.
5. The ousiai (substances or beings) of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are divided and differ from one another.¹³

In the same manner that Modalism is relevant today, Arianism also can be seen today in many who Christ as a ‘lower’ deity. More importantly, Brown suggests that “…Arianism gave us orthodoxy, or at least triniarianism.”¹⁴

For Orthodoxy

As noted, the heretical beliefs against the concept of the Trinity – or at least the one substance of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – compelled the early church to gather and formulated a creed or a doctrine. The First ecumenical council of the Church was the Council of Nicea of 325 A.D. And one of the reasons for the assembly was to discuss the Arianism and its implications for the young Church. The Emperor Constantine wanted church bishops to settle matters, which were dividing and confusing many in the Church. The central issue was the identity of Christ – who was Christ and is He divine? Those who were gathered eventually proclaimed: “We believe… in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of his Father, of the substance of the Father, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one

substance with the Father.”¹⁵ The Nicene Creed found it necessary to introduce the term *homoousios* (one substance) to clarify the deity of Christ and to oppose Arius. Tony Lane believes that “… Arius was condemned by the use of the word *homoousios* in particular.”¹⁶ Even though, Arius was condemned, his heretical beliefs lingered on for many years that eventually led to the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D.

Leading the way to the Council of Constantinople in 381 A.D. were the Cappadocian Fathers – Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa. Lane states the Cappadocian Fathers “…fused together the Nicene belief that Father and Son are *homoousios* (of one substance) and the Origenist belief that Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three hypostases of beings.”¹⁷ Despite the Cappadocian Father’s teachings raising some concerns, their views were eventually accepted at the council and reaffirmed the Church’s stances against Arianism and other Trinitarian heresies.

**THE ENDURING TRINITY**

The councils of the fourth century revealed the necessity of establishing a Trinitarian doctrine to bring the known Church into communion with herself. The struggles of the early church in evolving the Trinity concept have endured throughout the ages. This section will briefly focus on Martin Luther, from the Reformation period and Karl Barth, from modern times, and how the Trinity persevered.

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¹⁷ Ibid., 36.
The Reformation: Martin Luther

The early years of the sixteenth century, a monk named Martin Luther began a new era in the history of the Church known as the Reformation. After the Fathers, the Church began the time of the Middle Ages or Mediaeval Times (500-1500 A. D.). Luther sought to reform the Church, which had fallen away from the Scripture. In the mist of the new transformation, there arose some who did not only want the Reformers to challenge the Catholic Church, but also to challenge the Trinity view. Olson and Hall state that these attempts to undermine the Trinity “… forced the mainline, magisterial reformers who wished to remain orthodox in terms of Nicene faith in the Trinity to defend a continuing belief in the Trinity among their followers.”\textsuperscript{18} Unlike the church fathers, Luther did not see the need to dissect all the components of the Trinity in order to defend it. Instead, as Stephen Holmes claims, Luther assumed the Trinity is the “… right interpretation of Scripture and offers it, sometimes as explaining particular features of the text (classically on the plural in Gen. 1:26), sometimes as the natural meaning of the Scripture (John 1, for example).”\textsuperscript{19}

Modern Times: Karl Barth

The Enlightenment period began, along with the secularization of society, after the Reformation era. Christian theology was no longer prominent in the people’s lives. Along those lines, the Trinity became obscured. Karl Barth is a Swiss theologian who renewed interest in the Trinity. Barth tied the knowledge of God to revelation as God’s

\textsuperscript{18} Olson and Hall, \textit{The Trinity}, 68.

self-disclosure and connected revelation with the Trinity. In other words, God and the Son experienced the same things because they were one. Letham states that Barth argues that the “…doctrine of the Trinity in an outflow of the proposition that ‘God reveals himself’”. Letham continues to states that God’s self-revelation is the basis for the doctrine of the Trinity according to Barth. “The statement, understood thus, that God reveals Himself as the Lord, or what this statement is meant to describe, and therefore revelation itself as attested by Scripture, we call the root of the doctrine of the Trinity.” Barth’s renewal in the doctrine of the Trinity was not without some doubts and concerns, however, his interest in the doctrine brought back to light and refocused a new generation of thinkers to the enduring Trinity.

CONCLUSION

Understanding and explaining the Trinity is difficult. On the other hand, the Trinity remains a necessary doctrine of a Christian’s faith. As noted, the doctrine of the Trinity, even though the term is not found in Scripture, the concept is found in the Bible. Also, the early church fathers revealed the essences of the Trinity from Scripture that eventually led to the necessary development of the doctrine because of heresies and confusion about the nature of God. During the Reformation, Martin Luther reaffirmed the doctrine of the Trinity when others wanted to reform the nature of God also. In modern times, Karl Barth brought interest back to the Trinity after the Enlightenment – an era about the worship of man than of God.

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20 Olson and Hall, The Trinity, 96.


22 Ibid.

23 Karl Barth, Church Dogmatics, I/1:308.
Bibliography


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