THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY: HISTORICALLY ASSAILED

BUT BIBLICALLY AFFIRMED

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A Position Paper

Presented to

Dr. Bruce Ware

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for 27060 WW

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by

Student's name

email@students.sbts.edu

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On my honor, I have neither given nor taken improper assistance

in completing this assignment.

THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY: HISTORICALLY ASSAILED
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In his excellent book reflecting of the gospel truths found in the Heidleburg Catechism, pastor and author Kevin DeYoung says of the doctrine of the Trinity, "If any doctrine makes Christianity Christian, then surely it is the doctrine of the Trinity. The three great ecumenical creeds-the Apostle's Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Athenasian Creed-are all structured around our three-in-one God, underlying the essential importance of Trinitarian theology."[1] Any thoughtful and careful study of the Scriptures will reveal that the doctrine of the Trinity is built upon three biblical truths: there is one God, God exists in three distinct persons and each of those persons is fully God. However, when these core truths, either in whole or in part are not embraced, false teachings and unbiblical heresies are sure to arise.

Throughout the history of the church, many heresies have attempted to assail the doctrine of the Trinity, but this doctrine has been biblically affirmed throughout the pages of the Scripture. To support this thesis, this paper will explain the most common heresies from church history and then explain and affirm the biblical doctrine of the Trinity by utilizing current theological literature, prominent scholarly work, and relevant biblical texts from both the Old Testament and New Testament. Finally, this paper will conclude by addressing some of the common objections that have been raised in response to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. The research argued in this paper will demonstrate that the biblical doctrine of the Trinity has and will continue to stand the test of time.

Heretical Positions Against the Doctrine of the Trinity

"The three main heresies that contradict the doctrine of the Trinity are Modalism (the persons are ways God expresses himself, as in Oneness theology), Arianism (the Son is a

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[1] Kevin L. DeYoung, *The Good News We Almost Forgot: Rediscovering the Gospel in a 16th Century Catechism* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2010), 49.

creature and not divine, as with Jehovah's Witnesses), and Tritheism (there are three distinct gods, as in Mormonism and Hinduism)."[2]

Modalism

One of the primary heresies that sought to assail the biblical doctrine of the Trinity was Modalism. The central tenet of Modalism is that God has made himself known in three different forms or modes. This heretical view was espoused by an early Christian named Sabellius who proposed that there is only one God, God the Father who decided to manifest himself in the "mode" of the Son, who entered into human history as Jesus Christ of Nazareth.[3] While Modalists believe that there is one God, they do not believe that God can exist as Father, Son and Holy Spirit at the same time. God, then, according to the Modalist view is successively Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; he is not simultaneously Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Throughout salvation history God has revealed himself as Father, Son and Holy Spirit at different times but never at the same time. Mark Driscoll illustrates this by saying that, "For a Modalist, the God of the Old Testament is the Father. In the incarnation, God was manifested in Jesus. Then, after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, God came in the mode of the Holy Spirit."[4]

For some, Modalism can be seen as a compelling view because it seeks to protect the Biblical belief that there is one God, the Father. He has been, is and will forever be king over the universe. While Modalists espouse support for their view from biblical passages which claim the existence of only one true God, the God of the Bible, they also seek to claim support from passages such as John 10:30 and John 14:9 that clearly indicate the unity of the Father and the Son as the one true God. One of the great challenges that Modalists faced was reconciling their

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[2] Mark Driscoll and Gerry Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 71. iTunes e-book.

[3] Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), 65. iTunes e-book.

[4] Driscoll and Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe,* 60.

view with the numerous places in the Scripture where the personal relationships of the Trinity appear.

While the Modalist view sought to uphold the oneness of God and the fully deity of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, it faced significant challenges of acceptance from the church and the key ecumenical councils in church history. No church council was needed to convince Christian people that this view simply could not account for Scripture's teaching. The biblical examples of the baptism of Jesus, or Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane demonstrate that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are present at the same time. Dr. Bruce Ware says of Modalism that, "God, then, must be simultaneously Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not just one of these "modes" of the divine expression at a time."[5]

Arianism

A second heretical view from church history that sought to assail the biblical doctrine of the Trinity was Arianism. This view was espoused by a man named Arius, who was a bishop from Alexandria, and it denied the full deity of God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Arius believed that God the Son was created by God the Father at a point in time before which God the Son did not exist, nor did the Holy Spirit.[6] Arius proposed that Jesus was fully human, the highest created being of God but was not fully God.

To support their view, Arians depend heavily upon biblical texts such as John 1:14; 3-16, 18 and 1 John 4:19 that call Christ God's "only begotten" Son. If Christ were "begotten" by God the Father, they reasoned, it must mean that he was brought into existence by God the Father.[7] Arians seek to justify this view by arguing that from human experience, the word "beget" refers to a father's role in conceiving a child. Arians also point to Colossians 1:15 that

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[5] Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance,* 65.

[6] Wayne Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith* (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1999), 113.

[7] Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith,* 113.

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refs to Christ as "the first-born of all creation" to substantiate their argument that Christ was at some point brought into existence by God the Father, and was therefore not of the same nature as God.

Though the Arian view amassed quite a large following, its views were largely dismissed at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. At this council, bishop and theologian Athanasius argued in defense of the deity of Christ. While some at the council sought to argue that Christ was only of a similar nature as God, Athanasius's argument prevailed and the Nicene Creed was written that affirms that Christ is of the very same nature and substance of God. In affirming that the Son was of the same nature as the Father, the early church also excluded a related false doctrine, subordinationism. While Arianism believed that the Son was created and not divine, subordinationism held that the Son was eternal and divine, but still not equal to the Father in being or attributes.[8]

Today Arianism is the part of the official teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses, a dangerous cult which was founded in 1881 by a man named Charles Taze Russell. Jehovah's Witnesses teach that there is no biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity and that there is only one divine being from all eternity. This divine being is Jehovah God, the creator and preserver of the universe and all things. Jehovah's Witnesses essentially believe what Arius taught about Christ in the third century, that he is not God, but rather God's first created creature. Mark Driscoll captures one of the many flaws of the heretical teaching of the Jehovah's Witnesses by saying, "Thus, Jesus is the archangel Michael, who is mentioned in the Old Testament. Neither is the Spirit divine but rather more of a cosmic force of Jehovah."[9]

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[8] Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith,* 114.

[9] Driscoll and Breshears, *Doctrine: What Christians Should Believe,* 62.

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Tritheism

   A third heretical view that has attempted to assail the biblical doctrine of the Trinity is Tritheism. Pastor Mark Driscoll defines this heresy by saying, "Tritheism teaches that the Trinity consists of three equal, independent and autonomous beings, each of whom is divine."[10] Tritheism places a strong emphasis on the plurality of the Godhead but at the same time deemphasizes the unity that the biblical doctrine of the Trinity would espouse. The conclusion of this heretical teaching is to say that God is three persons and each person is fully God.[11] This false doctrine is reminiscent of the many pagan systems of religion that believed in a multiplicity of gods.

   While there have only a few people who have held this view in church history and there are no modern groups who actively claim to believe and embrace Tritheism, this heretical view still has the potential to assail and undermine the biblical doctrine of the Trinity and potentially cause confusion in the hearts and minds of Christians. One way this confusion can happen is through the use of inferior human analogies such as likening the Trinity to an egg that has the three distinct parts of the shell, the yolk, and the white to explain God's triune nature.

   While these heresies have been largely unsuccessful in their attempts to assail the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, they have been influential in both positive and negative ways in church history. In a negative way, these heresies have been embraced by both Christian denominations and cults alike. In a positive way, these heresies have fueled a renewed sense of responsibility on the part of individual Christians and church councils to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity in biblically faithful and culturally relevant ways. As we will now see, these heresies stand in stark contrast to the biblical view that there is one God who exists in three distinct persons and each of those persons is fully God.

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  [10] Ibid, 63.

  [11] Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith,* 114.

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Biblical Affirmations of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Dr. Bruce Ware provides a helpful summary of the arguments that will be considered in the remainder of this paper when he says,

> "The Christian faith affirms that there is one and only one God, eternally existing and fully expressed in three Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each member of the Godhead is equally God, each is eternally God, and each is fully God- not three gods but three Persons of the one Godhead. Each person is equal in essence as each possesses fully the identically same, eternal divine nature, yet each is also an eternal and distinct personal expression of the one undivided divine nature."[12]

There is Only One God

Perhaps the most startling statement in the entire Bible is found in the very first verse where God announces that, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). This was a truly amazing statement in the midst of a polytheistic world. Biblical Christianity affirms that there is only one true God, not many gods. God made this clear in the writings of Moses when he said to his people that the Lord is our God and the Lord is one (Duet. 6:4). Pastor and author John MacArthur clarifies the meaning of this truth well by saying, "That truth was central to Israel's religious convictions. Because they lived in the midst of polytheistic societies, it was vital that they give their allegiance to the one true God."[13] While the pagan cultures all around them worshiped their many gods, God's people were to worship him, the one true God, faithfully with their whole hearts.

Solomon reiterated this truth at the dedication of the Temple that the peoples of the earth would know that he is God alone and there is no other (1 Kings 8:60). Later in the Old Testament, God speaks of himself as the one true God in an emphatic way through the prophet Isaiah, "I am the Lord and there is no other, besides me there is no god; I gird you, though you do not know me, that men my know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is

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[12] Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles and Relevance, 121-122.*

[13] John MacArthur Jr., *God: Coming Face to Face with his Majesty* (Victor: Wheaton, 1993), p. 18.

none besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other" (45:5-6). So the Old Testament Scripture is clear that there is one and only one God.

The oneness of God is also prevalent in the teachings of the New Testament as well. Jesus said that eternal life is found in knowing God as the one true God (John 17:3). The Apostle Paul spoke of God the Father being the one God through whom all things exist (1 Co. 8:6). Later in the New Testament Paul also affirms that there is one God and Jesus Christ is the sole mediator between God and men (1Tim. 2:5). Dr. Bruce Ware summarizes these biblical teachings from the Old and New Testaments by saying, "The Bible is clear: there is one and only one God. The God of the Bible, the God of the Israelites, and the God shown through Christ is the only true God."[14]

God is Three Persons

One of the great hymns of the Christian faith is "Holy, Holy, Holy." In this hymn, one of the great mysteries concerning the doctrine of the Trinity is found in the last line of the first verse where it says, "God in three persons, the blessed Trinity." Pastor John MacArthur speaks of this mystery when he says, "God is one, yet exists not as two but three distinct persons. That is a mystery unparalleled in our experience."[15] What this means then is that God the Father is God, Jesus the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God. However, this also means that God the Father is not the Son or the Spirit, the Son is not the Father or the Spirit and the Spirit is not the Son or the Father, they are each God, but there is still only one God.

The truth of the one God eternally existing in three persons can be seen in many places throughout Scripture. In the Old Testament book of Genesis, God refers to himself by saying, "Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness" (1:26). Millard Erickson makes an

Commented [ACH22]: STYLE: The student utilizes a very reader-friendly style that is easy to follow, while skillfully interacting with quality sources.

important observation about this verse when he says, "Here the plural occurs both in the verb, 'let us make' and in the possessive suffix 'our.' What is significant from the standpoint of logical analysis, is the shift from singular to plural. God is quoted as using a plural verb with reference to himself."[16] Elsewhere in the Old Testament, when God was about to destroy the Tower of Babel he used another plural form in reference to himself when he said, "Come, let us go down and confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech" (Gen. 11:7).

The biblical truth that God is three persons is also seen in the New Testament, most notably in the Great Commission given by Jesus in the book of Matthew when he said to his disciples, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (28:19). It is important to notice the singular use of the word "name" in this verse. The word name is a reference to the character or essence of God as one. Jesus did not command the disciples to baptize in the "names" of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit or in the name of the Father and the name of the Son and the name of the Holy Spirit. He said to baptize in the "name" of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Again, Millard Erickson observes, "So name is singular but there are three persons included in that name."[17]

We see these three persons of the Godhead present at another significant New Testament event, the baptism of Jesus. Matthew affirms their presence when he says that the Holy Spirit descended upon Christ like a dove and then God the Father audibly spoke these words, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (3:17). What an amazing scene, God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit all captured in the same picture. These passages affirm the biblical truth that there is one God who exists in the three persons of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is three in one and one in three, a powerful truth and profound mystery.

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[16] Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine,* 2nd ed. (Baker: Grand Rapids, 2001), p. 110.

[17] Ibid, 110.

Commented [ACH23]: THEOLOGICAL COMMUNICATION: This paper excels at tracing this doctrine through a broad swath of Scripture, showing depth of research and a good grasp on the topic. These truths are organized in a clear, helpful way.

Each Person is Fully God

To this point we have clearly seen that Scripture teaches the truth that there is one God who exists in the three persons of the Godhead as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Now we will see a third and final truth in the biblical affirmation of the Trinity, that truth is that each of these three persons is fully God. The Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Spirit is God.

First, the Father is fully God. This truth has scarcely been the subject of debate throughout the history of the church because it is clearly taught throughout the pages of Scripture. The very first verse of the Bible asserts that, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). In the model prayer, Jesus instructed his disciples to pray, "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matt. 6:9). The apostle Paul spoke of the blessedness of God as Jesus Father when he said, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places" (Eph. 1:3). God the Father is fully God.

Second, the Son is fully God. As Millard Erickson asserts, this truth has met with more resistance than the first but nonetheless is thoroughly biblically affirmed. He says, "Somewhat problematic is Jesus as deity, yet Scripture identifies him as God."[18] One passage in which Jesus is clearly identified as God is in the Gospel of John when the apostle writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In this verse, Christ is referred to as "the Word". The phrase in the beginning harkens back to Genesis 1:1, when in the beginning of time as we know it, God, who was already in existence, created the heavens and the earth. Therefore, Christ existed in the beginning. He was with God and he was God. Later in the Gospel of John, Thomas, one of Christ's disciples referred to him as, "My Lord and my God" (John 20:28). The scripture affirms that, the Son is fully God.

Third, the Holy Spirit is fully God. Concerning this facet of the doctrine of the Trinity, Dr. Wayne Grudem aptly argues for the deity of the Spirit. He says,

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[18] Ibid, 108.

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"Once we understand God the Father and God the Son to be fully God, then Trinitarian expressions in verses like Matthew 28:19 ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit") assume significance for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, because they show that the Holy Spirit is classified on an equal level with the Father and the Son."[19]

In the book of Acts, the apostle Peter, clearly equates the Holy Spirit with God when he asks Ananias, who had held back some of the proceeds from the sale of some property, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit…you have not lied to men but to God" (5:3-4). The Holy Spirit is fully God.

Objections to the Biblical Affirmations of the Doctrine of the Trinity

One of the most common objections to the biblical affirmations of the doctrine of the Trinity comes from Christians who struggle with the fact that the term, "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible. As a result, they question whether they should believe or embrace a doctrine that is not neatly defined in a specific passage of Scripture or stated in some sort of creedal manner. In considering the objection of using terminology not found in the Bible to define biblical truth, the most important question to ask in affirming the Trinitarian nature of God presented in the Scripture is captured best by Dr. James R. White. He says,

"What is most important, the truth taught by Scripture or the use of only the words of Scripture to express that truth? If we express a truth of Scripture by use of words not used by scriptural writers, are we in some way compromising Scripture? Certainly not. The issue is whether the truth so expressed is, in fact in harmony with the Scriptures. Just as 'justification by grace through faith alone without meritorious works' is an accurate, proper summary of the biblical teaching on salvation, though the exact phrase itself does not appear in Scripture, so too 'one God in three Persons' is the only possible conclusion derived from a study of Scripture alone and all of Scripture."[20]

A second common objection comes from those of the Jehovah's Witnesses cult, who believe that Jesus was not God, but a god. Their objection stems from a misinterpretation of the first verse in John's gospel that says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with

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[19] Grudem, *Bible Doctrine: Essential Teachings of the Christian Faith,* 109.

[20] James White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal* 21, no.4 (Spring/Summer 1999): 20-25, 40-41.

God, and the Word was God" (1:1). The literal interpretation of this third clause would be that, "God was the Word." The text clearly does not say that the Word was a god or that God was a word. The biblical refutation of this passage is further explained by John M. Frame when he states, "There are about ten passages in which the New Testament directly identifies Jesus as God. These have been contested exegetically, but I think these disputes have been due less to genuine difficulties in the texts than to theological resistance to Jesus' claims."[21] The Scripture again affirms there is only one God, eternally existing in three distinct persons who are each fully God.

Conclusion

This paper demonstrates the ways in which the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity has been assailed throughout the history of the church, but affirmed throughout the pages of the Scripture. The Trinitarian teaching of the character and nature of God should provide Christians with an unshakeable confidence in knowing that while this doctrine is unique to biblical Christianity and questioned by those who deny the truth of God's clear revelation, it has and will continue to stand the test of time. The one true God eternally exists in three distinct but equal persons who are fully God. The words of the Apostle Paul eloquently capture this truth when he says, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

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[21] John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (P&R: Phillipsburg, 2002), p. 663.

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