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THE TRINITY IN HISTORY: HOW NOT TO BE A HERETIC

I. **Introduction: The Twin Pillars of Trinitarian Doctrine: Distinction and Equality; Difference and Identity. E.g., John 1:1 – “with God” (distinction), “was God” (equality)**

The Christian faith affirms that there is one and only one God, eternally existing while fully and simultaneously 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 eternally, simultaneously, and fully the identically same and undivided divine nature. Yet each is also an eternal and distinct personal expression of that one undivided divine nature. Because of this, what *distinguishes* each Person of the Godhead from each other Person is not and cannot be the divine nature, since the identically same one and undivided divine nature is the full and eternal possession of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. So, what *distinguish* each Person of the Godhead from each other Person are the *relationships* that each has with each of the other Persons and his particular *roles* in relation to the others. In light of both the *equality of essence* yet *differentiation of relationships and roles* that exist among the Persons of the Godhead, we consider now just how the church came to affirm these truths about the Trinity and how those Trinitarian relationships and roles are expressed within the Trinity of Persons.

II. **Biblical Teaching: Scriptural Monotheism**

If we take the biblical record of progressive revelation into account, it seems clear that God intended first for his people to come to understand and embrace his Oneness – there is one God (e.g., Gen 1:1; Deut 4:35; 1 Kings 8:60; Isa 45:5-7) – with hints given to his Threeness in the midst (e.g., Gen 1:1-2, 26-28; Isa 48:16). In the economy of God’s revelation, then, God chose to make know his Oneness and only afterwards also his Threeness. Only in the revelation of Christ as the incarnation of God himself (John 1:1-3, 14-18; Phil 2:5-9; Col 1:15-17; Heb 1:1-3), and of the Spirit as God himself (Acts 5:1-5, 9; 1 Cor 2:10-13; Heb 9:14), and of the Son and the Spirit with the Father as the One God of the Christian faith who is also Three (Matt 28:18-20; 2 Cor 13:14; Eph 4:4-6), do we see the necessity of affirming, along with the Oneness of God also his Threeness. The One God of the Christian faith is God only as he is, eternally, simultaneously, and fully, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

A. OT Affirmation of One God

Genesis 1:1 – In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

Deuteronomy 4:35 – To you it was shown that you might know that the Lord, He is God; there is no other besides Him.

Deuteronomy 6:4 – Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!

1 Kings 8:59-60 – ⁵⁹ [Solomon’s address after temple build] And may these words of mine, with which I have made supplication before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, that He may maintain the cause of His servant and the cause of His people Israel, as each day

requires,⁶⁰ so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no one else.

Isaiah 45:5-6 – ⁵I am the Lord, and there is no other; Besides Me there is no God. ⁶I will gird you, though you have not known Me; That men may know from the rising to the setting of the sun That there is no one besides Me. I am the Lord, and there is no other

Isaiah 46:9 – Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like Me.

B. NT Affirmation of One God

John 17:3 – This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God...

1 Corinthians 8:6 – yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we *exist* for Him...

1 Timothy 2:5 – For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,

Romans 3:30 – since indeed God who will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith is one.

James 2:19 – You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder.

III. **Biblical Teaching: Scriptural Trinitarianism**

A. Father is God – clearly this is the case, and never questioned, as asserted in 1 Cor 8:6 that we just read. Who did Jesus honor, to whom did Jesus pray, whose will did Jesus obey, if not God, his Father?

B. Jesus is God – here it gets very interesting. For even some of the very passages affirming that there is one God raised questions in the minds of the early Christians about Jesus in particular and his relationship to this one God.

John 17:3 – This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent – (distinction and identity)

1 Corinthians 8:6 – yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things and we exist for Him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, by whom are all things, and we exist through Him – (distinction and identity)

John 1:1; John 8:58; Mark 2:5-11 (forgives sin); Heb 1:2 (Creator), 3a (exact representation of his nature), 3b (upholds the universe by the word of his power), 6 (Let all God's angels worship him), 8 (Of the Son he says, Thy throne O God is forever and ever), and 10-12 (quotes Ps 102:25-27, where God is eternal and immutable).

C. Holy Spirit is God – Acts 5:3-4 (lied to the HS . . . not lied to man but to God); 1 Cor 2:10-11 (HS knows the thoughts of God); 1 Cor 3:16 (you are a temple of God, the Spirit dwells in you); Heb 9:14 (eternal Spirit)

- D. Triadic Passages – Matt 28:19-20 (baptize in the name of F, S, HS); 2 Cor 13:14 (grace of the LJC, love of God, fellowship of the HS)

IV. Heresy and Orthodoxy in the Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity

- A. Council of Nicea (AD 325)—Affirmed Christ is fully God
1. Sabellius—modalistic Monarchianism, or Modalism, or Sabellianism, **rejected**
 2. Arius—dynamistic Monarchianism, or Subordinationism of essence, or Arianism, **rejected**
 3. Athanasius—won the day, and **affirmed** that Christ was *homoousios* with the Father
 4. Contemporary “Arians” in Jehovah’s Witness and Mormon theology.
 5. Contemporary “modalists” in Oneness “Jesus only” Pentecostal theology
- B. Council of Constantinople (AD 381)—Affirmed Christ is Fully Man; Holy Spirit is Fully God
1. Apollanarius—docetic view, that Christ was fully God but *not* fully human, **rejected**
 2. Arius’s followers—the “pneumatomachians” (“Spirit fighters”) view, that the Spirit is just the presence of God, an impersonal force, **rejected**
 3. Cappadocian Fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus)—**affirmed** the Spirit is, with the Father and Son, fully God
 4. Contemporary “pneumatomachians” in the liberal rejection of the Spirit as truly Personal, and truly God.
 5. Contemporary “functional Apollanarians” who so stress the deity of Christ that the humanity of Christ is, for all intents and purposes, unnecessary.
- C. Council of Ephesus (A.D. 431)—Affirmed Christ is One Person
1. Nestorianism—Christ was fully God and fully man by being two full persons joined together, **rejected**
 2. **Affirmed** that Christ was fully God in nature, and fully man in nature, and so one person with two natures—hypostatic union, i.e., the union of two natures (*ousia*) in one person (*hypostasis*)
 3. Contemporary “functional Nestorians” who so split the two natures of Jesus such that there essentially is a divine Person and human person functioning in any and every given action. E.g., So some would say, “It was not Jesus who was tempted, but the

human Jesus was tempted,” or “It was not Jesus who forgave sin, but the divine Jesus forgave sin.”)

- D. Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451)—Affirmed Christ has Two Complete Natures in One Person
1. Eutychianism—that Christ’s two nature co-mingled within him, producing a sort of humanized deity and divinized humanity, **rejected**
 2. **Affirmed** that Christ was fully God and fully man in one person, his two natures being *conjoined* indissolubly forever together but not *confused*.
 3. Historic and contemporary “functional Eutychians” who see divine qualities carried over to the human nature of Christ, and the reverse. E.g., historically, Luther’s use of the “*communication idiomatum*” appealed to the ubiquity of Christ’s divine nature communicated to his human body. Or some might say that God (i.e., the divine nature of Jesus) literally died on the cross when Jesus died.
- V. **Conclusion:** Oneness (of essence) and Threeness (of persons) are equally necessary in understanding the living and true God, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Compromising Oneness results in some form of Polytheism; compromising Threeness results in some form of Unitarianism. Trinitarian (three) Monotheism (one) requires that Oneness and Threeness be brought together: the God of the Bible, the God of the Christian Faith, is the One God who is Three, as he is one in essence, and three in persons. Praise be to the One God – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.