The Trinity in Scripture

Gerhard Pfandl
Biblical Research Institute

The word Trinity (Lat. *Trinitas*, "tri-unity" or "three-in-oneness") is not found in the Bible (neither is the word "incarnation"), but the teaching it describes is clearly contained in Scripture. Briefly defined, the doctrine of the Trinity stands for the concept that "God eternally exists as three persons, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and each person is fully God, and there is one God."[1]

God himself is a mystery—how much more the incarnation or the Trinity! Nevertheless, even though we may not be able to comprehend logically the various aspects of the Trinity, we need to try to understand as best we can the scriptural teaching regarding it. All attempts to explain the Trinity will fall short, "especially when we reflect on the relation of the three persons to the divine essence . . . all analogies fail us and we become deeply conscious of the fact that the Trinity is a mystery far beyond our comprehension. It is the incomprehensible glory of the Godhead."[2] Therefore, we do well to admit that "man cannot comprehend it and make it intelligible. It is intelligible in some of its relations and modes of manifestations, but unintelligible in its essential nature."[3]

We need to be aware that we can only ever achieve a partial understanding of what the Trinity is. As we listen to God's Word, certain elements of the Trinity will become clear, but others will remain a mystery. "The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but those things which are revealed belong to us and our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29).

---

[1] W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Zondervan, 1994), 226.

[2] Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Eerdmans, 1941), 88.

[3] Ibid., 89.

The Trinity in the Old Testament

Several passages in the Old Testament suggest or even imply that God exists in more than one person, not necessarily in a Trinity, but at least in a binary relationship.

1. Genesis 1

Throughout the creation story in Genesis 1 the word for God is *ʿElohim*, the plural form of *ʿEloha*. Generally, this plural has been interpreted as a plural of majesty rather than of plurality. However, G. A. F. Knight has correctly argued that to make this a plural of majesty is to read into the ancient Hebrew text a modern concept, since the kings of Israel and Judah are all addressed in the singular in the biblical record.[4] Furthermore, Knight points out that the Hebrew words for water and heaven are both plural. Grammarians have termed this phenomenon the quantitative plural. Water can appear in the form of small drops or large oceans. This quantitative diversity in unity, says Knight, is a fitting way of understanding the plural *ʿElohim*. This also explains why the singular noun *ʿAdonai* is written as a plural.[5]

In Genesis 1:26, we read "Then God said [singular], 'Let Us make [plural] man in Our [plural] image, according to Our [plural] likeness.'" What is significant is the shift from singular to plural. Moses is not using a plural verb with *ʿElohim*, but God is using a plural verb and plural pronouns in reference to himself. Some interpreters believe that God is here speaking to the angels. But according to Scripture, angels did not participate in creation. The best explanation is that already in the first chapter of Genesis there is an indication of a plurality of persons in the Godhead itself.

2. Genesis 2:24

According to Genesis 2:24, man and woman are to "become one (*ʿechad*) flesh," a union of two separate persons. In Deuteronomy 6:4 the same word is used of God, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one (*ʿechad*)." Millard J. Erickson says, " It seems that something is being affirmed here about the nature of God—he is an organism, that is, a unity of distinct parts."[6] Moses could have used the word *yachid* (only one, unique) in Deuteronomy 6:4, but the Holy Spirit chose not to do so.

3. Other Old Testament Texts Expressing a Plurality

After the fall of man God said, "Behold, man has become like one of Us" (Gen 3:22). And some time later, when men began to build the tower of Babel,

---

[4] G. A. F. Knight, *A Biblical Approach to the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Edinburgh, 1953), 20.
[5] Ibid.
[6] Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Baker, 1983), 1:329.

the LORD said, "Come let Us go down and there confuse their language" (Gen 11:7). Each time the plurality of the Godhead is emphasized.

In his famous throne vision Isaiah hears the LORD asking, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?" (Isa 6:8). Here we have God using the singular and plural in the same sentence. Many modern scholars take it as a reference to the heavenly council. But did God ever call on his creatures for advice? In Isaiah 40:13,14 he seems to refute this very notion. He has no need of counseling with his creatures, not even with heavenly beings. The plural, therefore, while not proving the Trinity, suggests that there is a plurality of beings in the speaker.

4. The Angel of the Lord

The phrase "angel of the LORD" appears fifty-eight times in the Old Testament, "the angel of God" eleven times. The Hebrew word *mal'ak* ("angel") means simply "messenger." Therefore, if the "Angel of the LORD" is a messenger of the LORD, he must be distinct from the LORD himself. Yet, in a number of texts the "Angel of the LORD" is also called "God" or "LORD" (Gen 16:7-13; Num 22:31-38; Judg 2:1-4; 6:22). The Church Fathers identified him with the pre-incarnate Logos. Modern scholars have seen him as a being who represents God, as God himself, or as some external power of God. Conservative scholars generally agree that "this 'messenger' must be seen as a special manifestation of the being of God himself."[7] If this is correct, we have here another indicator of the plurality of persons in the Godhead.

The Trinity in the New Testament

Truth in Scripture is progressive; therefore, when we come to the New Testament we find a more explicit picture of the Trinitarian nature of God. The very fact that God is said to be love (1 John 4:8) implies that there must be a plurality within the Godhead, since love can only exist in a relationship between different beings.

1. In the Gospel of Matthew

(a) At the baptism of Jesus, we encounter the three members of the Godhead in action at the same time:

> When he had been baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened to Him, and He saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting upon Him. And suddenly a voice came from heaven, saying, 'This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." (Matt 3:16-17)

The account of Jesus baptism is a striking manifestation of the doctrine of the Trinity—there stood Christ in human form, visible to all; the Holy Spirit

---

[7] G. Ch. Aalders, *Genesis* (Zondervan, 1981), 300.

descended upon Christ in bodily form as a dove; and the voice of the Father spoke from heaven, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." In John 10:30 Christ claims equality with the Father, and in Acts 5:3, 4 the Holy Spirit is identified as God. It is difficult if not impossible, therefore, to explain the scene at Christ's baptism in any other way than by assuming that there are three persons in the divine nature or essence.

At the baptism of Jesus the Father called him "my beloved Son." The sonship of Jesus, however, is not ontological but functional. In the plan of salvation each member of the Trinity has accepted a particular role. It is a role for the purpose of accomplishing a particular goal, not a change in essence or status. Millard J. Erickson explains it this way:

> The Son did not become less than the Father during his earthly incarnation, but he did subordinate himself functionally to the Father's will. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is now subordinated to the ministry of the Son (see John 14-16) as well as to the will of the Father, but this does not imply that he is less than they are.[8]

The terms of "Father" and "Son" in Western thinking carry with them the ideas of origin, dependence, and subordination. In the Semitic or Oriental mind, however, they emphasize sameness of nature. Thus when the Scriptures speak of the "Son" of God they assert his divinity.

(b) At the end of his ministry, Jesus tells his disciples that they should go "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). In this, the initiatory rite of each believer into the Christian religion, the doctrine of the Trinity is clearly taught. First, we note that "in the name" (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα / eis to onoma) is singular, not plural ("in the names"). To be baptized in the name of the three persons of the Trinity means to identify oneself with everything the Trinity stands for; to commit oneself to the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit.[9] Second, the union of these three names indicates that the Son and the Holy Spirit are equal with the Father. It would be rather strange, not to say blasphemous, to unite the name of the eternal God with a created being (whether eternally created or at some point of time), and a force or power in this baptismal formula. "When the Holy Spirit is put in the same expression and on the same level as the two other persons, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is also viewed as a person and of equal standing with the Father and the Son."[10]

---

[8] Erickson, 1:338.

[9] Some commentators believe that behind the formula lies the language of money transfers from the Hellenistic era, so that the formula figuratively expresses that the one baptized is "transferred" to the Lord's account and so becomes his possession. Others interpret "name" as "authority." Thus, one is baptized by the authority of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

[10] Grudem, 230.

2. In the Writings of Paul

Paul and the New Testament writers generally use the word "God" to refer to the Father, "Lord" to refer to the Son, and "Spirit" to refer to the Holy Spirit. In 1 Corinthians 12:4-6 Paul refers to all three in the same text:

> There are diversities of gifts, but the same *Spirit*.
> There are differences of ministries, but the same *Lord*.
> There are diversities of activities, but the same *God* who works all in all.

Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 13:14 he lists the three persons of the Trinity:

> The grace of the Lord *Jesus Christ*.
> The love of *God*.
> The communion of the *Holy Spirit*.

While we cannot say that these texts are a formal enunciation of the Trinity, these passages and others like it (e. g., Ephesians 4:4-6) are distinctly Trinitarian in character. It was the church in later times that hammered out the details of the Trinity, but they built on the foundations of the biblical writers.

The Divinity of Christ

A crucial element in the doctrine of the Trinity is the divinity of Christ. Since the Trinity doctrine teaches that there is one God in three persons, and that each person is fully God, it is important to ascertain what Scripture teaches about the divinity of Christ.

The Divinity of Christ in the New Testament

There are a number of passages in the New Testament which clearly affirm the full deity of Christ:

1. John 1:1-3,14.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." The introductory phrase "in [the] beginning" (without the article) refers us back to the beginning of time. If the Word was "in the beginning," then he himself was without beginning, which is another way of saying he was eternal.

"The Word was with God" tells us that the Word is a separate person or personality. The Word was not "in" ($\varepsilon\nu$ / *en*) God, but "with" ($\pi\rho\grave{o}\varsigma$ / *pros*) God.

"And the Word was God," or, more literally "and God was the Word." The Word was not an emanation of God but God himself. While verse 1 does not tell us who the Word is, verse 14 clearly identifies it as Christ. "A more emphatic

and unequivocal affirmation of the absolute Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ it is impossible to conceive."[11]

2. John 20:28

"And Thomas answered and said to Him, 'My Lord and my God.'" This is the only time in the Gospels that anyone said to Christ "my God" (*ὁ θεός μου / ho Theos mou*). When Thomas saw the resurrected Christ, the doubter was transformed into a worshiper. It is significant that neither Christ at the time it happened nor John when he wrote the Gospel disapproved of what Thomas said. On the contrary, as far as John was concerned, this episode constituted a high point in his narration, for he immediately tells the reader,

> And truly Jesus did many other signs in the presence of His disciples,
> which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may
> believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing
> you may have life in His name. (20:30, 31)

This Gospel, says John, is written to persuade people to imitate Thomas who called Jesus "My Lord and my God."

3. Philippians 2:5-7

Although this passage was written to illustrate humility, it is one of the key NT texts to support Christ's divinity. "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form [*μορφῇ / morphe*] of God, did not consider it robbery [*ἁρπαγμὸσ / harpagmos*] to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form (*morphe*) of a bond-servant, and coming in the likeness of men."

Morphe ("form," or, "visible appearance") describes the genuine nature of a thing, its essence. It "refers not to any changeable form but to the specific form on which identity and status depend."[12] *Morphe* contrasts with *schema* (*σχῆμα*, 2:7), which also means "form," but in the sense of superficial appearance rather than essence. The noun *harpagmos* appears only in this text in the NT; the corresponding verb means "steal, take away forcefully." In secular Greek the noun means "robbery." However, the context makes it clear that Jesus did not covet, or try to steal "equality with God." On the contrary, he did not attempt to hold on to the equality with God that he possessed intrinsically. In other words, he did not attempt to retain his equality with God by force, but "treated it as an occasion for renouncing every advantage or privilege that might have accrued to him thereby, as an opportunity for self-impoverishment and unreserved self-sacrifice."[13] This is the meaning of "but made Himself of no reputation." His

---

[11] Arthur W. Pink, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Zondervan, 1945), 22.

[12] W. Poehlmann, "*μορφῇ*," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 3 vols., eds. H. Balz and G. Schneider (Eerdmans, 1981), 2:443.

[13] F. F. Bruce, *Philippians*, NIBC (Hendrickson, 1989), 69.

equality with God was something he possessed intrinsically; and one who is equal with God must be God. Hence, Philippians 2:5-7 "is a passage which demands for its understanding that Jesus was divine in the fullest sense."[14]

4. Colossians 2:9

"For in Him dwells all the fullness ($\pi\lambda\acute{\eta}\rho\omega\mu\alpha$ / *pleroma*) of the Godhead bodily ($\sigma\omega\mu\alpha\tau\iota\kappa\hat{\omega}\varsigma$ / *somatikos*)." The word *pleroma* has the basic meaning of "fullness, fulfillment." In the Old Testament it refers repeatedly to the earth/sea and "all its fullness" (Ps 24:1; cf. 50:12; 89:11; 96:11; 98:7), which is quoted in 1 Corinthians 1:26,28. In secular Greek *pleroma* referred to the full complement of a ship's crew or to the amount necessary to complete a financial transaction. In Colossians 1:19 and 2:9 Paul uses the word to describe the sum total of every function of divinity.[15] This fullness dwelt in Christ "bodily"; i.e., even during his incarnation Christ retained all the essential attributes of divinity, though he did not use them for his own advantage. The fullness of the Godhead "made its abode in his humanity without consuming it or deifying it, or changing any of its essential properties. . . . It was easily seen that Godhead dwelt in that humanity, for glimpses of its glory flashed again and again through its earthly covering."[16]

5. Titus 2:13

Paul describes the saints as "looking for the blessed hope and the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ" (NKJV). The KJV translates this passage as "the glorious appearing of the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ," which has the saints waiting for the Father and the Son. While this translation is possible, the NKJV rendering is to be preferred for the following reasons: (1) The two nouns "God" and "Savior" are connected by one article, indicating that, as a rule, the two nouns are two designations for one object. (2) The entire New Testament looks forward to the second coming of Christ. (3) The context in verse 14 speaks of Christ alone. (4) This interpretation is in harmony with other passages such as John 20:28; Rom 9:5; Heb 1:8; 2 Peter 1:1. This text, therefore, is an explicit assertion of the deity of Christ.

---

[14] Leon Morris, *The Lord from Heaven: A Study of the New Testament Teaching in the Deity and Humanity of Jesus* (Eerdmans, 1958), 74.

[15] Some commentators define *pleroma* in terms of Gnostic thought, whereby *pleroma* signifies the new aeon (or gnostic emanation) that has become incarnate in the Redeemer (Kaeseman, *Essays on New Testament Themes* [London, 1964], 158). C. F. D. Moule, however, has pointed out that *pleroma* was such a common word in the LXX that one would need strong evidence to drive one to look to an external source for its primary meaning in a writer so steeped in the OT as Paul (*The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, Cambridge Greek Testament Commentary [Cambridge, 1957], 166).

[16] John Eadie, *Colossians*, Classic Commentary Library (Zondervan, 1957), 145.

The Witness to Christ's Divinity in the Old Testament

Not only is Jesus called God in the New Testament, but he is also called Lord and God in quotations from the Old Testament where the Hebrew has Yahweh or Elohim.

1. Matthew 3:3

"The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord." According to verse 1, this text from Isaiah refers to John the Baptist, who was the forerunner of Jesus. In Isaiah 40:3 the word for Lord is Yahweh. Thus "the Lord" whose way John was to prepare was none other than Yahweh himself.

2. Romans 10:13

"For whoever calls on the name of the LORD shall be saved." The context (vss. 6-12) makes it clear that Paul is thinking of Christ when he refers to "the name of the LORD." The text is a quote from Joel 2:32 where the word for LORD in the Hebrew is again Yahweh.

3. Romans 14:10

In this text Paul reminds his readers that "we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ." He then adds a quote from Isaiah 45:23 which says "As I live says the LORD, every knee shall bow to me and every tongue shall confess to God." In Isaiah the speaker is Yahweh; in the book of Romans the text is applied to Christ.

4. Hebrews 1:8

"Your throne, O God, is forever and ever . . . God, your God has anointed you." In this chapter, seven Old Testament texts are used to support the argument that Christ is superior to the angels. The fifth text, quoted in verses 8 and 9, comes from Psalm 45:6, 7, where a king of the house of David is addressed as "God." Is this poetic hyperbole, as is sometimes found in oriental courts, or is this text pointing to another person beyond the Old Testament prince from the house of David?

To Hebrew poets and prophets a prince of the house of David was the vice-regent of Israel's God; he belonged to a dynasty to which God had made special promises bound up with the accomplishment of His purpose in the world. Besides, what was only partially true of any of the historic ruler's of David's line, or even of David himself, would be realized in its fullness when the son of David appeared in whom all the promises and ideals associated with the dynasty would be embodied. And now at last the Messiah had appeared. In a fuller sense than was possible for David or any of his successors in ancient days, this Messiah can be addressed not merely as God's Son (verse 5) but actually as God, for

He is both the Messiah of David's line and also the effulgence of God's glory and the very image of His substance.[17]

All these passages indicate that Christ and God and Yahweh are one.

Jesus' Self-Consciousness

Jesus never directly asserted his divinity; nevertheless his teaching was permeated with Trinitarian concepts. In accordance with the Hebrew idea of son-ship (i.e., whatever the father is, that is the son also), Jesus claimed to be the Son of God (Matt 9:27; 24:36; Luke 10:22; John 9:35-37; 11:4). The Jews understood that by claiming to be the Son of God he was claiming equality with God, "Therefore the Jews sought all the more to kill Him, because He not only broke the Sabbath, but also said that God was His Father, making Himself equal with God" (John 5:18, cf. 10:33).

Jesus repeatedly claimed to possess what properly only belongs to God. "He spoke of the angels of God (Luke 12:8-9; 15:10) as his angels (Matt 13:41). He regarded the kingdom of God (Matt 12:28; 19:14, 24; 21:31, 34) and the elect of God (Mark 13:20) as his own."[18] In Luke 5:20 Jesus forgave the sins of the paralytic, and the Jews on the basis of Isaiah 43:25 correctly argued "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Thus implicit in Jesus' action of forgiveness was the claim to be God.

Christ's divinity is also indicated by his use of the present tense in his reply to the Jews, "Before Abraham was [born] *(γενέσθαι / genesthai)* I am (ἐγὼ εἰμί / *ego eimi*)" (John 8:58). By using the terms *genesthai* (was born or became) and *ego eimi* (I am) Jesus contrasts his eternal existence with the historical beginning of the existence of Abraham. It is eternity of being and not simply pre-existence before Abraham which is expressed here. The Jews at least understood it this way; they realized that Jesus claimed to be Yahweh, the I AM from the burning bush (Exod 3:14), and they took up stones to kill him (8:59).

Finally, the fact that Jesus accepted the worship of others is evidence that he himself recognized his divinity. After Jesus came to the disciples walking on water, "they worshiped him" (Matt 14:33). The blind man whose sight was restored after he washed in the pool of Siloam "worshiped Him" (John 9:38). After the resurrection the disciples went to Galilee, where Jesus appeared to them, and "they worshiped Him" (Matt 28:17).

Time and again Jesus accepted worship as perfectly proper. He thereby laid direct claim to divinity.

---

[17] F. F. Bruce, *Hebrews*, NICNT (Eerdmans, 1964), 19, 20.
[18] Erickson, 326.

Difficult Texts[19]

Anti-Trinitarians use a number of Bible texts to support their contention that Jesus at some time in eternity was "begotten" (i.e., he had a beginning and is therefore not absolutely equal to God).

1. Revelation 3:14

"Jesus, the beginning of God's creation." It is claimed that Jesus was created at some point in the past, that he was God's first work.

Response:

(a) The Greek word ἀρχὴ (*arche*) can be translated "beginning," "point of origin," "first cause," or "ruler." The Father himself is called "beginning" in Rev 21:6.

(b) The same title is used for Jesus in Rev 22:13. While the word "*arche*" can have a passive sense, which would make Jesus the first created being, the active sense of the word makes him the first cause, the prime mover, or the creator. That Jesus is not the first created being but the creator himself is the testimony of other New Testament texts (see John 1:3; Col 1:16; Heb 1:2).

2. Proverbs 8:22-31

"I was brought forth." It is argued that this passage refers to Jesus and teaches that Jesus was either born or created.

Response:

The context speaks about wisdom, not Jesus. The personification of wisdom is a literary device that occurs also in other parts of Scripture. In Psalm 85:10-13 we have "mercy and truth" meeting together, "righteousness and peace" kiss each other, and "truth shall spring out of the earth." In Psalm 96:12 "the field" is joyful, and "all the trees of the woods will rejoice before the Lord." (See also 1 Chron 16:33; Isa 52:9; Rev 20:13-14). This kind of language should not be interpreted literally. "Personification is a literary and poetic device which serves to create atmosphere, and to enliven abstract ideas and inanimate objects by representing them as if they were human beings."[20]

The personification of the divine attribute of wisdom as a woman begins in chapter one: "Wisdom calls aloud outside; She raises her voice in the open squares" (1:20). In chapter three we are told, "She is more precious than rubies" and "all her paths are peace" (3:15, 17). In chapter seven she is called a "sister" (7:4), and in chapter eight wisdom lives together with prudence, another personification (8:12). Personified wisdom is also the topic in Prov 9:1-5. To apply these passages to Jesus requires an allegorical method of biblical interpretation that leads to positions incompatible with other passages. It was this kind of hermeneutic that led to the rejection of the allegorical method of interpretation by

---

[19] I am indebted to my colleague Ekkehardt Mueller for material in this section.

[20] Kenneth T. Aitken, *Proverbs* (Westminster Press, 1986), 85.

the Reformers. It should also be noted that no verse of this passage is ever quoted in the NT.

(c) Proverbs 8:22-31 contains poetic imagery which needs to be carefully interpreted. The first phrase in verse 22 can be translated, "The Lord possessed me" (KJV, NIV); "The Lord created me" (RSV, NEB); or "the Lord begot me" (NAB). The basic meaning of the verb *qanah* is "to purchase, to acquire," and hence "to possess," but the other two translations are possible. Apart from *qanah*, two other words refer to wisdom's origin: *nasak* ("to establish"; 8:23)*,* and *chil* ("be born"; 8:24, 25). The basic thought in this passage is always the same: wisdom was with God before creation began. Whether God created her or whether she was begotten or simply possessed is not the focus. What is central is not the manner of her origin but rather her antiquity and precedence within God's creation. Since the language is poetical and metaphorical, it should not be used to establish anything concerning Christ's supposed origin.

Ellen White at times applied Proverbs 8 homiletically to Christ, but she used the text to support his eternal pre-existence. Before quoting Proverbs 8 she says, "Christ was God essentially, and in the highest sense. He was God from all eternity, God over all, blessed forevermore."[21]

3. Colossians 1:15

"Jesus, the firstborn." Since Jesus is called the "firstborn" ($\pi\rho\omega\tau\acute{o}\tau o\kappa o\varsigma$ / *prototokos*), it is argued that he must have had a beginning.

Response:

(a) The expression *prototokos* ("firstborn") in this text is a title, not a definition of his biological status. According to 1:16, everything is created by Jesus. Therefore, he cannot be created himself.

(b) The term "firstborn" had a special meaning for the Hebrews. In general, the firstborn was the leader of a group of people or a tribe, the priest in the family, and the one who received twice as much of the inheritance as his brothers. He had certain privileges as well as responsibilities. Sometimes, however, the fact that one was the firstborn did not matter in God's eyes. For example, although David was the youngest child, God called him "My firstborn" (Ps 89:20, 27). The second line of the parallelism in verse 27 tells us that this meant that he was to become the most exalted king. See also the experience of Jacob (Gen 25:25-26 and Exod 4:22) and Ephraim (Gen 41:50-52 and Jer 31:9). In these cases the time element "first" was deleted. Important was only the special rank and dignity of the person called the "firstborn." In the case of Jesus, this term also refers to his exalted position and not to a point of time at which he was born.

---

[21] *Selected Messages*, 1:247.

In Colossians 1:18 Christ is called the "firstborn from the dead." Though he is not chronologically the first (Moses and others had preceded him), he is the pre-eminent one.

4. John 1:1-3.

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." It is claimed that there is a distinction in equality between God the Father, who is *the* God, and Jesus, who is only *a* god. The Greek term for God ($\theta\varepsilon\grave{o}\varsigma$ / *theos*) is found with the article $\overset{\text{.}}{o}$ (*ho*), "the God," or without the article, "a god" or "God." In John 1:1-3 the Father is named *ho theos*, whereas the son is called *theos*. Does this justify the claim that the Father is God Almighty whereas the Son is only a god?

Response:

The term *theos* without the article is frequently also used for the Father, even in the very same chapter (see John 1:6, 13, 18; Luke 2:14; Acts 5:39; 1 Thess 2:5; 1 John 4:12; and 2 John 9).

Jesus is also *the* God (Heb 1:8-9; John 20:28). In other words, the use of the term God—with or without the article—cannot be used to make a distinction between God the Father and God the Son. God the Father is *theos* and *ho theos*, and so is the Son.

Oftentimes, the absence of the article in Greek denotes special quality and should not be translated with the indefinite article "a."

If John had used the definite article each time *theos* occurs, he would be claiming that there is only one divine person. The Father would be the Son. John 1:1 reads, "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with *ho theos*, and the Word was *theos*." If John had used only *ho theos*, we would read: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with *ho theos*, and the Word was *ho theos*." According to John 1:14 the Word is Jesus. Therefore, replacing "Word" by "Jesus" we get the sentence, "In the beginning was Jesus and Jesus was with *ho theos*, and Jesus was *ho theos*." *Ho theos* clearly refers to the Father. The modified text would read: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with the Father, and the Word was the Father." This is theologically wrong. In talking about two persons of the Godhead, John had no other choice than to use once *ho theos* and the next time *theos*. Therefore, the absence of the article in the second case cannot be used for arguing against equality between Father and Son.

5. John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9

"The only begotten [$\mu o\nu o\gamma\varepsilon\nu\grave{\eta}\varsigma$ / *monogenes*] Son." It is suggested that the word *monogenes* points to a literal begetting of Jesus.

Response:

The word *monogenes* means "only, one of a kind, unique." It occurs nine times in the NT. It is found three times in Luke (7:12; 8:42; 9:38), where it al-

ways refers to an only child. It is found five times in John's writings (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9) as a designation of Jesus' relationship to God. It occurs once in Hebrews 11:17, where Isaac is called Abraham's *monogenes* son. Isaac was not Abraham's only son, but he was the unique son, the only son of promise. The emphasis is not on the birth, but on the uniqueness of the son. Therefore, the translation "only" or "unique" is to be preferred. The translation "only begotten" may have originated with the early church Fathers and is found in the Vulgate. The latter in turn influenced later translations.

The normal term for begotten is *gennao* (γέννάω) which is found in Heb 1:5 and may point to Christ's resurrection or incarnation.

In the LXX the term *monogenes* is the translation of the Hebrew *yachid*, which means "only one, unique" or "beloved" (cf, Mark 1:11 in connection with Christ's baptism).

It is not clear whether *monogenes* refers only to the historical and risen Lord or also to the pre-existing Lord. It is of interest to note, however, that neither in John 1:1-14, nor in 8:58, nor in chapter 17 does John use the term "Son" for the pre-existent Lord.

6. Matthew 14:33

"You are the Son of God." Can the title "Son of God" be understood literally?

Response:

(a) This title is a messianic title (see Ps 2:7; Acts 13:33; Heb 1:5). It stresses Jesus' deity. Jesus used the title very rarely for himself (only in John, e.g., John 11:4). It is one of many titles that Jesus had. In trying to understand who Jesus is, all of them need to be investigated in order to get a coherent picture. That the title "Son of God" stresses Christ's deity is evident from John 10:29-36. This is further supported by the fact that the Son is the precise image of God, being equal with God (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3; Phil 2:6).

(b) The word "son" has a broad range of meanings in the original language. Therefore, it is not possible to reduce it to the narrow limits of the English language and define it in a purely literal way. The sonship of Jesus is attested in connection with Christ's birth (Luke 1:35), baptism (Luke 3:22), transfiguration (Luke 9:35), and resurrection (Acts 13:32-33). The Bible is silent on the question on whether this title describes the eternal relationship between Father and Son. In any case, Scripture attributes timeless existence to Jesus (Isa 6:6; Rev 1:17, 18).

During his incarnation Jesus voluntarily subordinated himself to the Father, being the Son of God. This included surrendering the prerogatives, but not the nature of the deity. The risen Lord, being enthroned as king and priest, also voluntarily accepts the priority of the Father, but he and the Father are—according to Scripture—both God, co-eternal and co-equal personalities of one Godhead.

The Holy Spirit as the Third Person of the Trinity

That the Holy Spirit is a divine person, equal in substance, power, and glory with the Father and the Son, is manifested throughout Scripture.

1. The Holy Spirit is a Personal Being

(a) Some have questioned whether the Holy Spirit is a distinct person or only the "power" or "force" of God. There are a number of verses where the Holy Spirit is mentioned together with the Father and the Son (Matt 28:19; 1 Cor 12:4-6; 2 Cor 13:14). This indicates that the Father and the Son are persons. The Holy Spirit, therefore, should also be a person.

Frequently, the masculine pronoun "he" is used in reference to the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13, 14), in spite of the fact that the word for Spirit in Greek [$\pi\nu\varepsilon\hat{\upsilon}\mu\alpha$ / *pneuma*] is neuter and not masculine).

The word "counselor" or "comforter" (*parakletos*) uniformly refers to a person, not a force.

The Holy Spirit is said to speak (Acts 8:29), teach (John 14:26), bear witness (John 15:26), intercede on behalf of others (Rom 8:26-27), distribute gifts to others (1 Cor 12:11), and to forbid or allows certain things (Acts 16:6-7). According to Ephesians 4:30, the Holy Spirit can also be grieved by people. All these activities are characteristic of a person, not a force.

2. The Holy Spirit is God

A number of texts in Scripture describe the Holy Spirit as God:

Matthew 28:19 ". . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This text places the Holy Spirit on an equal level with the Father and the Son.

(b) Peter told Ananias that, in lying to the Holy Spirit, he had lied not "to men but to God" (Acts 5:3-4).

(c) "The Holy Spirit is omnipotent. He distributes spiritual gifts 'to each one individually as He wills' (1 Cor. 12:11). He is omnipresent. He will 'abide' with his people 'forever' (John 14:6). None can escape His influence (Ps. 139:7-10). He also is omniscient, because 'the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God' and 'no one knows the things of God except the Spirit of God' (1 Cor. 2:10,11)."[22]

(d) Ellen White firmly believed in the personality of the Holy Spirit. "We need to realize that the Holy Spirit, who is as much a person as God is a person, is walking through these grounds."[23]

---

[22] *Seventh-day Adventists Believe . . .* , (Hagerstown, 1988), 60.
[23] *Evangelism*, 616.

Summary

While there are certainly textual and conceptual difficulties with the doctrine of the Trinity, our study of the Old and New Testament has produced some possible answers. We have seen that the Godhead exists in a plurality, that Jesus is God, co-existent from eternity with the Father, and that the Holy Spirit is the third person of the Godhead.

Difficult Bible texts are best understood in harmony with the rest of Scripture. It is of little value to the church to cause division because of different understandings of some aspects of the Godhead. While the mystery of the Trinity can never be fully understood by finite man, it is a biblical doctrine that is part of the Christian Faith.

Gerhard Pfandl is an Associate Director of the Biblical Research Institute. He holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in Old Testament from Andrews University. A native of Austria, he has worked as a pastor in Austria and in the Southern California Conference. From 1977–1989 he was Professor of Religion at Bogenhofen Seminary in Austria. Prior to joining the Biblical Research Institute in 1999, he served for seven years as Field Secretary of the South Pacific Division in Sydney. He has published many articles for scholarly and popular journals in German and English and is the author of vol. 1 of the Adventist Theological Society Dissertation Series, *The Time of the End in the Book of Daniel*. PfandlG@gc.adventist.org