Theology Proper: The Triune God (Part 2)

Theology and Philosophy of the Trinity

“Try to explain it, and you’ll lose your mind; But try to deny it, and you’ll lose your soul.”
(unknown)

I. Terms

A. Trinity

That this word does not appear in the Bible is irrelevant because its definition and meaning is everywhere in the Bible. We could substitute “Trinity” for “God the Father, God the Son, God the Holy Spirit, the One God.” But it is more conducive for discussion to reduce these statements down into a single word that communicates the same meaning.

B. Person

1. A “who.” A “you” in relation to me or an “I” in relation to you.
2. The word “person” affirms “the personal relationships, particularly of love, within the triune Godhead” (Saucy 502).

C. Essence/Substance

1. This is the “stuff” of God. There is only one essence or substance that is God.
   a) One human is never of the same substance with another human. Consider that DNA is unique among many fundamental differences from human to human. God is, however, one substance, one in essence.

II. Structure of the Trinity

“The God of Israel, who ‘directed’ the patriarchs and ‘inspired’ the prophets, is the holy Trinity, who has now been clearly revealed as such in the incarnation of the Son, the Word made flesh, and in the Holy Spirit” (Wainwright 816).

A. The Ontological Trinity – How God Relates to Himself

This refers to the Trinity only in relation to the Trinity. All three members are completely equal, one in plan, will, and desire. There is no subordination and no hierarchy. Only perfection and eternal love—something that is only possible if God is Trinity.

B. The Functional Trinity – How God Relates to Creation

“All members of the Trinity are equal in essence, but they do not have the same roles” (Geisler 548). The error of subordinationalism (condemned by all branches of Christianity) affirms that there is an ontological subordination of one member of the Trinity to another.

“The function of one member of the Trinity may for a time be subordinate to one or both of the other members, but that does not mean he is in any way inferior in essence... This is to be understood as a temporary role for the purpose of accomplishing a given end, not a change in
status or essence…a business or enterprise may choose one of their number to serve as the captain of a task force or the chairperson of a committee for a given time, but without any change in rank” (Erickson 363).

“This subordination is voluntary, not necessary (Phil. 2:5-7)” (Thiessen 98).

“Now all of us can come to the Father through the same Holy Spirit because of what Christ has done for us” (NLT Eph. 2:18).
1. **The Function of the Father**
   a) Superior to Son and Spirit in *office* but not in *nature*. The president is greater than many by his *position*, but not by virtue of his *character*.
   b) “The Father spoke the creative words to bring the universe into being” (Grudem 248).
   c) The Father initiates or “draws” us to salvation, “For no one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws them to me” (John 6:44).
   d) The Father planned redemption. “God has now revealed to us his mysterious plan regarding Christ, a plan to fulfill his own good pleasure. And this is the plan: At the right time he will bring everything together under the authority of Christ—everything in heaven and on earth” (*NLT* Ephesians 1:9-10); Galatians 4:4; John 3:16.

2. **The Function of the Son**
   a) The Son gives light, “The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was coming into the world” (John 1:9).
   b) “God the Son...carried out these creative decrees” (Grudem 248). “All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being”; “He came into the very world he created” (John 1:3, 10).
   c) The Son is sent by and comes fourth from the Father, “What I am telling you is from the Father who sent me” (John 14:24); “I came forth from the Father” (*NASB* John 16:28).
   d) The Son is “eternally ‘begotten’ or ‘generated’ from the Father, but the Father is never said to be ‘begotten’ or ‘generated’ from anyone” (Geisler 549).
   e) The Son accomplishes salvation, “That is why, when Christ came into the world, he said to God, ‘You did not want animal sacrifices or sin offerings. But you have given me a body to offer. You were not pleased with burnt offerings or other offerings for sin. Then I said, ‘Look, I have come to do your will, O God—as is written about me in the Scriptures” (Hebrews 10:5-7).
   f) The Son is functionally subordinate to the Father, “For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” (*NASB* John 6:38).
   g) God the Son died as a substitute for our sins, not the Father, and not the Holy Spirit.

3. **The Function of the Holy Spirit**
The Spirit is given, sent by, and proceeds from the father, “I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. He is the Holy Spirit” (NLT John 14:16-17); “But when the Father sends the Advocate as my representative—that is, the Holy Spirit” (John 14:26); “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father” (NASB John 15:26).

1) “The Son is closely involved in the coming of the Spirit: he prays for his coming (14:16); the Father sends the Spirit in the Son’s name (14:26); the Son will send the Spirit from the Father (15:26); the Son must go away so that he can send the Spirit (16:7). The Spirit’s ministry is understood as a continuation and elaboration of that of the Son. He will bring to remembrance what the Son has said (14:26); he will bear witness to the Son (15:26); he will declare what he hears from the Son, thus glorifying the Son (16:13-14)” (Erickson 357).

b) The Spirit convicts,” And when he comes, he will convict the world of its sin, and of God’s righteousness, and of the coming judgment” (John 16:8).

c) The Holy Spirit regenerates, “Humans can reproduce only human life, but the Holy Spirit gives birth to spiritual life” (NLT John 3:6).

d) The Holy Spirit Sanctifies, “For if you are living according to the flesh, you must die; but if by the Spirit you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). “...so that my offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (NASB Romans 15:16). “...according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (1 Peter 1:2).

III. Perichoresis

A. Definition

“The distinct persons of the Trinity are not only mutually, intimately involved with one another; the distinct persons of the Trinity mutually indwell, or interpenetrate, one another” (Clark).
B. This reality is found in the following texts:

1. “the Father is in Me, and I in the Father” (John 10:38).
2. “God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself” (2 Corinthians 5:19).
3. “Jesus ‘goes away’ in order to send the Spirit (John 16:4-15), yet Jesus is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). How is Jesus with us? In and through the Spirit” (Clark).
   a) Also consider, “your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God” (1 Corinthians 6:19). “God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1:27).
4. “Paul states that the Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9-11). Why? Because of the mutual interpenetration of Father, Son, and Spirit” (Clark).
   a) “However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you” (NASB Romans 8:9-11).

IV. Analogies

A. Inadequate Analogies
B. Better (though still inadequate) Analogies

1. God is one “what” and three “whos”
2. Triangle – Visual three-in-oneness
3. Chemistry: Triple Point
   a) “The particular temperature and pressure at which the solid, liquid, and gaseous phases of a given substance are all at equilibrium with one another” (Dictionary.com).
4. Love – Lover, beloved, spirit of love (1 John 4:16). Love is something only a person can do.
5. Mind, Ideas, Words
Bibliography


