Elenctic Theology: Theology Proper

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*Part 3: The Trinity*

## The Trinity

### Introduction to the Tri-unity of God

#### ***The Trinity Doctrine is Crucial for Christians***

##### The Trinity is both necessary and unique to the Christian Faith, that is, an essential doctrine. It is one of the doctrines distinguishing Christianity from all other world religions.

##### No other form of monotheism affirms a plurality of Persons in the Godhead. Therefore, all other forms of Monotheism that reject a plurality of Persons reject the Trinity.

#### ***“Trinity” as a Theological Term***

##### The word “Trinity” is not a biblical term. However, this does not mean the doctrine of the Tri-unity of God is unbiblical. The word means “tri-unity.” It simply represents a scriptural concept.

##### Another example of a non-scriptural term that represents a biblical concept is the word “theocracy.” This non-biblical word describes Israel’s biblical form of government.

#### ***The Ontological & Economic Trinity***

##### The Ontological (aka, Essential or Immanent) Trinity: This approach examines Being of God, that is, what God is.

##### The Economic Trinity: This approach examines the manner of working of the three Persons of the Godhead.

### Common Objections to the Doctrine of the Trinity

#### *Methodology & Presumptions*

##### There are several anti-Trinitarian groups who raise issues with the concept of the Trinity. The Jehovah’s Witnesses (JWs) are some of the most difficult—as Cults of Christianity go—since they tend to have more “arguments” and pseudo-scholarship at their disposal than other groups. As such, there is a great deal of un-twisting of presumptions and specific Scriptural passages to accomplish before one can begin to persuade a JW or other anti-Trinitarian of the truth of the Trinity.

##### The reason for groups having problems with the Trinity is their reliance on faulty theological methodology. They have their personal forms of “reason” in place of the clear teachings and authority of Scripture. This is why method and bibliology must be established before constructing substantive statements of doctrine.

##### One of the best and most efficient way to do polemic is to look for the faulty presumptions in the heretic’s arguments. If you destroy the foundation, the building will fall too. The JWs, as representative of the anti-Trinitarian groups, have many faulty presumptions in place regarding the Trinity, which taints their reading of the individual biblical passages. For example, they hold the following ideas about the Trinity: (1) the Trinity Doctrine was invented by Satan; (2) the Trinity Doctrine is the result of pagan influences on the church and is, in their minds, a pagan teaching; (3) the Trinity Doctrine was “invented” at the Council of Nicea along with the deity of Christ; (4) the Trinity Doctrine is incoherent or illogical; (5) the word “Trinity” is unbiblical as it is not found in the Bible; and (6) the Trinity Doctrine is the result of unbiblical, neo-platonic influences on the church.

##### JWs and others, like Oneness Pentecostals (i.e., Modalistic Pentecostals), have most of these presumptions in place before approaching the biblical data. As such, it colors their exegesis resulting in an eisegesis of their presumptions into biblical texts that apparently contradict their accepted views. For example, in their minds, John 1:1-3 cannot possibly teach the deity of Christ because, for them, the Bible would then be teaching something that was pagan and illogical. So they change the Scriptural data to meet their presumptions. And, far too many true Christians do this as well, but they do it with non-essential doctrine. This eisegetical method is something all must avoid. But for the JWs, it has eternal consequences because they allow it to change essential Christian doctrine. So for one to have a more productive discussion with a sincere and knowledgeable JW, one will need to address and defeat their faulty presumptions. When one accomplishes this, you will have an easier time with the specific biblical passages.

#### ***The Common Objections with Brief Responses***

##### **The Trinity Doctrine was invented by Satan.**

###### Response: This is a mere assertion based on their other presumptions and is a use of loaded language. It is also a variant and indirect use of the *ad hominem* fallacy, which, in this case, is implying that Christians are simply a bunch of stupid, Satan followers for believing it. And it is a form of the genetic fallacy, which states if Satan is the origin or genesis of a teaching, it must necessarily be false. (But see James 2:19 and Matthew 4:3). An utterance of Satan and demons is not necessarily false. The JWs use this same tactic with “Pharisee” doctrine as well, but the Pharisees were not wrong on everything.

##### **The Trinity Doctrine is the result of pagan influences on the church and is, in their minds, a pagan teaching.**

###### Response: In their booklet, *Should You Believe the Trinity?,* the JWs compare the Trinity to pagan notions of God as 3 in 1, such as Egyptian and Babylonian triads and Hindu Pantheistic versions. Here, they fail to distinguish the theistic views involved in the comparison, such as polytheism, pantheism, and monotheism. Also, the Christian needs to point out that Pagans, like JWs, have a notion as God as Creator, but we do not observe the JWs eliminating their view that Jehovah is the Creator because a “pagan” also has that view. They should apply their own rules consistently.

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##### **The Trinity Doctrine was “invented” at the Council of Nicea along with the deity of Christ.**

###### Response: Here one needs to do some homework in historical theology, noting what truly occurred at the Council of Nicea and the events leading up to it. It is easy to trace the teachings of the deity of Christ from Scripture through the church fathers up to Nicea. Nicea, like Chalcedon, was called to clarify doctrine in the face of challenges to orthodoxy. The ecumenical Council of Nicea was called, primarily, to deal with the Arian heresy, which rejected the deity of Christ. It was not the opposite situation, that is, that the Arians called an ecumenical council to deal with this new “heresy” of the deity of Christ. No one in the history of historiography has seriously suggested that reversed view of Nicea. The result of Nicea was the *homoousia* language of the Nicene Creed, clarifying Christ’s relationship with the Father, which is, that the Son has the same substance as the Father. Ask the JWs if they have ever read a church history book or historical theology text on the subject. If not, demand that they do some homework before making absurd, unsupported assertions.

##### **The Trinity Doctrine is Incoherent or Illogical.**

###### Response: They will try in vain to demonstrate that the true doctrine of the Trinity, appropriately stated, violates the Law of Non-Contradiction or any other rational precept. Ask them what specific law of logic it violates and to define that law. When they cannot do this, define it for them and note that for it to be a true contradiction Trinitarians would need to assert that God is 1 and 3 at the same time and in the same sense, but no authorized representation of Trinitarianism has ever done this. This is why the JWs must distort Trinitarianism to attack it. It is worse than a Straw Man argument on their part because they generally do not even attack weak views of the Trinity, they attack false views of it. For example, in their book *Let God be True* they define the Trinity as “3 gods in 1.” No informed Trinitarian would ever make a statement like this. As such, you must point out to them that their representations are false, slanderous, and defamatory. Then ask your JW friend if she believes it is acceptable for the Watchtower to distort people’s views.

###### Also, note that their rule is that they should not believe or practice things that are, in their own words, difficult to understand or “incomprehensible.” See their standard work, *Reasoning from the Scriptures,* which is an in-house JW text that instructs them on doctrine and how to communicate it to prospective converts. In it, in the section on the “Trinity” on page 425, they claim to follow the teaching of Jesus in John 4:22 that they “worship what they know,” and have no real place for “mystery” in their system of thought and reject that God can be “incomprehensible.”

###### However, you must note that they are quite selective in applying this principle. On pages 148-149 of the same text in the section on the doctrine of “God,” they state with respect to God’s eternality that “our minds cannot fully comprehend it (i.e. “incomprehensible”), but that is not a sound reason for rejecting it.” In their rejection of evolution, they claim evolutionists reject creation because “to believe otherwise would mean that they would have to acknowledge the existence of a Creator *whose qualities they cannot fully comprehend*” (italics mine). They go on to note that scientists do not fully understand the “functioning of the human brain,” yet “who would deny that it exists.” You must point out that they do not follow this principle with the doctrine of the Trinity and they are unjustifiably arbitrary and unreasonable for not applying this standard to Trinitarianism.

##### **The word “Trinity” is unbiblical as it is not found in the Bible.**

###### Response: This is one of the most absurd and hypocritical arguments they raise against the Trinity. The the word “Trinity,” like the words or noun phrases “Hypostatic Union,” “God-man,” “Penal Substitution,” and “*Ex Nihilo* Creation” are labels that function as theological shorthand to describe a particular biblical teaching. It is irrelevant whether these terms are found in the Bible itself. The real issue is whether the ideas connected with the terms are found in Scripture. And the JWs are hypocrites in this area because they use all sorts of “unbiblical” terms to describe their own views. For example, they use the terms like “theocracy” and “theocratic kingdom” to describe one of their views, but these are not found in Scripture.

##### **The Trinity Doctrine is the result of unbiblical, neo-platonic influences on the church.**

###### Response: The response to this assertion is the same as a few of the responses above. First, make the JW bear his burden of proof. Have them show when and where these neo-platonic ideas changed Christian orthodoxy. They generally will not have a clue where to begin. Then, as with Satan, demons, and Pharisees, the utterance of a Neo-Platonist is not necessarily wrong. Finally, as with the Nicean example above, make them bear the burden of proof and show the historical examples of how this took place. They assert it; they bear the burden of proof.

#### ***Conclusion***

##### If they have not met their burden of proof in each of these issues, demurrer and dismiss the case. You have no epistemic burden to respond to unfounded assertions.

##### When witnessing to them you must note this consistently with the JWs and continue to point out that they are not only wrong about these things, but they are immoral if they slander people by attributing false beliefs to them. Calling Trinitarians “pagans” when they are not in fact “pagans” is a slander.

### The Trinity in Scripture

#### ***Introduction***

##### All of the biblical facts for the doctrine of the Trinity are found in Scripture. The final form of the doctrine of the Trinity is not a theological problem–it is a solution to a theological problem!

##### *The Three Scriptural Classes of Trinitarian Texts*

###### The first is the class of Scriptures that demonstrate the *essential oneness of God*.

###### The second is the class of Scriptures that demonstrate the *full deity of the distinct Persons of the Godhead*—for example, the deity of the Son, Jesus Christ.

###### The third is the class of Scriptures that demonstrate the *simultaneous distinction of the three Persons of the Godhead*.

##### *The Relevance of the Classes and Categories*

###### To have a complete and coherent doctrine of God, one must account for all the relevant biblical data.

###### Thus all three categories must be included in a discussion of God.

#### ***Biblical & Theological Arguments for the Three Classes of Trinitarian Texts***

##### **Class #1: The Essential Oneness or Unity of God**

###### *Definition of Unity & Related Issues[[1]](#footnote-1)*

**Unity:** *Unity* means God is one in an absolute sense because there is no other God and the one God is incapable of real or essential division. Unity, therefore, indicates there is no *genus* God and the one and only God is simple. Thus, some theologians distinguish between a *unity of singularity*, or numerical oneness of the divine essence, and a *unity of simplicity*, the noncompositeness of the divine essence.

**Simplicity:** *Simplicity* (more precisely, ontological simplicity) means God has an uncompounded or noncomposite nature. God is not the sum of the divine attributes. If He were, God would necessarily be a result and in some sense contingent. Consider the following argument for divine simplicity.

The Argument from the Independence of God as a Ground of Simplicity

God is absolutely independent. He is not dependent on anything for His existence or essence.

Multiple things, essentially distinguished, can become one only by aggregation. If a thing is a composite thing, it is necessarily composed by another, since nothing can compose itself.

If God’s attributes are essentially distinct from His essence or from each other, the divine essence would be made perfect by something essentially distinct from itself.

And since there is nothing prior to God to compose or aggregate the parts, God must be a non-composite Being.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Simplicity, Immutability & Divine Perfections

The concept of God as a composite Being is opposed to the concept of God being a Being of absolute perfection.

Composition implies imperfection inasmuch as it implies passive power, mutability, and dependence. God is whatever He can be and cannot be other than what He is.

If the divine essence is perfected by another, God is not the Most Perfect Being.

It follows that if God were an aggregate of really distinguished attributes or properties, He is not immutable in any meaningful way since He would have in Himself passive potency, which is the root of mutability.

**Aseity:** *Aseity* means God exists *a se*, from Himself. The term is used synonymously with *autotheos*, of Himself God. See the section, *infra*, on the works of God for additional notes on Aseity as they relate to Trinitarian issues.

**Infinity:** *Infinity* refers to the limitlessness of the divine essence.

Negatively considered, infinity is defined by the absence of limit.

Positively considered, it is an infinite superiority over all things.

Moreover, *infinity* is not as an isolated attribute, but a property of the divine essence that extends to each of the divine attributes. For example, when infinity extends to divine knowledge, it is *omniscience*; to divine power, it is *omnipotence*; to divine existence and continuance, it is *eternity*; and to the divine essence, it is *immensity*.

###### *Selected Biblical References for the Unity of God*

*Old Testament* – Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; I Kings 8:60; Isaiah 43:10; 44:6; 45:5.

*New Testament* – Mark 12:29; John 17:3; I Corinthians 8:4-6; I Timothy 2:5.

###### *Old Testament Concepts of Unity*

*Echad* (dj`a\)  
The word translated “one” in Deuteronomy 6:4 is the Hebrew word *echad*, which commonly indicates a compound unity. Here, compound unity does not necessarily indicate a composite unity—where “parts” are essentially distinguished. It may refer to a single thing within which essential distinctions may be made or a thing within which non-essential distinctions—for example, formal or modal (See distinctions, *infra*)—may be made. Examples of compound unity are demonstrated in the following texts:

Genesis 1:5: “And there was evening and there was morning, one (*echad*) day.” Here there are two distinct parts within the one day.

Genesis 2:24: “For this cause a man shall leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave to his wife; and they shall become one (*echad*) flesh.” The two individuals constitute a unity.

Deut. 6:4: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is (*echad)* One!”

*Yachid* (dyj!y`)  
This Hebrew term is used to indicate absolute oneness and is generally translated as “only begotten,” “beloved” or “only one.” It is usually used in the sense of an only child. Consider these scriptural uses of the term.

Judges 11:34: “. . . Now she was his *one and only* *(yachid*) child; besides her he had neither son nor daughter.”

The term in this passage indicates the absolute sense of oneness applied to Jepthah’s daughter. It means “only one” or “unique,” not “one among many.”

This term appears eleven times in the Old Testament. (*See, e.g.,* Gen. 22:2, 12, 16) The Septuagint (LXX) translates it seven times with *agapetos* “beloved” and four times with *monogenes* “only begotten.”

It is important that *yachid* is *not* used to describe the oneness of the divine nature or unity of the Godhead because it would appear to exclude the plurality of Persons in the Trinity.

##### **Class #2: The Full Deity of the Distinct Persons of the Godhead**

###### ***The Father*** (II Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:2)

“Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Note that the full deity of the Father is generally not a debated issue.

###### ***The Son*** (Is. 9:6; John 1:1-3; 5:18; 8:58; 10:30; 20:28; Titus 2:13; Rev. 1:8 cf. 22:12-13, 16, 20).

Note that the Deity of Christ is fully addressed in the Christology portion of ECD.

*The Alpha-Omega Proof for the Deity of Christ*  
One of the clearest affirmations of the deity of Christ is found in the Book of Revelation. This is known as the Alpha-Omega Proof. The argument can be stated in the following manner.

“Alpha and Omega” is a title for Almighty God (Rev. 1:8).

Almighty God, the Alpha and Omega, is also declared to be the “First and the Last” (Rev. 21:5-7).

The Alpha and Omega, First and the Last, who is Almighty God, declares “I am coming quickly” (Rev. 22:12-13).

Then, the speaker, using the first person singular, “I,” declares: “*I, Jesus, have sent My angel to testify to you these things for the churches”* (Rev. 22:16).Thus, Jesus identifies Himself as the AW and the One who is coming quickly.

The author of the Revelation, John, affirms the identity of the AW by saying*. “‘. . .Yes, I am coming quickly.’ Amen, come Lord Jesus”* (Rev. 22:20).

See Also Revelation 1:17-18; Is. 44:6; 48:12-16

*Conclusion:* Jesus is Almighty God, Jehovah (hwhy), the Alpha & Omega, the First & the Last.

###### ***The Holy Spirit*** (Ps. 139:7-8; Jn. 3:5-7 cf. I Jn. 3:9; Acts 5:3-4; 13:2; I Cor. 2:10-11; II Cor 3:17, 18)

The Holy Spirit is identified as God and does the work of God.

*“But Peter said, ‘Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit, and to keep back some of the price of the land? . . . You have not lied to men, but to God’”* (Acts 5:3-4).

##### **Class #3: The Divine Persons Simultaneously Distinguished**

###### *The Three Persons Simultaneously Distinguished*

The Baptism of Christ (Matt. 3:16, 17)

The Father (1st Person) from heaven says, “This is my beloved Son” (2nd Person) while the Spirit of God (3rd Person) descends on Him in the form of a dove.

Do not overstate the meaning of the passage. It does not necessarily demonstrate the deity of Christ or the personality of the Holy Spirit. This passage demonstrates the simultaneous distinction of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The Great Commission (Matt. 28:19, 20)

“. . . baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

Here the three Persons are represented as equal in dignity and authority. It is significant that the word “name” is in the singular followed by a plurality of Persons.

The Upper Room Discourse of Christ (John 14-16)

John 14:16, 17: “And I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; that is the Spirit of truth . . .”

John 14:26: “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name,…”

John 15:26: “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, He will bear witness of Me.”

These texts not only mention three Persons in the same passage, but also make a clear distinction between the Persons.

This category of text is important because it eliminates the possibility of Sabellianism or Modalistic Monarchianism (i.e., that God is one Person in three successive modes of operation or roles).

###### *Two Divine Persons Simultaneously Distinguished*

In these texts, Jesus is affirmed by the Father when Jesus prays to the Father (Matt. 17; John 17)

In these texts the Son of God or Logos is distinguished from the Father (John1:1-3; Col. 1:9-23)

### Distinctions for Theology Proper & Trinitarianism[[3]](#footnote-3)

#### ***Introduction***

##### Theology students need to learn the various types of distinctions early in the process of theological study for many reasons. The proper use of distinctions assists one in understanding issues such as: (1) the Persons of the Trinity, (2) the relationship of the divine essence and attributes, (3) the difference between soul and spirit, and (4) the relationship of the intellect and will to the soul and spirit, and the distinction between body and soul.

##### Below are brief definitions of the most common types of distinctions employed in theological discussions.

##### These are used to distinguish things in reality and in the mind and to distinguish within a single thing and to distinguish between multiple things.

##### Additional distinctions, such as the Type-Token distinction, will be addressed in later materials.

#### ***Types of Distinctions***

##### *Real or Essential Distinction (Distinctio Realis)*

###### This is a distinction between two independent things, that is, two distinct essences (or, more precisely, two substances).

###### These are separately existing things that exist in reality.

###### Example: A Cat and a Dog or two Cats or two Dogs

##### *Formal Distinction (Distinctio Formalis)*

###### In the mind there is a distinction between different ways of conceiving one and the same thing. This distinction can be, for example, logical or grammatical.

###### This is known as a mental or intra-mental distinction and is used for some types of things that do not exist separately or independently.

###### This is a distinction between two or more formal aspects of the essence of a thing.

###### The Formal Distinction with a Foundation in a Thing (*distinctio formalis ex parte rei*) means there is a distinction between formal objects within one and the same thing.

Example 1: Within a red ball the mind distinguishes the formal objects of redness, color, shape, and sphericity.

Example 2: Within the human soul-spirit, the mind distinguishes the formal powers or capacities of intellect, will, and affections, which are not separate things, but distinguishable faculties within a single thing.

##### *Modal Distinction (Distinctio Modalis)*

###### This is a distinction between various modes subsistence of a thing or the various ways in which a thing can exist.

###### The nature of the object being analyzed will determine which type of distinctions should be employed.

###### Whereas a formal distinction distinguishes between formal objects or properties within a thing, the modal distinction considers the distinct ways the entire essence can exist.

###### Example of a Modal Distinction: The three modes of water

##### *Distinction by Reason of Analysis (Distinctio Rationis Ratiocinatae)*

###### This is a rational distinction that has its basis or foundation in an external thing. It is not merely an intramental, rational distinction.

###### The distinction expresses a genuine distinction in an extramental reality.

###### This type of distinction is closely related to a Virtual Distinction.

###### Example: The Attributes of God

##### *Distinction by Reason Reasoning (Distinctio Rationis Rationans)*

###### This is merely a rational distinction grounded solely in the operation of reason, that is, it is merely intramental.

###### It is not grounded in an external thing.

###### Example: A distinction between a Unicorn and a Pegasus

### “Substance” & “Person” Terms for Theology Proper & Trinitarianism

Note that the definitions given below are not the only definitions for these metaphysical terms and concepts. The definitions are derived from the common definitions use by confessional Protetsant Scholastic theology.[[4]](#footnote-4) Note that the nature language is employed to describe the true God in His oneness, while the person language is employed to describe the Three Persons of the Trinity.

#### ***Nature Language***

##### *Essence (essentia)*

###### Essence is the whatness or quiddity of a thing.

###### It is those properties or qualities that make a being or thing precisely what it is, and not something else.

###### It distinguishes the *genus* of the thing, identifying

##### *Substance (substantia)*

###### A substance is the essence of a thing plus existence (*esse*).

###### Substance is the underlying “stuff” of things that exist. The emphasis is on the concrete reality of the thing as distinct from “essence,” which simply indicates what a thing is (Genus). Thus, a substance is an “existing essence.”

###### Substance can indicate the formal and material reality held in common by all members of a genus as well as the formal and material reality of an individual thing.

###### Substance is the “stuff” in which the properties of the thing inhere. Moreover, a substance maintains its identity through change, that is, when it gains or loses accidental properties.

##### *Nature* (*natura*) A third term used in speaking of God is the term “nature” (from Latin *natura*). There are three basic uses of *natura* in theology.

###### Some use it as a synonym for the terms “essence” and “substance.”

###### Some use the term to refer to a *particular* kind or species of essence in actual existence.

###### Some use it to refer to the entire created universe and its phenomena.

##### The words “essence” and “substance” and “nature” are commonly used by some as exact synonyms when discussing the Being of God, but there are important distinctions one should make when using the terms. See the definitions above.

#### ***Person Language[[5]](#footnote-5)***

##### *Person (Persona (Latin) or Prosopon (Greek))*

###### These terms originally indicated a dramatic role, or, more precisely, a mask worn by an actor in playing a role.

###### They later indicated the individual character in the play and thereby had an objective significance.

##### *Subsistent (Subsistentia (Latin) or Hypostasis (Greek))*

###### These terms indicate a particular being or existent.

###### Also, they indicate an individual instance of a given essence.

##### *Mode of Subsistence (Modus Subsistendi (Latin))*

###### This term indicates the mode or manner of the individual existence of a given thing.

###### This term is used to describe the individual Trinitarian Persons.

###### Note that this concept is distinguished from Modalism or Modalistic Monarchianism, a Trinitarian heresy.

##### *Intelligent, Self-Subsistent Being (Suppositum Intelligens (Latin))*

###### This term also indicates an instance of a rational substance.

###### The terms *individuum* and *suppositum* are synonyms, indicating an individual thing.

##### *Being (Ens (Latin))*

###### The term *ens* indicates an existing thing.

###### In Protestant Scholastic theology, *ens* is the most simple predicate. It indicates the coincidence of *esse*, the act of existing, with *essentia*, the whatness of the thing.

###### The terms *ens* and its synonym, *res*, commonly translated into English as “thing,” both indicate an existent in the basic sense.

#### ***Mutual Indwelling Language***

##### *Coinherence (Circumincessio (Latin), Perichoresis or Emperichoresis (Greek))*

###### These terms relate the concept that the Persons of the Trinity coinhere in the divine essence and in each Other.

###### Thus, the Persons of the Trinity are understood as indwelling each Other.

### Definitions of the Trinity

#### ***Simple Definition*:** Three Persons are the one eternal God.

#### ***Complex*:** The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three eternal Persons who equally share one infinite, undivided divine nature.

#### ***Virtually Incomprehensible to the Average Mortal***: God in an eternal, necessary, infinite, independent, self-existent (*aseitas*), immaterial Being (*ens*) that simultaneously subsists in three personal modes (*modus subsistentia*). The Persons are individually distinguished by their eternal, hypostatic characteristics: the Father’s, Paternity (*paternitas*), is defined by His unbegotteness and active generation of the Son; the Son’s, Filiation (*filiatio*), is defined by His generation from the Father and His procession of the Spirit; the Holy Spirit’s, Procession (*processio*), is defined by His emanation from the Father and Son. The Divine Persons are consubstantial (*homoousia*) and coinhere (*circumencessio*) in each Other.

### Alleged Illustrations of the Trinity

#### ***One Man with 3 Personal Roles (Heresy of Modalism)***

#### ***Water in its Three Modes (Heresy of Modalism or Tritheism or Partialism)***

#### ***The Egg (Heresy of Tritheism or Partialism)***

#### ***The Three-Leaf Clover (Heresy of Tritheism or Partialism)***

#### ***The Soul of Cerberus (Analogy to Fiction, Three “Mind” Model)***

#### ***The Three Faculties of the Human Soul (Incomplete Illustration)***

### Trinitarian Heresies

#### ***Modalism (Modalistic Monarchianism, Sabellianism & Patripassianism)***

##### *Definition*: God is one substance*,* one Person, and this one Divine Person *successively functions* in three personal roles or modes of operation (*modus operandi*) or *successively* changes His Mode of Subsistence (*modus subsistendi*).

##### *Problems:* It rejects the biblical notion that the divine substance *simultaneously* subsists as three Persons. Most modalists affirm that Jesus is the Father, the Son, and The Holy Spirit.

##### *Examples*: United Pentecostal Church, T.D. Jakes, the Local Church & Living Stream Ministries (Witness Lee), and Apostolic Churches

#### ***Unitarianism***

##### *Definition*: God is one substance, one Person, and He has only one personal role or mode of operation—the mode and role of the Father.

##### *Problems:* This view rejects the biblical notion that there are three divine Persons. Unitarians assert God is only one divine Person—the Father.

###### This view always holds that Jesus is a “person,” but He is merely a created person.

###### Jesus and the Father as essentially or really distinguished. Here, the man Jesus Christ is not the same substance (*homoousia)* as the Father.

###### The most common heretical views of Christ found among Unitarians are:

Arianism: The Logos is a preexistent, finite, created being. Here, the Logos preexists as a created spirit person and assumes part of human nature.

Dynamic Monarchianism: Jesus, the man, is merely a human being filled with the power (*dunamis*) of God. Jesus does not preexist in any sense in this view.

###### The personality of the Holy Spirit is commonly rejected in this view.

Most often, the Holy Spirit is redefined as an attribute of God, such as divine power, or redefined as the nature of God, such as God as “spirit,” rather than matter.

Occasionally, the Holy Spirit will be redefined as a created, spirit Being, similar to the Arian’s view of Jesus and the Logos. Macedonianism is an historical example of this view.

##### *Examples*: Jehovah’s Witnesses, Christadelphians, Liberal Christianity, Islam, Deists, classical Unitarians and others

#### ***Tritheism***

##### *Definition*: There are three distinct gods. Each god has his own numerically distinct substance (*i.e.,* there are 3 substances), each god is a distinct person, and each god has a distinct personal role. This results in three numerically distinct beings of the same genus.

##### *Problems:* This view rejects the biblical notion that there is only one divine Being by nature. It is a form of polytheism. Tritheists essentially or really distinguish the Persons of the Trinity.

##### *Examples*: Mormonism, some Word of Faith teachers (e.g., Kenneth Copeland), and “Three Being” Trinitarianism.

## The Trinity & The Works of God[[6]](#footnote-6)

### Introduction to the Works of the Triune God

#### The general works of God are understood as the decree, creation, providential preservation of the creation, and redemption.

#### A more precise understanding of the works of God would distinguish the activities of God into the following categories:

##### Internal Works (*opera Dei ad intra*) and External Works (*opera Dei ad extra*)

##### Essential Works (*opera Dei essentialia*) and Personal Works (*opera Dei personalia)*

### The Internal & External Works of God Distinguished[[7]](#footnote-7)

#### ***The Internal Works of God (opera Dei ad intra or interna)***

##### The internal works of God are accomplished apart from any relation to external things and are, by definition, eternal and immutable.

##### The internal works of God can be either *essential* or *personal*.

#### ***The External Works of God (opera Dei ad extra)***

##### The external works of God are the divine activities according to which God creates, sustains, and relates to all finite, created things.

##### The external works of God include the activities of grace and salvation.

### Essential & Personal Works of God Distinguished

#### ***The Essential Works of God Generally Considered***

##### Essential works are the works of God performed by the Triune Godhead in its essential oneness, that is, essential works are the *common works* of the divine Persons in distinction from the individual works of the distinct Persons.

###### Essential works are, specifically, the Eternal Decree and its execution in Creation, Providence, and Redemption.

###### Although the three Persons of the Trinity work as One God in the external works, there is a clear manner of working or mode of operation that corresponds with the interpersonal relations of the Trinity.

##### The manner of working (*modus operandi* or *modus agendi*) of the Godhead is described as: The Father acts or works *through* the Son and *in* the Holy Spirit.

###### ***The Father:*** The Father is the *source* of the divine activity (*fons actionis*) and works of Himself and is from none (*a nullo*).

Gal. 4:4-6—“But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, *5* in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive adoption as sons. *6* And because you are sons, God has sent forth the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!”

###### ***The Son:*** The Son is the *means* of action (*medium actionis*), who works not of Himself, but of the Father (*a Patre*).

Gen. 19:24—“Then the Lord rained on Sodom and Gomorrah brimstone and fire from the Lord out of heaven”

John 5:19—“…the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son does in like manner.”

John 5:30—“I can do nothing on my own initiative. As I hear, I judge; and My judgment is just, because I do not seek My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.”

John 8:28—“…I do nothing on My own initiative, but I speak these things as the Father taught Me.”

###### ***The Holy Spirit:*** The Holy Spirit is the *limit* of activity (*terminus actionis*), who works not of Himself, but from both (*ab utroque*) the Father and the Son.

John 16:13—“But when He, the Spirit of Truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and will disclose to you what is to come.”

#### ***The Essential Works of God Distinguished as Internal and External***

##### *The Essential Internal Works* (*opera Dei essentialia ad intra*)

###### This is the Eternal Decree (*decretum* or *concilium*) willed by the entire Godhead as the foundation for all the External works (*opera ad extra)*.

##### *The Essential External Works* (*opus Dei essentiale ad extra*)

###### This is the execution or enactment of the divine decree in the general work of creation, providence, and redemption.

###### The external works of God are *indivisible*, that is, God works—not merely one Member of the Godhead.

Gen. 1:26—“Let Us make man in Our image after Our likeness.”

John 5:19—“…the Son can do nothing of Himself, unless it is something He sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, these things the Son does in like manner.”

###### Although the essential external divine work is indivisible, the Scriptures are careful to preserve the proper order and manner of action in the Godhead

I Cor. 15:57—“but thanks be to God, who give us victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Rom. 11:36—“For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.”

#### ***The Personal Works of God (opera Dei personalia)***

##### The Personal works of God are the internal (*ad intra)* operations of the individual Persons of the Trinity.

##### The personal works are restricted to the activities of and relations between the Persons of the Trinity. We see this in:

###### The activity of the Father in *begetting* the Son;

###### The activity of the Father and Son in *spirating* the Holy Spirit;

###### The relation of the Son to the Father by being begotten (*passive generation*);

###### The relation of the Spirit to the Father and the Son by being spirated (*passive spiration*).

##### These works identify and distinguish the Persons of the Trinity. They are also designated as *hypostatic characteristics*, which are the incommunicable and distinct modes of subsisting of the individual Persons of the Godhead.

##### The personal works of God are also called the *immanent works of themselves* because they do not issue forth from the Godhead, in contrast to the essential works, which are the ground of all the external works (*opera ad extra*).

## Issues Related to the Personal Works of God

### *The Begottenness of the Son (John 1:18; 3:16)*

#### The Concept of the Eternal Generation of the Son

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#### The Biblical Term *Monogenes* (monogenhv") is translated as “only-begotten” or “unique.” *Monogenes* is combination of the Greek words:

##### *Monos* (mono")—sole, only, alone and a form of either:

##### *Gennao* (gennavw) – Beget

##### *Genos* (gevno") – race, people, class, kind but not

##### *Ginomai* (givnomai) – Born, begotten, made, created

### *Aseity & the Personal Works of God*

#### In order to avoid the errors of tritheism and the essential subordination of the Son and Holy Spirit, some theologians make a distinction between *personal aseity* and *essential aseity*.

##### *Essential Aseity* means the divine essence is, *of itself,* divine. It does not derive its divinity from another. Moreover, essential aseity is closely related to the concept of coessentiality or consubstantiality (*homoousia*).

##### *Personal Aseity* is the view that each divine Person is a Person of Himself (*autoprosopon*).

#### *Argument Against Personal Aseity* If the Son and Spirit were Persons of Themselves (*autoprosopon)*, there would be 3 self-existent Personal Beings, two of which derive their essence from the Father, resulting in Tritheism and the essential subordination of the Son and Holy Spirit.

#### *Summary* Since each Divine Person subsists in a numeric unity of indivisible divine essence, and the divine essence is fully present in each Person, each Divine Person must have the attribute of *essential aseity*, that is, each Person is *autotheos*, of Himself God by nature. The Son and Spirit do not have a derived deity. Their aseity is grounded in the divine essence. This characteristic distinguishes the divine Son, particularly, from sons by creation (elect angels) and sons by adoption (elect human beings).

### *The Issue of the “Filioque” Addition to the Nicene Creed: Single or Double Procession?[[8]](#footnote-8)*

#### *Historical Background*

##### The word *filioque* is a Latin term meaning “and from the Son.” This term is not found in the original version of the Nicene Creed (A.D. 325) or the second version (A.D. 381). Both versions simply state that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father.” But in A.D. 589, at a regional church council in Toledo (Spain), the phrase “and the Son” (*filioque*) was added. The creed thereafter stated that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.” Some viewed this addition as a further development in the clarification of the ontological Trinity. However, this addition to the Nicene Creed became a significant issue for the Eastern Church. They believed the addition of the *filioque* undermined the balance of the Trinity and subsequently became one of the major factors leading to the Great Schism between the Western and the Eastern Churches.

##### Eastern and Western theologians have continued to analyze and debate the implications of the *filioque*.

###### The Eastern Orthodox holds the concept of “double procession”—the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father *and the Son*—subordinates the Holy Spirit to a position of being less than the Father and the Son, and impairs the proper balance of the Trinity. This, they argue, caused the Western Church to have a lower regard for the work of the Holy Spirit.

###### The Western Church, Roman Catholics and Protestants, generally argue that the Son sends the Holy Spirit (John 16:7). And apart from the *filioque*, Christ is ontologically subordinated to the Father, resulting in a Unitarian, rather than a Trinitarian view of the Godhead. Moreover, they argue, the Eastern view results in an emphasis on mystical experience that minimizes the adoration of Christ.

#### *Biblical Texts*

##### John 14:26 – “But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the *Father will send* in My name.”

##### John 15:26 – “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father.”

##### John 16:7 – “But I tell you the truth, it is to your advantage that I go away; for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you; but if I go, *I will send Him* to you.”

#### *Possible Solutions*

##### The original version of the Nicene Creed states that the Holy Spirit “proceeds” from the Father. This is accurate according to John 15:26. The Greek word translated as “proceeds” is the Greek word *ekporeuo*, which is the word used in the Nicene Creed. The term translated as “send” is the Greek word *pempo*, which is the term describing the action of both the Father and the Son.

##### So if the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, we might simply understand this as a statement that the Father is the eternal source of the Holy Spirit, as well as, the Eternal Begetter of the Son.

##### The *filioque* addition at the Council of Toledo sought to correct the alleged “error” of ignoring the role of the Son in the sending the Holy Spirit, which Scripture affirms. The issue is whether the Western Church went beyond Scripture by introducing the concept of “double procession” or whether the inference of “double procession” from “double sending” is not only permissible, but helpful for safeguarding the Nicene truth of the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son.

##### The Eastern Church believes a better solution would be to state that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father *through* the Son,” which is the language used by St. Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century. They believe this statement properly recognizes the mediatorial role of the Son (I Tim. 2:5) regarding the sending of the Holy Spirit, who is also called the “Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9).

1. *See* Muller, *DLGTT* [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. *See* Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenchtic Theology*. Vol 1. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. For more on the issue of distinctions, see Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin & Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985); Robert Audi, Ed., *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy,* 2nd. Ed. (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. *See* Richard Muller, *Dictionary of Latin & Greek Theological Terms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Note that (L) indicates a Latin word while (G) indicates a Greek word. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. For discussions of the specific terms, see Muller, *DLGTT*. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *See* Muller, *DLGTT*, for additional details. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This section has been adapted and modified from a variety of internet sources. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)