

Trinitarian History

Before sketchily retracing the history of Trinitarian theology it may be appropriate to review what so far has become clear.

Overall the objective of Trinitarian theology, in short, is to teach about; Who God is and who man is in relationship to God, to fellow man and to the natural world in which he exists. The plans that God has to restore the glory of his fallen creation, including man, to something far greater than it was in the beginning and to show man the role that he is being prepared to play.

Theology, the study of God and his relationship to the world, has certain characteristics that are common to all fields of learning. After a little knowledge is acquired, the natural instinct is to assume that one knows far more than they really do, but as the knowledge base grows comes the humbling truth that, as yet, one has hardly scratched the surface and will never be, the know it all, that one previously thought ones-self to be. Regardless of the intensity of his study and depth of his knowledge, man can never uncover, the innermost secrets of God.

At some point along the way there is a decision to be made. To be satisfied, once convinced that personal salvation is assured, or feel compelled to push on in the hope of making a lasting contribution towards the welfare of those around them. Do we push on to further understanding in the hope that we may have a part in the salvation of others? Do we have the desire to set an example that may inspire others to follow in our footsteps?

So what of our excursion into Trinitarian theology? Just how has it contributed to our spiritual growth? Although I, cannot answer for you all. it seems that the following would be on our lists.

The overall star of the show is Jesus Christ. It is all about what he has done for us, not about what we can do for him. At best, we respond to what he has done, but that also only comes through enabling us to do so.. The Bible is one continuing story of a good creation, marred and disfigured by poor decisions and actions of man, being painstakingly restored to a condition that far surpasses the original.

The Old Testament begins with man enjoying the splendour when things are done God's way. All was fine until man decided, that things would be even better if done his way. Although God knew otherwise, he allowed mankind to test his theory and appointed scribes to carefully record the outcome of the experiment. Records reveal that man, left to his own devices, was never up to the task. The further he departed from God's ways the greater his disaster and misery.

Although of course God has the power to force repentance on man at any time, he refrained from doing so in the wisdom that, if his great plans were to be fully realised, it could only be with the full and voluntary co-operation of his creation. God knows full well, that when one is convinced against his will, he is of his own opinion still.

But God was one step ahead from start to finish. The one and only way out of the dilemma was for his one and only son to take on human flesh, to live a completely sinless life on behalf of all human kind and be offered as the perfect sacrifice to bring total victory over

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every sin ever committed. The son's righteousness would become their righteousness and thus they would all be reconciled to the Father. It is a long story that has been retold many times.

The New Testament is about how the plan was executed, but not in a way that the people had expected. The Old Covenant foretold that a Messiah would rescue God's chosen people from their problems, so their thoughts became fixed on a strong military type leader, who would defeat their captors on the battlefield. So Jesus came, lived and died with very few recognising who he really was. Rather than merely disentangle them from their physical constraints, he did much more, by releasing them from the sin that for so long had alienated them from their creator.

Although Jesus had lived and worked with his handpicked disciples for over three years prior to his death, even they did not understand his true identity, until after his death and resurrection, when so much of what he taught suddenly, for the first time, began to make sense. From the outset they quickly realised that Jesus was a very special type of being without being able to realise **"How Special"**.

The disciples had been with Jesus at the time when he had confronted the Jews and made the claim recorded in John 10:30;
"I and the Father are one."

That certainly put the cat among the pigeons. His opposition set about stoning him on the spot on a charge of blasphemy without any degree of success. Although Jesus knew that he would die at their hands, it would be done at a time of God's choosing and in a manner that had already been decreed. As for the disciples, perhaps they would have liked to believe, but at that time it was utterly beyond their comprehension

The resurrection removed much of their doubt and what remained evaporated as they watched him disappear as he ascended into the sky. Suddenly, the commonly assumed single God portrayed by the Old Testament had become more than one God. Although solving the mystery of Genesis 1:26

"Let us make man in our image, in our likeness."

it created a further problem. How could the ever loving and ever loved Jesus be one with the cold, harsh God that they pictured from their understanding of the Old Testament?

But it did not end there; had not Jesus promised to send them a special Counsellor or Comforter after he had returned to the right hand of his Father. John 14:15-18,

"If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you forever—the Spirit of Truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you."

Dropping down to verse 26,

"But the Counsellor, the Holy Spirit, whom the further will send in my name, will teach

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you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.”

If they had previously been perplexed, they were now totally confused

But the story continued to unfold, Jesus was resurrected, precisely as he had foretold. He spent time with them and bit by bit, confirmed what he had already told them. It was left to Luke to briefly describe the ascension. Before doing so he opened the minds of his disciples to what the Old Testament had to say about Jesus. Luke 24:45-49,

Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures. He told them, “This is what is written; The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning at Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. I am going to send you what my Father has promised; but stay in the city until you have been clothed with power from on high.”

Shortly after, Jesus was taken from them and ascended into the sky. Unlike the time when he was taken from them via the cross, they believed the words of their Master. Their world did not fall apart, they did not even contemplate returning to their former way of life but with confidence waited in Jerusalem for the event that they were certain would happen. And it did!

Even obedience was taking on a new meaning. No longer was it seen as the forced submission to a higher power but as an invitation to bask in the unlimited love, power and direction of a God only concerned with their best interests.

In his stirring sermon on the day of Pentecost Peter reaffirmed all this in a powerful message that cut to the heart and core of his audience. He was now a changed man, no longer self-centred. but now one caught up in a cause far greater than himself. From that time on, he would boldly proclaim the word and ways of his Master against all odds; he had denied the one he served for the last time.

Peter now knew that his future lay in furthering the message of Jesus Christ. He also knew that his Lord and Saviour had often referred to his own Father and now the Counsellor that Jesus had promised to send had instantly changed him from a coward and would be bully, to the man he was created to be.

Although Peter had been initially puzzled and irritated by Jesus’ final words to him as recorded in John 2,

“Feed my Lambs,” v 15

“Take care of my sheep” v 16

“Feed my sheep” v 17

His future had now become crystal clear and from that point onwards he remained faithful to his calling.

But as some mysteries were revealed; others deepened. As for the disciples and the inner ring of believers, who exactly was this God that they had been called to serve. They had personally lived with Jesus for about three years and as the man, they knew him well, but the events of the last few weeks had clearly shown that he was much more than a mere man. Just

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who was he, and where did he fit into the overall picture that now included the Father and the Holy Spirit? He had revealed himself as the Messiah but there still remained so much, as yet to be explained.

Fortunately they were now lost in a cause far greater than themselves and busied themselves in the task that they had been given, as recorded in Mark 16:15,

“Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation.”

That was more than enough to fully occupy their time, yet they longed to know more of the one to whom they were voluntarily enslaved. If only they had asked the question asked by Saul as he was struck down on the road to Damascus. Acts 9:5,

“Who are you, Lord?”

Whilst strictly true, the response that he got perhaps was perhaps not as comprehensive as he would have liked,

“I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.”

Although having snippets of the truth neither the apostles nor Paul, as he was subsequently to be known, had a clear understanding of how three could be one, or how one could be three. So rather than further confuse the already confused, apart from acknowledging the unity of the three, they avoided further comment which may have fuelled speculation. Instead they fervently preached Christ as they had been told to do. In time the mystery would be solved

As the New Testament was yet to be written, the only teaching resources that the apostles and Paul had was the Old Testament plus their past and continuing personal experiences with Jesus. As they preached, a stream of vital information continued to be revealed to them through the work of the Holy Spirit. As their knowledge grew, they passed it on to those they taught, and preserved much of it when they got around to writing the majority of the New Testament, which over time has become the church's major teaching resource.

These early years were the halcyon days of the church as converts devoured the teaching without shadow of question or doubt. It was only after this first wave of enthusiasm had waned that question and doubt crept in, and by the time the New Testament was written the anti-Christ's were already making their presence felt. Almost without exception we find the writers, within their books, making passionate pleas for believers to return to the faith once delivered. The gospel introduced by Jesus Christ and faithfully taught by the apostles specially trained for that very purpose..

Consequently the clarification of the mystery of the Trinity, which defied all human logic, was left in the hands of the early church fathers. If the rapidly growing church was to remain unified it was necessary for it to have a common perception of “Who is God? Without such a standard men would continue to invent gods of their own making and end up with a myriad of gods that were nothing more than false idols.

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The early church fathers, those born within two generations of the apostles, are remembered as the apostolic fathers because they were taught directly by the apostles themselves. Here we find revered names like Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, and Polycarp of Smyrna.

As the church spread the next wave of early fathers were identified by area or by the language in which they wrote. Prominent among those writing in Greek were, Irenaeus of Lyon, Clement of Alexandria, Origen of Alexandria and Athanasius of Alexandria. Then there were the contributions of those writing in Latin. Among those best remembered are Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Augustine of Hippo and Gregory the Great. Among others to make significant input was a monastical group called the Cappadocians. Even today reference is often made to Basil the Great.

All these great men lived within the first few centuries of church history and were much better armed to answer the great question of “Who is God?” than were the apostles who were restricted to the writings of the Old Testament and their own personal experiences of personally living and working with Jesus Christ. In addition to the Old Testament, they now also had the New Testament as a record of the apostle’s experience and a new knowledge base as the Holy Spirit went about his work. As Jesus said in John 16:13,

“But when he, the Spirit of Truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.”

Through painstakingly considering the few from the Old Testament, and the many references to the nature and form of God from the New Testament, constantly being better understood through divine revelation, a clearer picture of what is now known as the doctrine of the Trinity was at last emerging. As Paul’s understanding was growing, he made two references to a Godhead in Romans 1:20 and Colossians 2:9. Luke also used the term for a third time in Acts 17:29. (However, only the early versions, such as the King James, used the term and consequently the term is not to be found in later versions.).. Finally the voice of those struggling with the Trinitarian concept of three persons being one prevailed.

The Godhead is a great mystery, which is clearly beyond the finite mind of the unsaved, natural man. I Corinthians 2:14.

“The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.”

As always God is one step ahead, telling it before it actually happens. Likewise believers of today are still unable to fully understand the doctrine but accept it because the Word of God says so.

Back to the story; we now have a concept that cannot be explained in human terms and a dictionary without a word capable of defining it. Undaunted the fathers pressed on and towards the end of the second century the word Trinity was conceived as best describing it.

An ancient historian sees it this way,

As Clement and Origen represented theological development in the East, so Tertullian had tremendous influence in the West, which being centered in Rome, gave greater credence to the traditional role of faith than to philosophy, and was more apt to expound on scripture .

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It was Tertullian (c.160-230) who first coined the term trinitas from which the English word 'trinity' is derived. He clarifies thus the 'mystery of the divine economy... which of the unity makes a trinity, placing the three in order not of quality but of sequence, different not in substance but in aspect, not in power but in manifestation'

From this belated beginning the doctrine as we know it today has developed. Before being accepted as truth it needs to be tested against the written word, the gospel message itself and the early teachings of Paul and the disciples. As with any teaching, if it fails this test it is to be rejected.

1 Cor 3:10-14, "By the grace God has given me, I laid a foundation as an expert builder, and someone else is building on it. But each one should be careful how he builds. For no one can lay a foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward."

The foundation is of Christ and Christ alone, and as we shall see shortly see there have been many to doubt the sufficiency of Christ.

The world around the early Church was changing. The Roman Empire began to crumble as Constantine came to power. He wished to unify the Empire, and chose Christianity to do so. But Christianity was far from unified

From early times the finished work of Jesus has had detractors. As quickly as Paul established churches, they followed close behind claiming that it needed to be supported by the good works of believers. When that was finally laid to rest as heresy other issues were constantly being raised to denigrate the work of Jesus.

By the time the fourth century AD arrived there was a movement afoot that questioned the divinity of Jesus. In short if he were created or begotten he did not always exist like the Father and therefore, could not be his equal. For a time this philosophy simmered only to burst into flame when it won the support of a young preacher named Arius in the early 320's. Controversy that threatened to divide an already weakening church raged when Alexander, bishop of Egypt stepped in to defend the accepted view of the church

By the natural salesmanship of Arius and the popularity of his supporting bishop, Eusebius, the Arian message began to spread. It spread so much that it caught the notice of the emperor, Constantine the Great, who was in the process of uniting the Roman Empire under his own rule. There had been as many as four emperors at once during the reigns of Constantine and his father Constantius but this had now been reduced to two.

Now reduced to two emperors, civil war had ignited in A.D. 320 when co-emperor Licinius ignored the Edict of Milan and reinstated the persecution of Christians. Constantine took that as an opportunity to rid himself of his rival; however, it would take 4 years to make that happen, and the battles would not end until September, 324.

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It was during this civil war that Arius and Eusebius, in complete disregard of the commands of Christ and writings of the apostles, sought to divide the Church. The ever astute Constantine was quick to recognize the danger of this. With so many of his subjects converted (so-called) to Christianity, splitting the Church could easily split the empire!

Constantine the Great was no fool. He was a master statesman and diplomat. He did not simply demand that the 318 bishops of the churches in the empire appear before him in Constantinople. Instead he called a council in a city easily accessible to all the bishops of the empire, Nicea in modern-day Turkey. He also paid their travel expenses and welcomed them with great pomp and circumstance.

Wooed and comfortable, the bishops gathered at the Council of Nicea to discuss the dissension that had by now spread across most of North Africa and the Middle East. Constantine asked if he could participate, and the bishops granted their host this privilege. While not a churchman, he was a diplomat as well as a master in expediency, and by his carefully chosen words was to play a major role in the proceedings.

It was the summer of 325 when proceedings which were to last for two months, got under way. Arius in his usual self-confident manner was the first speaker to advance the Arian view and the main response highlighted the brilliance of a rising star in Athanasius. As the council dragged on for two months, each bishop spoke in turn, under the ever watchful eye of Constantine. Athanasius, only an elder at the time of the Council of Nicea, became the champion of the Niceans afterward. As emperors turned for him and against him, he was banished from the eastern part of the empire no less than five times over the next thirty years or so.

In the end the Arian view was thrown out as heresy and all but 5 of the 318 bishops present signed the creed of unification. However many were far from satisfied with the wording of the document which, at further assemblies, was modified to better reflect the teachings of the apostolic fathers. As for Arius he was exiled but later repented and was due to be reinstated. However on the day of the ceremony he was to mysteriously die on the way to the venue.

So the Nicene Creed of unity was signed, but never quite delivered in the way that the conniving Constantine had hoped. For a time Arian groups continued to spring up and threaten division within the church but the Great Roman Empire was beyond revival. The writing was already on the wall.

However, the divinity of Christ was settled, never to be seriously challenged again. Notwithstanding, further attacks were to be made on the Trinity doctrine but because of time they must remain on the shelf until next time.

Let us pray!