TESTING THE TRINITY

RECLAIMING THE MYSTERY OF FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT

SHAWN STAMP

What if there is a better answer?

Do you understand the Trinity? Could you explain it to others? Did you know that it's nowhere to be found in the Bible? If you are looking for answers, "Testing the Trinity" offers a Scriptural alternative to this confusing, extra-Biblical dogma.

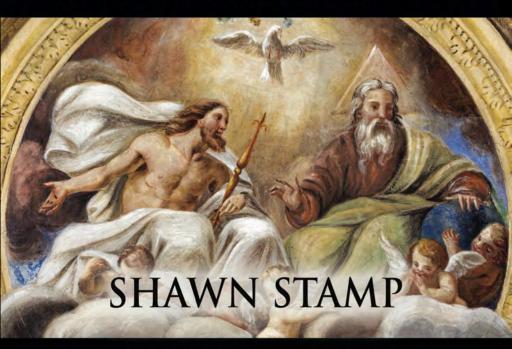# Testing the Trinity: Reclaiming the Mystery of Father, Son, and Spirit

By Shawn Stamp

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Preface

This book is the culmination of more than 25 years of searching, studying, praying, and self-doubt. Getting to this point has been an arduous journey, a continuous cycle that keeps bringing me back to certain ideas, intuitions, and facts that I cannot seem to escape. Because no matter how earnestly I have tried to arrive at a different conclusion – specifically the "orthodox" one – I always end up back where I began, praying that God would open my eyes and show me the error that keeps bringing me back here time and time again. And what is "here," this conclusion that I cannot ignore?

The doctrine of the Trinity is seriously, if not hopelessly, flawed.

I do not make this statement lightly, for I am well aware that many others have headed down similar paths before, only to end up in places that are far more dubious and dangerous than the doctrine they are questioning in the first place. Accordingly, since this whole endeavor could prove to be nothing more than the latest heresy in a long line of failed alternatives, I have kept my musings mostly to myself for fear of propagating needless confusion and error…until now. Because not only have I become convinced that there is in fact a better answer to the riddle of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," but ultimately, even if I'm completely wrong, the gravest heresies still serve a purpose by galvanizing the church to clarify and articulate the essence of our faith. Clearly I'm betting on the former, rather than the latter…

In either case, just because I have finally decided to "go public" does not mean that my journey is complete. On the contrary, God's Word is inexhaustible, and it would be the height of arrogance to presume that I have plumbed the depths of His Word, His Wisdom, or His Being. There is always more to discover, more to learn, more about God to worship, which in turn forces me to acknowledge that the answer to my prayer might come at any time. Indeed, I have no illusions of infallibility, so if and when the day comes that the truth of the Trinity is made plain to me, then I will have no choice but to recant and rejoice! Until then, there is one thing I do know with absolute certainty: my journey is far from over.

With that in mind, I am offering this chronicle of my 25-year trek for your consideration. I'm sure that many will be angered by this book, others will be shaken by it, and still others will simply dismiss it as irreverent drivel. Please believe me, though, when I say that it is not my goal to stir up controversy for its own sake, and neither is my intention to offend or otherwise disparage the legitimacy of anyone's convictions. I am simply asking questions and looking for answers, and my sincere hope is that you will find something edifying in the pages that follow as you accompany me on my journey. Furthermore, whether you agree with me completely, partially, or not at all, I trust that you will be inspired to search the Scriptures anew.

So before we begin, allow me to address a few housekeeping issues regarding sources and citations so that there is no confusion. First, passages of Scripture are taken from the NASB translation unless otherwise noted. It is widely regarded as one of the most accurate English translations available, and to the extent that other translations are used it is primarily due to the familiarity of the passage in the alternative version. Second, all other supporting historical and technical information has been drawn from a variety of sources, most of which is readily available on-line. This can admittedly be problematic since the Internet enables anyone to publish anything and pass it off as fact; nevertheless, I have strived – to the best of my ability – to ensure that the material presented is:

- Verifiable – The information has been corroborated by multiple sources, or is generally accepted as accurate
- Reliable – I have tried to draw from peer-reviewed or academic sites whenever possible, as opposed to simply using Wikipedia (which is still a valuable resource in its own right) or "Toms.Religion.Blog.com"

That being said, this book is not intended to be an academic paper whereby every source is cross-referenced and annotated. To the contrary, since all of the information herein is essentially at your fingertips, if you see something that doesn't look right, I trust that you will start your own journey and seek to find the answers for yourself.

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"The simple, indeed, (I will not call them unwise or unlearned) who always constitute the majority of believers, are startled at the dispensation (of the Three in One)"

Tertullian

∞

"The word God is nowhere in the Scriptures used to signify more than one of the three persons at once."

Isaac Newton

Opening Arguments

Give no offense either to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God.
1 Corinthians 10:32

The year was 1521, and a German monk by the name of Martin Luther was on trial for heresy. It was the culmination of events that had been set into motion four years prior, when his *Ninety-five Theses* essentially went "viral." Although Luther's intent was ostensibly to foster an academic, clerical debate with regards to several theological questions, his *Theses* were soon translated from Latin into German and within a few months had spread across Europe.

At the heart of the matter was the issue of our justification, which Luther believed could neither be earned nor bought. Contrary to the teaching of the Church, he maintained that salvation was by "faith alone" independent of our works; moreover, he decried the sale of indulgences as a means to buy favor with God. Luther declared that salvation is not something that anyone has the ability or the authority to sell – not even the Pope – and the resulting backlash against the Roman Catholic Church became a groundswell of opposition that fueled the Protestant Reformation.

Needless to say, this put Luther directly at odds with the entire Roman Catholic hierarchy, and for three years Pope Leo X tried unsuccessfully to discredit Luther and his views. Rather than consigning Luther to the footnotes of history, though, Rome's campaign only increased his popularity and gave him a platform to express his convictions. And so, in 1521 at the Diet of Worms, Luther was summoned to appear before the secular authorities and ordered to publicly recant. The choice before him was clear: Luther could either renounce his beliefs and live…or stand by them and die. He famously chose the latter:

> "Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason...I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and will not recant anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. Here I stand. I can do no other. May God help me. Amen."

In the wake of this declaration, Martin Luther was officially deemed a heretic and his arrest was ordered. Fortunately for Luther, though, he had friends in high places who sympathized with his crusade, offered him protection, and subsequently enabled him to continue his work for many years. As a result, the Protestant Reformation was born.

Contending for Truth

So what exactly qualifies someone as a heretic? Historically speaking the answer was fairly straightforward: if you defied or otherwise contradicted an official teaching of "The Church" you were a heretic. Seems simple enough, but this definition is really just the tip of the iceberg. Where things get complicated is that the disposition of "The Church" as well as the kind of issues it has considered heresy-worthy have changed over time.

During Christianity's first few centuries, the governing body of "The Church" was loosely comprised of the regional bishops. They played a vital role in the formation of Christian orthodoxy, convening to articulate essential Christian doctrine and thereby speak with one voice against false teachers. That being said, since getting everyone together was no small feat, church councils were relatively rare and only called to combat those teachings that struck at the core of the Christian faith: namely the person and the deity of Christ.

Over time, though, as the power of the papacy in Rome gradually subsumed that of the individual bishoprics, "The Church" effectively became synonymous with the Pope. Consequently, the variety of issues that could get someone branded a heretic increased sharply…as did the penalties. By the time Martin Luther comes onto the scene of history, being found guilty of heresy was a capital offense that typically resulted in being burned at the stake.

Fast forward to the present day, where the designation of "heretic" now amounts to little more than an insult. The reason is once again due to the changing nature of "The Church," which has gone from being monolithic and authoritarian to fragmented and somewhat discordant. As a result, the benchmark by which heresy has traditionally been measured is essentially non-existent today. Indeed, due to the vast array of denominations and

sects that have proliferated since Luther's day, the word heresy has virtually lost all meaning because one group's orthodoxy is another group's heresy. For instance:

- Protestants consider many Catholic teachings as heretical (not to mention vice versa)
- Some Pentecostal denominations are viewed as heretical by other denominations (and vice versa)
- Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses and all other derivatives of Christianity are deemed to be heretical cults by Protestants and Catholics alike
- So-called "Prosperity Preachers" are often branded as heretics

Regardless of its relative severity, though, the question of heresy is just as relevant today as in times past simply because there are so many diverse and contradictory teachings. This cacophony of viewpoints not only creates confusion about what Christianity really stands for, but it virtually guarantees that false teachings are being propagated in abundance. So even though the word itself may have lost some of its gravity, the issue at the heart of every heresy is still of paramount importance: *what is the truth?*

Create No Stumbling Block
From the earliest days of Christianity, an earnest desire to "contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3) has been the driving force behind the Church's efforts to identify and counteract false teaching wherever it is found. To put it differently, "The Church" in every era has rightly understood its solemn responsibility to ensure that Christianity maintains its identity from one generation to the next. It is the gatekeeper for any and all ideas on what constitutes proper Christian belief and practice, with the goal of suppressing those teachings that are not in alignment with the proclamation of sacred Scripture. A daunting task to be sure, but one that – for the most part – the Church has faithfully discharged over the centuries. The obvious dilemma, as Martin Luther so boldly reminded us, is what to do when "The Church" gets it wrong.

Clearly the Roman Catholic Church would maintain that Luther is the errant party in their ongoing debate, but that is beside the point. Because regardless of who is right or wrong on any *particular* issue, you cannot escape the possibility that "The Church" in any age could get something wrong. Due to this potentiality (dare I say, inevitability) it would be unwise to tacitly assume that heretics are always the ones in the wrong.

Indeed, if being in opposition to the religious authorities is all it takes to be a heretic, then by definition the Old Testament prophets, John the Baptist, and Jesus Himself were the heretics of their day. And at least in these cases, the testimony of Scripture is clear about who was off the mark. So yes, Martin Luther was a heretic. *That doesn't mean he was wrong*.

I labor this point for the simple fact that by virtually any standard of Christian orthodoxy both past and present, this book is tantamount to arch-heresy. It calls into question one of the most central doctrines of the Christian faith – the Trinity – and arguably strikes at the very heart of Christian belief. This is something that I do not take lightly, because over the course of history *most heretics have indeed been wrong.* Sometimes dangerously so! As such, to say that the track record of past heretics gives me pause is an understatement. Because deep down I know that like most heretics before me…the odds are not in my favor.

In any case, there are three fundamental questions that have been compelling me to press onward in this endeavor. The first question is arguably the same one that inspired Martin Luther to take his legendary stand on the issue of justification*: has "The Church" gotten this one wrong?* And the second question is simply this: *does it matter?* Put differently, assuming there are problems with the Trinity, do they warrant questioning a doctrine that has served the church for almost 2,000 years?

My fervent belief is that the answer to both questions is "yes," a conclusion I reached more than twenty years ago and have been trying to repudiate ever since. The irony is that in my ongoing efforts to personally exonerate the doctrine of the Trinity, I have actually become more convinced of its flaws as well as their severity. This assessment neither presumes that I have considered all the evidence, nor does it reflect some self-assured notion

that I am incapable of reaching a faulty conclusion myself; to the contrary, I continue to assume precisely the opposite on both counts.

And so, in the spirit of Martin Luther's *Theses*, I put forth the following points for consideration:

- The doctrine of the Trinity is an analytical framework extrapolated *from* Scripture rather than a restatement of Scripture. Thus its validity is ultimately dependent upon the soundness of its core premises as well as the logical arguments used to substantiate its conclusions.
- The Trinity is a synthesis of Christian doctrine and concepts borrowed from Greek philosophical and religious systems, making it an *extra-Biblical* framework…by default.
- The Trinity is a doctrine that was gradually forged over a period of more than 300 years.
- While most Christians will readily proclaim that the doctrine of the Trinity is central to the Christian faith, they struggle to both comprehend and explain it.
- Any errant notions that we bring to Scripture will inevitably obscure its message and subsequently diminish our capacity to hear God's voice as He speaks to us through His Word; truth, on the other hand, is what equips us with eyes to see and ears to hear.

The problem is that if the Trinity is indeed flawed, then a doctrine that is meant to illuminate our understanding of Scripture is actually distorting it and thereby impeding our ability to comprehend it. Perhaps more importantly, it presents an artificial, unnecessary barrier to non-Christians who may be disinclined to even consider the Christ of Christianity because of it. Think about it this way: how many people reject Christianity not because of what the Bible *actually* says; rather, they reject Christianity because of what Christians *say* that the Bible says?

As Paul points out in his letters, the essence of the Gospel is already "foolishness" and a "stumbling block" to non-Christians. Therefore, if the doctrine of the Trinity is true, then the fact that it creates additional problems for countless millions is an unfortunate but necessary

consequence of faithfully proclaiming God's Word. If, on the other hand, the doctrine is flawed, are we not adding offense by insisting upon a "truth" that is actually a product of our own ingenuity?

Here's the crux of the issue: the doctrine of the Trinity took more than three centuries to fully develop and articulate, and yet it is counted as one of the core doctrines of Christianity. In fact, some would even go so far as to call it Christianity's *defining* doctrine! It has been put on par with the incarnation, the atonement, and the resurrection – essential doctrines which are explicitly found in Scripture – and subsequently become the litmus test for Christian orthodoxy. So given its significance, my contention is twofold:

- Anything deemed to be so central to Christian belief and thought had better be virtually indisputable.
- While Scripture is infallible, our apprehension of it is not; consequently, any doctrinal framework like the Trinity should not be above reproach just because it has been declared sacrosanct by the church for centuries.

Which brings me to the third and final question that has compelled me along my journey: *what if there is a better answer?* Granted, this question may reflect my personal desire more than actual possibility, since it very well may be the case that the Trinity is the best explanation we can hope for. After all, when you consider the scores of brilliant theologians who have wrestled with this doctrine over the centuries it seems presumptuous and even downright arrogant to question it anew. Nevertheless, it has become my settled conviction that not only can we do better, but indeed that we must.

Just the Facts…
To be clear, there must be something about this three-fold aspect of God that is important for us to grasp, otherwise it wouldn't feature so prominently in the pages of the New Testament. Thus the real issue isn't whether there is any merit to the notion of God's "threeness" *per se*; rather, what is the three-fold designation of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" really trying to tell us? Unfortunately, the answer to that question is more

complicated than you might think, if for no other reason than the doctrine of the Trinity has become virtually self-fulfilling.

The problem is that once we assume that God's "three-person nature" is established truth, we tend to find "proof" of it everywhere we look. Quite frankly, we have been thoroughly conditioned to see the Trinity in verses where it may not be at all, not only misinterpreting those verses in light of the Trinity, but also counting them as further evidence that the Trinity is indeed true! It's the trap of circular reasoning, whereby the conclusion we should be trying to prove actually becomes the assumption that we start with. And once that happens, it can seem as if proof of the Trinity is everywhere.

So in spite of our biases, in the pages that follow we will attempt to discern the truth behind God's "triune" designation as we examine the testimony of several key "witnesses." Each one will be called upon to present the facts of the case, so to speak, and the decision on whether or not those facts support the historic view of the Trinity will be up to you, the jury. These witnesses include:

- Intertestamental Secular History
  This may seem like an odd witness to rely upon when it comes to theological matters, but the Bible is nothing if not a historical record. Both Old and New Testaments give us insights into the events of history from God's perspective, which is clearly the one that matters, but there is a 400-year gap between Malachi and Matthew where the Bible is silent. So even though you may be predisposed to question the reliability of this witness, it is the best one that we have available for understanding critical events that shaped the ancient world and set the stage for the arrival of Jesus.

- Church History
  Similar to the secular history that precedes the New Testament, this witness will give us key insights into the things that happened after the close of the New Testament. In particular, we will focus on some of the infamous heresies that galvanized the early Church and

discover how they shaped and guided the development of the Trinity during Christianity's first four centuries.

- Scripture
  This may seem like an obvious choice, but it is perhaps the most challenging witness to depose. The difficulty lies not with the trustworthiness of Scripture itself, but in separating what we *believe* Scripture says from what it *actually* says. Because due to our tacit acceptance of the Trinity, it is virtually impossible to see anything else when we open the pages of the Bible.

In the end, each witness will provide various pieces to the puzzle that is "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," and our task will be to put them together – without forcing them – and assess the resulting picture. Will it clearly reveal the dogma that has been proclaimed for almost two millennia? Not only do I believe that you will find more than reasonable doubt, but that you'll actually perceive a different picture than the one on the outside of the box…so to speak. The verdict, however, will be up to you.

So I'll ask again: *does it matter?* Is it worth rocking the boat? Does prudence dictate that I personally shelve this doctrine along with eschatology, baptism, and a host of other doctrines that – while important – are nonetheless secondary matters? Or, do the ripple effects of this fundamental doctrine justify…indeed, demand…pressing on?

Were it not for the lessons from Luther's famous stand I would likely be content to keep all of these musings to myself or the occasional intramural debate. But similar to Luther's convictions regarding the issue of justification, I am persuaded that the doctrine of the Trinity is inherently flawed and that its shortcomings are too important to simply ignore. As such, it's time to bring the Trinity into the light.

I hope and pray that I'm right.

A Synthetic Doctrine

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
Matthew 28:19

The doctrine of the Trinity dates back to the earliest days of Christianity, yet it remains something that most Christians struggle to comprehend. They know it involves the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that conceptually they are somehow "3 in 1," but most are hard-pressed to explain how it works in practice. In fact, the vast majority of Christians tend to rely upon illustrations and analogies that actually reflect heretical ideas which have been condemned for centuries!

This is not terribly surprising, since our finite minds cannot grasp infinity in general, let alone an infinite being. Theologians refer to this dilemma as God's incomprehensibility, which alludes to the fact that human beings are fundamentally incapable of knowing anything about God exhaustively. Indeed, even on our best day we are barely able to scratch the surface:

> As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.
> *Isaiah 55:9*

> Who can fathom the Spirit of the LORD, or instruct the LORD as his counselor?
> *Isaiah 40:13*

Any attempt to capture the essence of God is therefore destined to fall short, and even the language that we use to describe Him will be inadequate at best. That does not mean, however, that we can know nothing about God. To the contrary, God has revealed many things about Himself through His Word, and as we bring them all together we start to get a glimpse of Him in all of His glory.

Thus when it comes to understanding any aspect of God, including the meaning of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," it is important to remember that

any exposition of God's nature is inherently limited. Like any doctrine that deals with the attributes of God, there will necessarily be dimensions of His "threeness" that we can never expect to fathom…and it is entirely unreasonable to assume otherwise. Our goal, then, should be to articulate a framework that deepens our understanding of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" without overstepping into blatant speculation or error.

I guess you could say that we want the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth…so help us God.

The Tri-Unity of God
First and foremost, it is important to recognize that the phrase "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" is ***not*** the Trinity. This statement might initially strike you as dubious or even contradictory, but the word "Trinity" never even appears in Scripture. In fact, it is more than 100 years after the close of the New Testament before the word "Trinity" becomes part of Christian parlance! So although Jesus clearly speaks about God in terms of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit," not only does Scripture never refer to this (or anything else) as the Trinity, but neither does it precisely explain what Jesus means.

Accordingly, whatever the meaning of "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" may be, we need to remember that this phrase is calling attention to a particular truth about God in the same way that the Scriptures also declare that He is "Holy" or "Almighty." The problem is that whereas we have some innate comprehension of "Holy" and "Almighty," which thereby helps us understand these specific characteristics of God, when it comes to "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" the answer is not so obvious. Thus enters the Trinity, the doctrine which purports to illuminate and explain what Jesus actually *meant* by "Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

As such, in the Trinity we find an exposition of the "tri-unity" of God. It's one of His many attributes that sits alongside of and complements His omniscience, His sovereignty, and His holiness – just to name a few – giving us additional insights into His nature, His character, and His uniqueness. Far from being "just another attribute," though, the Trinity is arguably ***the*** doctrine that has come to set Christianity apart from all other religions, Judaism and Islam in particular. Indeed, no other doctrine has been so

vigorously debated or defended throughout church history, because ultimately the Trinity wrestles with **the** question: *"Who is Jesus?"*

Answering this question is a monumental undertaking because you cannot answer it without first addressing its predecessor: *"Who is God?"* The two questions are inextricably linked, and on account of God's incomprehensibility we will never be able to fully answer either one. Hence the best we can hope for is a satisfactory answer that stays true to Scripture without delving into nebulous areas where Scripture has remained silent.

In light of this caveat, you could say that tackling this question is the theological equivalent of climbing Mount Everest: it is possible to get to the summit, but even the slightest misstep along the way could lead to disaster. So in the same manner that Sherpas guide climbers safely to the top of Everest, the Trinity attempts to guide us in our understanding of God by establishing boundaries. These boundaries are based upon the nature of the relationships within the "Godhead" – between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and help us to evaluate whether a given proposition about God is "safe" or "dangerous." It is a relational doctrine built upon three primary declarations:

- There is one and only one God
- God has eternally existed as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
- All three persons are equal members within the singular "Godhead," not three individual gods

Figure 1 – A basic view of the Trinity

From this basic foundation, the Trinity goes on to make the following assertions about the relationships between the members of this triune Godhead:

- When we say that God exists in three **distinct** persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it means that each member of the "Godhead" has His own identity that does not overlap or mix with the other members. Specifically:

    - The Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit
    - The Son is not the Father or the Holy Spirit
    - The Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son

- Since all three persons are God, there is complete equality amongst the members of the Trinity. In practical terms this means that they are:

    - Co-existent – One did not create the others
    - Co-eternal – One did not precede the others
    - Co-equal – Each Divine Person is the same in divinity, power, majesty, etc. as the others

    In other words, not only is there no sense of hierarchy within the "Godhead," but the attributes of One member are completely and fully shared by the others.

- There is one and only one God
- God has eternally existed as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit
  - Father is not the Son or the Spirit
  - Son is not the Father or the Spirit
  - Spirit is neither Father nor Son
- All three persons are equal members within the singular Godhead, not three individual gods
  - No sense of hierarchy: F/S/HS are co-equal, co-eternal, co-existent...
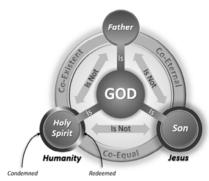 - Any attribute of One is an attribute of All

Figure 2 – The essence of the Trinity

This is the Trinity in a nutshell, and technically speaking Jesus isn't part of the picture; that being said, you can't talk about the Son without implicitly acknowledging His connection to Jesus. The Son is the "second person of the Godhead," also referred to as the "pre-existent Christ" or the "pre-incarnate Christ," such that when we speak about the person of Jesus as being "fully God and fully man," it is Jesus' singular relationship with the Son that makes up the "fully God" part of that description. In practical terms, Jesus is simultaneously one of "us" and one of "Them," thus answering the question of why we believe Him to be fully man and fully God…and therefore worthy of worship.

Consequently, any discussion about Jesus necessarily brings the doctrine of the Trinity to the forefront, thereby ensuring that any statement about Jesus – and God the Son by association – stays "within bounds." The Trinity is therefore fundamental to our understanding of Him as the Son of God and Son of Man; conversely, though, to the extent that the Trinity is off the mark, our perception of Jesus will be wrong as well.

And finally, when it comes to the Holy Spirit, the Trinity recognizes that this "third person of the Godhead" is the rest of humanity's connection back to God. For whereas the Son's unique union with Jesus is what makes redemption and our salvation possible, it is the role of the Spirit to convict every other person of their sin even as He works in the hearts of believers to sanctify them and transform them into the likeness of Christ. Adding this

context to the previous diagram results in the following "big picture" view of the Trinity:

Figure 3 – The Trinity and its relationship to humanity

A Tenuous Foundation

When we consider the doctrine of the Trinity in comparison to God's other attributes, its relative complexity is striking. To use an analogy from mathematics, most of God's attributes read like axioms – statements of fact – whereas the Trinity resembles a proof with lots of corollaries. In other words, virtually all of God's attributes express singular ideas that are taken directly from the pages of Scripture. For example:

Attribute	Definition	Why do we believe it?
Omnipotence	God has the power to do whatever He pleases	There are literally hundreds of verses that proclaim God's awesome power, some by example (Genesis 18:14) and others simply as a statement of fact. Indeed, the word omnipotence literally means "all power," and Scripture refers to God as "Almighty" more than 300 times alone!
Sovereignty	Not only can God	Again, there are almost 300

	do whatever He wants, but since He has no equal nothing has the ability to thwart Him	individual references to God as "Sovereign," and these verses do not include the dozens of others that illustrate what His sovereignty entails. (e.g. Isaiah 55:11)
Holiness	God is set apart from all other beings because He is perfectly pure in character and being	Over 500 individual references to a "Holy" God or the holiness of God. (Exodus 15:11, Isaiah 6:3)

Whereas most of God's many attributes follow this pattern, the doctrine of the Trinity is essentially a logical construct that builds upon its core premises. As such, the assertions about co-eternality, co-equality, etc. do not stand alone, but are deductions and inferences that elaborate on and necessarily follow from the Trinity's three foundational statements.

Granted, the concept of God's "threeness" is so foreign to our thinking that we might expect it to require more than a sentence to capture its essence; nevertheless, the deductive nature of the Trinity introduces two potential problems that we don't have to deal with when compared to God's other attributes:

▪ The validity of the doctrine is no longer a function of Scripture alone, but it now relies on logic and reasoning to arrive at its conclusions. To the extent that errors in reasoning are made, then the conclusions would likewise be erroneous. Consider this example:

- When it rains, things get wet.
- The sidewalk is wet.
- Conclusion: It just rained.

This is an example of flawed reasoning, because it doesn't allow for the possibility that there are other ways the sidewalk could have gotten wet. In this case, the neighbor's sprinkler is the culprit.

▪ Like any form of deductive reasoning, conclusions can be false even if they are logically correct. In other words, if any of the underlying propositions are themselves false, the conclusion falls apart:

  • John is a man
  • Men love sports
  • Conclusion: John loves sports

In this case, the conclusion is logically correct in spite of the fact that John actually hates sports. The issue is the flaw in the second premise: it implies that **_all_** men love sports when clearly this is not always the case.

Consequently, when it comes to the Trinity we have to guard against both faulty logic as well as invalid premises. The good news is that after 2,000 years of scrutiny and reflection, I think it is safe to say that any glaring errors in reasoning have probably been identified and addressed. Furthermore, when it comes to the first premise that there is only one God, to dispute its validity is to reject Scripture. This truth is most notably proclaimed in the book of Deuteronomy, and it echoes throughout the Psalms, the prophets, and the pages of the New Testament.

Hear, O Israel, the LORD your God, the LORD is one.
Deuteronomy 6:4

Where things start to get murky is when you introduce the concept that within God there are three distinct "persons." Just to be clear, the New Testament is replete with references to God as Father, Son, and Spirit; however, a direct statement that these represent three "persons" within a "Godhead" simply doesn't exist. This comes as a surprise to many Christians, who tacitly assume that something so central to our faith must be clearly stated in the Bible. In reality, though, nowhere does Scripture

explicitly say that each of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct "persons"…it simply associates all of them with God.

Some may cite 1 John 5:6-8 as evidence to the contrary, which states:

> [6] This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that bear witness, because the Spirit is truth. [7] For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. [8] And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.
> *1 John 5:6-8 (KJV)*

Verse 7 is the one place in all of Scripture that comes closest to declaring the "tri-person" nature of God, but even then the notion of multiple persons is merely implied and still has to be read *into* the text. Even more disconcerting, though, is that many versions of the Bible render the passage like this:

> [6] This is the one who came by water and blood – Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. [7] For there are three that testify: [8] the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.
> *1 John 5:6-8 (NIV)*

Look at the differences between verses 7 and 8: the second half of verse 7 is completely missing in the NIV, as is the distinction between whether the three are in Heaven or on earth. If the former passage from the King James Version is correct, then at least we have a verse that *approximates* a key tenet of the Trinity. If, however, the second passage is correct, then the number of times that Scripture even **alludes** to the "tri-person" nature of God drops from one to zero.

Let that sink in for a moment. Whereas other core tenets of Christianity are clearly stated and can be found cover-to-cover in the pages of Scripture, the

number of verses that even *suggest* an essential aspect of the Trinitarian formula is at most one…and potentially zero.

Now I'm sure that many who are reading this will be quick to object that even without this verse there are multiple places in Scripture that hint at the reality of God's triune nature, but hints can be misconstrued…especially if you are already biased to look for them. The critical point is that when you attempt to correlate specific verses of Scripture to the notion of God being three "persons" in a singular "Godhead," the silence is deafening. Especially when you consider that almost every other attribute of God is articulated *hundreds* of times!

Again, I'm not really interested in passages that "hint" at the Trinity, I want to see – and expect to see – verses that plainly and unambiguously demonstrate where the core premises of the doctrine have come from. That is clearly the case for other doctrines like the atonement, the resurrection, and the incarnation, but when it comes to the "three in one" there is only one verse. Not that a single verse wouldn't suffice, but now even that one verse is suspect.

This dilemma raises some critical questions: why are there two translations? Furthermore, which one is correct? Given the unique role of verse 7 as it relates to declaring the core tenet of the doctrine, the answer to these questions could literally make or break the case for the Trinity. And as it turns out, we don't have to look far to find the answers.

A Questionable Source
If you are not familiar with the term "Christian apologetics," it refers to the discipline of addressing and refuting the claims of Christianity's detractors and skeptics. One particular branch of apologetics is concerned with establishing the integrity of the Bible, specifically with respect to demonstrating that the content of the Bible has not been altered over time. And given that the Bible has been passed down to us over a period of roughly 4,000 years, it certainly seems like a valid concern!

Think about some of the problems that arise if you cannot show that the Bible has remained the same since it was first written down:

- Which parts of the Bible – if any – are authentic?
- Which teaching is actually from Jesus, which parts have been "tacked on"?
- Which doctrines can we believe?
- Are we missing key parts of the text?
- Have "uncomfortable" parts of the Bible been removed by later revisionists?

Without some way to demonstrate that we can trust the content of the Bible there would be little reason to consider it authoritative or inspired. Every verse could be questioned, making it impossible to rely upon it as God's Word.

Fortunately (or more accurately, Providentially), very ancient texts have been discovered which substantiate the integrity of both the Old and New Testaments. When it comes to the New Testament in particular, not only do we have thousands of manuscript copies that date back to the 1st and 2nd centuries, but the passages of the New Testament were so extensively quoted by early church leaders that we could virtually reconstruct it in its entirety from their writings alone! And what does all of this evidence reveal?

When you analyze the 5,000+ manuscript copies for accuracy, they are 99.5% identical. The differences are typically due to punctuation, misspellings, etc., but even the smallest differences are easy to spot since we have so many copies that agree. In short, there is little doubt that today's New Testament contains the same words that the Church has had for almost two millennia, demonstrating that the Bible has been faithfully preserved and transmitted from one generation to the next.

That being said, there are a few passages in some of the later manuscripts that do not appear in the earlier ones. For instance, the story in John 7:53-8:11 of the woman caught in adultery does not appear in the very earliest manuscripts. Most modern translations call attention to this fact, but

include the story anyway because it adds no "new information" regarding the essence of the Gospel and it certainly doesn't present any contradictions. In similar fashion, additional details in Mark 16:9-20 about what happened after Jesus' resurrection were most likely added to the original manuscripts, but they also echo and reinforce information already stated in the other Gospel accounts.

Then you have 1 John 5:7. Like the other passages in the New Testament that have been added to the original manuscripts, the versions that actually include the phrase in question – "in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one" – typically call attention to the fact that it is not found in the earliest copies of 1 John. In fact, the first time where we see this phrase appear is in the Vulgate, a Latin translation of the Bible that was undertaken towards the end of the 4th century.

So here's the key question: *does the additional phrase include anything of consequence?* If Scripture contained other unequivocal statements that spelled out the notion of "three persons" within the "Godhead" then there would be no harm in including it. But as we have seen, this verse stands alone in declaring that the "three" are somehow "one." It is the lone voice within the New Testament…and it is clearly not John's.

This is problematic because when church councils decided whether or not to officially recognize a book as part of the New Testament, one of the key criteria was that it had been written by a contemporary of Jesus. This limited the list of potential authors to those living at the time of Christ, and as such would clearly disqualify whoever chose to add this phrase to 1 John. Indeed, shouldn't this alteration to 1 John be excluded by definition, even as a footnote?

Reasonable Doubt?
In the final analysis, the basic premise of God's "tri-personness" may still be valid, it just isn't explicitly stated in the Bible. This distinction sets the Trinity in stark opposition to other essential Christian doctrines that are drawn directly from Scripture, for not only is the entirety of the Trinity a logical argument, but one of its essential premises is also the product of interpretation!

Consequently, we are forced to admit that since the premise of God being "3 in 1" is based upon our interpretation rather than a restatement of Scripture, its validity is therefore contingent upon our ability to properly interpret God's Word. This dependency is something that should be neither dismissed nor ignored, because even though His Word cannot err, the same cannot be said of us.

Consider the implications of this caveat by contrasting God's "threeness" to His Holiness. While we are incapable of plumbing the depths of either attribute, the hundreds of verses that testify to the reality of God's Holiness leave no doubt that it is true. By comparison, the concept of God's "triune nature" is not only difficult to understand, but is also potentially erroneous. It reflects what we believe Scripture reveals about God rather than what Scripture says all on its own, a disparity that raises some serious concerns regarding the authoritative, dogmatic way in which the Trinity has historically been applied:

- In light of the fact that this doctrine has no direct Scriptural foundation, how can it legitimately be used as the litmus test of orthodoxy?
- Why does it deserve to be accorded any more weight than views of eschatology…which are also interpretive frameworks based upon Scripture?

To paraphrase Jesus' rebuke of the Pharisees, how can something deemed to be so central to the Christian faith be based upon "what has been said" and not upon "what is written" in Scripture? He rightly castigated them for elevating their traditions and their rules above Scripture, because although their motives were originally well-intentioned, they actually ended up nullifying the very Scriptures they were supposedly trying to uphold:
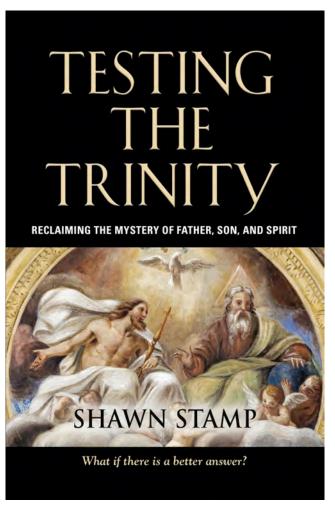
> He was also saying to them, "You are experts at setting aside the commandment of God in order to keep your tradition. For Moses said, 'Honor your father and your mother'; and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother, is to be put to death'; but you say, 'If a man says to his father or his mother, whatever I have that would help you is Corban (that is to say, given to God),' you no longer permit him to do

anything for his father or his mother; thus invalidating the word of God by your tradition which you have handed down; and you do many things such as that."
Mark 7:9-13

Rather than humbly acknowledging their error, though, the Pharisees became stubborn and indignant. They dug in their heels, clung to their traditions, and chose to remain in darkness. And in the process, they missed the Son of God.

We would be wise to learn from their mistake.

Do you understand the Trinity? Could you explain it to others? Did you know that it's nowhere to be found in the Bible? If you are looking for answers, "Testing the Trinity" offers a Scriptural alternative to this confusing, extra-Biblical dogma.

Testing the Trinity: Reclaiming the Mystery of Father, Son, and Spirit

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