

The Trinity in Johannine Literature

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Good Work

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"The Trinity is one of those parts of our faith that escape reasons' grasp"(Hamm 1). It is a concept that is difficult to understand and to people who have not studied the subject, it may seem that it is something that is left out of scripture. While the concept of the Trinity may be one of the biggest mysteries of the Bible, it is true that the Bible is clear that God is three in one: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. The three parts are separate personalities. And yet together, they form one being: God (McAllister 1). The Trinity is something that we can miss if we don't dig deeper into scripture. When we do this, we find that there is very much Biblical evidence for the Trinity.

Beliefs against the Trinity

Even though the Trinity is taught in the Bible, it is also true that the doctrine of the Trinity has been at the heart of much controversy (Tenney 822). The Christian belief of the Godhead including that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost are to be worshipped-was officially stated at the first great council of the Church Nicaea in A.D. 325 (Rawlinson 159). It seems that this statement was needed because the church fathers wanted to make this doctrine clear. They may have done this because of different opinions surrounding the Trinity during this time.

There is evidence in abundance that when this creed was made and even before that there were many influences at work in the non-Christian and pre-Christian Graeco-Roman world. If contemporary thought at the time would have been allowed to influence Christianity, it would have produced a doctrine of two persons in the Godhead. This idea has been given the name, with some hesitation, binitarianism (Rawlinson 162).

Another view that appeared in the early days of Christianity is stoicism. The early church sometimes supported the teaching of one God because of this influence. Stoicism is a philosophy heavily influenced by Platonism (Rusch 2). They divided their philosophy into logic, physics, and ethics (Tenney 518). Stoics distinguished between Logos *endiathetos* (the immanent Word) and the Logos *Logos prophorikos* (the expressed Word) (Rusch 4). Stoics were an early group that formed after Christ, that are today considered heretics. Another group that had different teachings than the Trinity in the early years of the Church were the Gnostics. Many of the Gnostics tried to distinguish the Christ from above and the Jesus from below (Slusser 470). Some Gnostics rejected the idea of incarnation all together. They believed that Christ was just an appearance of God in human form (Tenney 737).

Early Christians also faced the false conception that they were polytheistic. This came from the belief that they were worshipping a God that has three persons (Anderson). While we know that Christians are clear that we worship just one God, this false conception is something that can still exist today. It is possible for someone to hear that we believe in a God made up of three persons and think that we worship three Gods.

The Trinity in Johannine Theology

Throughout the New Testament, the Trinity is seen in underlining points. Although we never see the word "Trinity" in the Bible, when we study Scripture we see the Trinity laid out. This is no different in the books written by John. We do not see any single passage or verse that gives a clear and precise definition or proof of the Trinity, but when we study Johannine theology, we find that the Trinity is certainly presented by John. The best way to prove the Trinity in Johannine literature, like in the rest of

Scripture, is to discover how John proves that all three members of the Godhead are God. John shows sometimes more clearly than others that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all indeed God. In the following part of this paper I will attempt to discuss where and how John portrays the Trinity.

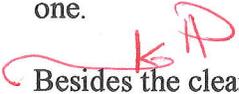
Deity of Jesus

The first thing that we see is that Jesus is God. There are several passages where John makes this very clear. The first verse is John 1:1 where it says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (NIV). The word used here is *logos*, which is the name given to Him who later became "flesh" or was incarnate, in John 1:14. The statement that He became flesh shows us that this is the Messiah. Therefore, whatever is meant in this verse is applicable to Jesus Christ (Barnes). We see the final part of this verse says, that the "Word was God." Therefore, we see that Jesus is God because of the application we can make of this verse to Jesus. In Adam Clarke's commentary he says of this verse, "[And the Word was God.] Or, God (Deity), *theos*, was the Logos: therefore no subordinate being, no second to the Most High, but the supreme eternal Yahweh (Clarke). This verse is a clear indicator that Jesus Christ is God. In this verse and the passage surrounding it, it seems cut and dry that Jesus is God.

The second verse that shows with some clarity that Jesus is God is John 10:30. This verse says, "I and the Father are one" (NIV). This is a second verse that shows Jesus as one with God the Father. The Life Application Study Bible, says of this verse, "This is the clearest statement of Jesus' divinity he ever made." While John 1:1 is maybe the clearest verse on the deity of Christ, John 10:30 is also compelling and is straight from the mouth of Jesus. Clarke in his commentary, says of this verse:

"If Jesus Christ were not God, could he have said these words without being guilty of blasphemy? It is worthy of remark that Christ does not say, I and MY Father, which by our translation very improperly supplies, and which in this place would have conveyed a widely different meaning: for then it would imply that the human nature of Christ, of which alone, I conceive, God is ever said to be the Father in Scripture, was equal to the Most High: but he says, speaking then as God over all, I and THE Father, *egoo kai pateer hen esmen* -the Creator of all things, the Judge of all men, the Father of the spirits of all flesh-are ONE, ONE in nature, ONE in all the attributes of Godhead, and ONE in all the operations of those attributes: and so it is evident the Jews understood him. See John 17:11,22" (Clarke).

The third time we see the Trinity in a clear manner in Johannine literature is in John 17:22. This verse says, "I have given them the glory that you gave me that they may be one *as we are one*" (NIV italics added). This verse again tells us that the Father and the Son are one. It doesn't say that they think alike or do things alike, but simply that they are one.

 Besides the clear statements showing that Jesus is indeed God, there are also many other ways that Jesus' deity is seen in Johannine literature. The verse that we discussed in the last chapter, John 17:22 is in the midst of a passage that shows Christ's deity by showing that the Father and the Son are in each other. John 17:20-23 says, "20 My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me" (NIV). In his commentary Matthew Henry says of this passage, "It is taken for granted that the Father and Son are one, one in nature and essence, equal in power and glory, one in mutual endearments" (Henry).

We also see this idea of them being in each other in other passages. John 14:8-11 says, "8 Philip said, "Lord, show us the Father and that will be enough for us." 9 Jesus

answered: "Don't you know me, Philip, even after I have been among you such a long time? Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'?" ¹⁰ Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me? The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, living in me, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (NIV). We again read in John 14:20, "On that day you will realize that *I am in my Father*, and you are in me, and I am in you" (NIV italics added).

When quoting verses, you do not put the verse number inside the quote.

Millard J. Erickson, Distinguished professor of Theology at Baylor University's Truett Seminary, says of the idea of the three members of the Trinity being in each other, including Jesus in the Father and the Father in Jesus:

"It is more the idea of union than simplicity or singularity. We are thinking here of a union in which the three are so closely linked with one another that the life of each flows through the others as well. Each has immediate access to the consciousness and experiences of the others. This means that each is dependent of the others for his own life and for his being deity. It would not be possible for one of the members of the Trinity to cease to be, or to separate from the Godhead, and the other two to continue in existence as God"(Erickson 62).

Besides these three ideas that John gives us, that allows us to see the Trinity, ~~in his literature~~, there are also several other ways that we see the deity of Jesus in his literature. These ideas are not as clear and straightforward, but they show, sometimes indirectly, that Jesus is indeed God.

The first of these is seen in that Jesus was with God before He came to earth. There are several places where we see this in John's ⁶ gospel. The first of these verses comes very early in John 1:2. It says, "He was with God in the beginning" (NIV). In John 8:42 we read, "Jesus said to them, "If God were your Father, you would love me, *for I*

came from God and now am here. I have not come on my own; but he sent me" (NIV Italics added). In John 6:46 we read that Jesus "comes from God". Also, in John 6:62 it talks about people seeing the Son of Man ascend to where he was before, showing that He came from somewhere other than just this world and from the previous verses we know that He came from God.

Another way that we find the deity of Christ laid out in Johannine literature is in the idea that Jesus is equal with God. In John 5:18 it says, "For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself *equal with God*" (NIV italics added). In this verse we see that Jesus was claiming that he was indeed God. Jesus was calling God His own Father, making himself equal with God (McDowell & Stewart 72).

We see the fact of Jesus being equal with God in other ways in John's literature. First, Jesus and the Father do the same things. In John 5:19 it says, "Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because *whatever the Father does the Son also does*" (NIV italics added). Having already claimed equality with God in nature, Jesus now claims equality with God in His will. Jesus has His own will, but He is so fully in accord with the will of God that it is impossible for Him to act independently of the Father (Lovett 87). Jesus says in this verse that He does whatever the Father does. "Its like a closed circuit TV arrangement," says C.S. Lovett, an editor of the Amplified New Testament and author of many books. He goes on to say, "The thoughts of the Father are displayed on the mind of the Son... it is exactly as though the Father Himself were on earth doing this" (Lovett 87). Secondly we see the equality of Jesus with the Father in the fact that scripture tells us if

we know Jesus we know God. John 14:7 says, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him" (NIV). Jesus is not only the way to God (v 5) He is also the truth of God since he is the idealization of God's self-revelation (Bruce 299).

We also see their equality in that they both have life in themselves. John 5:26 says, "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself" (NIV). F.F. Bruce, professor, author and editor of the New International Commentary on the New Testament says of this verse:

"Human beings, in common with all other living things, do not possess life-in-themselves; their life is derived from God, the source and stay of all life. To the Son alone, begotten, but not created, has the Father imparted His own prerogative to have life-in-himself... Nor is the Father's bestowal of life-in-himself on the Son something which began with his ministry on earth, or with the Incarnation; it is an eternal act, part and parcel of the unique Father-Son relationship which existed already 'in the beginning'" (Bruce 132)

Another way we find the deity of Christ in Johannine literature is that Jesus had godly responsibility. We see in several passages that Jesus is the creator. In John 1:3 we read, "Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made" (NIV). We see also that Jesus is the creator in verse 1:18 where it tells us that "...the world was made through him" (NIV). Again, we see that Jesus is the creator by His ability to bring people to life, such as in John 11:1-12 where he brings Lazarus back from the dead. When we couple the fact that the book of John shows us that Jesus is the creator with the Genesis 1:1 where it tells us, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth," we can't help but see that Jesus Himself must be God.

The next evidence of the deity of Christ in Johannine literature is seen in the truth that Jesus and the Father are in each other. John 10:38 says, "But if I do it, even though you do not believe me, believe the miracles, that you may know and understand that the *Father is in me, and I in the Father*" (NIV italics added). Again in John 14:10,11 it

says,"¹⁰ Don't you believe that *I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?* The words I say to you are not just my own. Rather, it is the Father, *living in me*, who is doing his work. ¹¹ Believe me when I say that *I am in the Father and the Father is in me*; or at least believe on the evidence of the miracles themselves" (NIV italics added). And furthermore we read, "On that day you will realize *that I am in my Father*, and you are in me, and I am in you" (NIV italics added). We can also read this point in John 17:21-23. Because of the miracles and works of Jesus, he has opened the way for what he says in the main clause in His last inviting word to the Jews he is speaking to in John 10:38. Faith in His works was the way for them to realize that Jesus and His Father are perfect in unity (Ridderbos 377).

We also see Jesus claim to be deity by Him saying, "I Am." In John 8:28 it says, "So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am [the one I claim to be] and that I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me" (NIV). Again in John 8:58 it says, "I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am!" (NIV) This statement is not that Jesus came into being before Abraham, but it is a statement that is saying he never came into existence at all. He existed before creation (Jamieson & Fausset & Brown). There is a remarkable resemblance between Jesus statement here and the name that denoted God in Exodus 3:14. Albert Barnes says of it, "The manner in which Jesus used it would strikingly suggest the application of the same language to God" (Barnes). To the Jews this sounded blasphemous (Wycliffe).

The final way that we see the deity of Jesus illustrated in Johannine literature is that Jesus accepts worship. This is very clear in John 20:28. After Thomas had doubted

Jesus' resurrection and Jesus had appeared to Him, Thomas said to Him, "My Lord and my God" (NIV). Josh McDowell in his book, More Than a Carpenter, says, "Jesus accepted Thomas's acknowledgement of him as God. Jesus rebuked Thomas for his unbelief, but not for his worship" (McDowell 14). In the highly monotheistic society that Jesus lived, his accepting of worship would have been major blasphemy. His disciples did not waver because of this and we must say in McDowell's words that either Jesus was "Lord, a lunatic, or a liar" (McDowell 25).

The deity of the Holy Spirit

In Johannine literature we find the doctrine of the Holy Spirit being part of the Godhead is proved by His responsibilities. Through the things John tells us that the Holy Spirit does, we see that He is indeed God.

The first thing that we see the Holy Spirit doing is working regeneration. John 3:5-8 tells us, "5 Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. 6 Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. 7 You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' 8 The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit" (NIV). Jesus makes it clear in these verses that all three persons of the Trinity are working as one to redeem the lost. It is not just the Father and the Son, but it is also the Holy Spirit (Gruenler 32).

The second thing that the Holy Spirit does that proves His deity is that he guides us in truth. In John the Spirit of truth promised is also called "paraclete," which means advocate or counselor. The Spirit effects the life of the disciples like Jesus did in His

earthly ministry, guiding them into the truth among other things (God For Us 2). John 16:13 says, "But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come" (NIV). Lovett says of this verse, "There is but one voice and mind in the Godhead, thus no member of the Trinity can act independently" (Lovett 2:62). 1 John 5:6 goes even further, telling us that "...the Spirit is the truth" (NIV). Jesus tells us earlier in the gospel of John that He is "...the way, and *the truth* and the life" (John 14:6 italics added). Thus we see that Jesus is the truth and that the Holy Spirit leads us in truth. This shows a connection.

Thirdly, we see the deity of the Holy Spirit in that all three persons of the Trinity are involved in loving, including the Holy Spirit. 1 John 4:12 it says, "12 No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us (NIV). James Montgomery Boice, pastor of Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia and heard weekly on the Bible Study Hour, founded by the late Donald Grey Barnhouse, says of 1 John 4:7-12:

John links love to the nature of God in a very subtle way in these verses and this should not be missed. It is seen in the fact that each of these statements regarding love and our need to love is linked to one of the persons of the Trinity, so that the entire Trinity is involved. In verses 7 and 8 the reference is to God the Father...In verses 9-11 the reference is primarily to God the Son. God loves us so much that he died for us, and therefore we should love one another. Finally, in verse 12, in the phrase "God lives in us," the reference is to God the Holy Spirit; and again the conclusion is the same: love one another. In other words, God the Father is love, God the Son is love, God the Spirit is love" (Boice 141).

Deity of the Father

Seeing that Jesus the Son is God and that the Holy Spirit is God, leaves us with God the Father. In John's writings it seems that that the Father is the person of the Trinity that the Jewish people had clearly seen as God. It appears that the people of the day

understood that the Father was God. There are some verses in John that show that the Father is indeed God.

John 4:21 states, "Jesus declared, "Believe me, woman, a time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem" (NIV). In this verse we see that Jesus tells the woman that God will receive worship. Worship is something that God alone should experience. This especially proves the Father's deity because of the fact that the Jewish people were extremely monotheistic. The Old Testament had made it clear to the Jewish people that they should not have or worship any God but Him, their God. In John 4:23 we again see that the Father will receive worship. It says, "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks" (John 4:23).

Along with the fact that Jesus tells us that the Father will receive worship, we also see Jesus call the Father God. In John 6:27 it says, "Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life, which the Son of Man will give you. On him *God the Father* has placed his seal of approval" (NIV). Also, in John 8:41 the Jewish people of Jesus time say, "...the only Father we have is God himself" (NIV). The Jews are saying that they truly have God for their Father (Wycliffe). This verse shows the Jewish people calling God the Father. Jesus throughout John refers to the Father and therefore, we can come to the conclusion that the Father was seen as God.

Conclusion

The theology of John shows us that Jesus, the Holy Spirit, and the Father are all God. This shows us therefore, since we know that there is only one God, that these three

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Good Summary

beings make up the Trinity. Although there has been different views about the Trinity in the past, when looking at scripture we see why the church fathers made clear their belief in the Trinity. In this paper we looked only at the evidence that we have of the Trinity in Johannine literature, if we were to look at more scripture, I'm sure we would find even more evidence. The Trinity might be something that is hard to explain, even challenging to our faith, but it is something that we find taught in the Bible.

Good solid
research

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