

Trinitarianism: An Evaluation Through Feminist and Biblical Lenses

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The battle for Truth has never subsided on every side since the Church of Jesus Christ was founded over 2000 years ago. Heresies and errors have bugged the Church forcing the respective Church leaders to exert some amount of effort in disinfecting the it of deleteriously poisonous teaching as well as attendant wrong ethical practice resulting there from. Seasons have varied and each doctrine has enjoyed its good epochs as well as bad ones. During the Reformation and Puritan eras, the mighty doctrine of Justification by faith, along aside other key doctrines, took centre stage reigning supreme. However, with the passing of the ages, the focus has shifted to other things. But there has been one central doctrine that has continuously caused some considerable controversy right across the life of the Church from inception. Although not fully developed until later in the 5th century under solid theologians like St Augustine of Hippo, the Trinity doctrine has enjoyed varying seasons.

During the early centuries, the Church fathers and Christians in general had minor differing views as to the divinity of Jesus and/or the Spirit. It was not until about AD 451 that this matter was eventually and, in a sense, finally & definitively settled; that the Triune God is the Lord of Heaven and Earth. It was about this time that the Arian heresy was finally given the last nail in the coffin as well as the controversies between the Eastern and Western Churches with respect to the eternal procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son was settled. The Eastern Church contended that the Spirit only proceeded from the Father not the Son while the Western Church tenaciously held a slightly more refined position asserting that the Spirit proceeded from both the Father and the Son. As to the essence, substance, aseity of the three persons of the God Head was concerned, the Christians were generally agreed that all the three were coequal and co eternal. Although the earlier saints may have had some problems, here and there, given that they did not have the whole picture of the God head, they too were generally agreed that the Son was divine as much as the Father was. However, reading scriptures like I Corinthians 8:6 and I Corinthians 15:28 pauses some challenges to many a reader, as to how exactly the persons in the God head related to each other. Some concluded from the I Corinthian 15 passage that the Son was subordinate and therefore inferior to the Father. Others strengthened their arguments of the Son and Spirit not being fully divine as the

Father because of certain statements scattered right across scripture. Others however, sought to prove that the Son and Spirit are indeed divine in the same sense that the Father is, yea, co-equal, of the same essence and substance as the Father is by summoning other passages that pointed to that fact. But the problem still remains, what does the Apostle mean when he states that the Son will be subordinate to the Father after handing over the Kingdom when history is wrapped up so that the Father may be God over all? Furthermore, what in what sense can the Son be said to be God almighty because at some point he expressly states in no uncertain terms that the Father is greater than him (John 14:28)? This and many other passages still cause problems for the Orthodox Christian as they attempt to explain away the Trinity to the Arianist.

Pointers to Deciphering a difficult text

How should Christians unlock such difficult passages like the I Corinthian 15 one? What hermeneutical principle lies at our disposal without imposing a meaning or forced injustice on the text? Several helps are potentially available from our tool box but the exegete definitely needs a good trained eye for detail. Often, context is often a helpful indicator of possible meaning, though not in all cases. In this case, this can only be explained by understanding in what context and how the persons of the Godhead relate with respect to redemption. We also need to say that in times like this, a good grasp of one's systematic theology becomes handy. A further framework is to know the covenants in scripture; works & Grace (Pink 2021; Lopez 2004; Horton 2006; Venema 2012; Bolt 2013). As far as redemption is concerned and how the functional roles of the respective persons of the God Head is concerned, there is some subordination of the Son and the Spirit to the Father. In other words, the Father planned the work of redemption, the Son accomplished this plan while the Spirit applies the work of Redemption to the elect. This implies that as far as this work is concerned, the Father sends the Son to do His will and the Spirit applies this work in obedience to the Father's will. As a human, Christ was subject to the Father though he remained fully divine from all eternity to all eternity. In the same way, if we are to be consistent in our application of our theology, we can stretch this relationship in the God Head to how men and women relate in the Church. Although there is neither male nor female in Christ with respect to our salvation (Galatians 3:28), yet there is order with one being the head over the other, yet they are equal before the Lord. In other words, functionally they differ but in essence they are the same.

This view has generated a lot of controversy and serious reactions from several quarters in the Church, including from Evangelicals themselves. Among those that argue against this view is the avowed Evangelical Feminist Dr Bilezikian who feels that this high doctrine has been hijacked with heresies secretly and subtly introduced. According to him, subordination of any persons of the God Head is foreign, heretical and a new heresy that has recently been introduced by a "small

click” of evangelicals. Among them, Bilezikian names Wayne Grudem and others who he accuses of fuelling “*pagan infiltrations, weird processions of three divinities lined up by order of seniority*” and thus dubs this approach as “an almost clever magician’s trick” and, “an amazing jump of logic”. As far as this Doctor is concerned, this relationship of the Father to the other two persons of the God Head is a new opportunistic doctrine calculated at exhuming, raising Arianism and Sabellism to the fore. He further argues that this approach is also subtly calculated to stifle women in the Church. Being a Feminist, this argument is hardly surprising but what are the facts on the ground? What does the Scripture say on this matter so that we close this matter once and for all?

What Scripture says on the Trinity and relations therein

When we examine the works of the Fathers, in relation to the development of this doctrine over the centuries as well as what the Church has consistently held over the ages, it becomes evident that Dr Bilezikian is merely blowing hot air to advance his small personal agenda. For the writings of the Fathers consistently teach and hold that there is the ontological and economic Trinity of things. Once one grasps these tenets, then things fall into perspective. Furthermore, the Testimony of scripture throughout does not support Bilezikian’s claims because the persons of the God Head have had roles and yet remain of the same essence from all eternity. Athanasius (AD 373), Alexander (AD 313-28), Basil the Great (AD 379) and a host of others all held that Jesus was as much divine as the Father. The Trinitarian position found its clearest expression in the writings of these early fathers but Augustine would refine all these and give a definitive expression of the Trinity. For interpretation of passages like I Corinthians 8:6; John 5:26, 15:28; and I Corinthians 15:28, we need to know the context and have a balance in the way we interpret such apparently difficult passages. For instance, the I Corinthian 15:28 passage, the comments have to do with the functional role as the saviour of the world in the work of redemption. The Son has wilfully chosen to taken on such as role. The John 5:26 passage has to do with the Father having life in Himself and granting it to the Son also to have life in Himself. At face value, it may suggest that the Son does not have life apart from that which is imparted to him by the Father. Recall once again that Christ is talking as a human in his saving work. So what are we saying to Bilezikian? Only this, his arguments do not hold water and his claim that Wayne Grudem and others are heretics is without consequence. In fact, they are more consistent with scripture than he is. The burden of proof is therefore on him rather than the mass of historically held positions.

Lessons Gleaned from this Consideration

There are so many lessons to be learned and gleaned from various sources: historical, Biblical or other credible sources on this matter. Some of the unlikely

sources we may know what is the incorrect view of the Trinity could even be non-Christian or even heretical sources like the Quran, the Jehovah's Witnesses materials among others¹. Although incorrect, and in some cases poisonous, a first-hand acquaintance of what proponents are actually saying could prove helpful.

Even learned Professors can go astray. Dr Bilezikian is obviously a very well-schooled individual from outstanding schools and yet he has erred, sadly from the truth, even using wrong lenses to defend his errors. No doubt an accomplished individual in his younger days, solid mentor to some and yet seriously slid down the slippery slope of error. His feministic underpinning philosophies have partly contributed to his errors. This is a big, big lesson for any of us: No one is immune from errors' insidious ways. A second lesson is that we need to watch over each other through mutual accountability mechanisms. Being fallen beings in Adam, our noetic structure has certainly been tainted by sin, total depravity remains our lot. Again, we echo our call, we need to meticulously watch each other. If we watched over each other, we probably would have had fewer high profile Evangelicals falling over the orthodox theological precipice. Names flow through our minds of once towering giants that have bowed the knee to the contemporary day Baal.

No one is immune from error. This point has already been alluded to but we need to stress it: No one can totally escape error's alluring baits. Left to ourselves, we would all wonder away into error, much like Eve did at the beginning of time (Genesis 3). Although this prospect seems remote to some of us, this is an ever present danger, especially in academic circles where people want to leave an indelible mark upon the sands of time as having generated something new! The quest for the "Professor" title is an ever increasing pull for many of us. Nothing wrong with desiring that rank but we need to watch out lest we sacrifice orthodoxy on the alter of academic brilliance. The doctrine of the Trinity is an

¹ Examples of these spurious or non-orthodox sources (on trinity, covenant etc.) could include the following: Qur'an (Q) 2:30; 2:80; 2:116; 4:48; 4:171; 5:72; 5:75; 5:116; 6:1; 6:56; 6:100; 6:106; 6:150; 6:161; 9:30; 9:31; 10:28; 10:68; 15:96; 16:51; 17:111; 18:4; 21:26; 31:13; 33:73; 112; JW: *Teach Us*: Chapter 4 page 44, 213 This source states the following about Jesus & the Trinity: "*The Bible teaches that Jehovah God is the creator and he created Jesus before all other things. (Colossians 1:15,16) Jesus is not almighty God. He never claimed that he was equal to God. In fact, he said: "The Father is greater than I." (John 14:28; 1 Corinthians 15:28) But some religions teach the Trinity, that God is three persons in one: the Father, the Son, and the holy spirit. The word "Trinity" is not in the Bible. This is a false teaching...The holy spirit is God's active force, his invisible power in action that he uses to do his will. It is not a person. For example, early Christians "became filled with the holy spirit," and Jehovah said: "I will pour out some of my spirit on every sort of flesh. Acts 2:1-4, 17."* On page 44 of the same book, this book states the following: "*Some people believe that Jesus and God are the same person. But that's not what the Bible teaches. The Bible says that Jesus was created, which means that Jesus had a beginning. But Jehovah, who created all things, had no beginning...*" A further quote would read like this (page 160): "*What is false religion? It is any religion that teaches us to worship God in a way that is against his word. The Bible calls all false religion "Babylon the Great...Why?...today, too, many religions teach that God is a Trinity, but the Bible clearly teaches that there is only one true God..."*"; Mormonism: *Gospel Principles* (a form of Mormon systematic theology): 13,51, 101

especially mysterious doctrine, we may never fully and comprehensively understand or grasp it as a large portion of it is akin to what the good old Puritans used to say "Ground where even angels fear to tread," incomprehensively complex! And yet, we must wrap our minds around the study of this marvellous God, whose ways and nature are past tracing out!

Some texts of scripture are difficult to unlock, that is fine. The pressure to appear to know and unlock all things is the peculiar mark of our days. We want to come across as knowledgeable, able to explain all mysteries both in the books of nature and the Bible. This is a good desire but close connected to this is spiritual pride leading to errors. We do not fully understand all parts of scripture to the minutest detail though we can and must diligently study to understand all things God has revealed in His word. The nature of Christ cannot be understood in a vacuum. It must be traced out from across scripture and then come up with what we think the Bible's metanarrative is actually saying. In short, we need to say that it is perfectly okay not to know everything because room for spiritual growth and insight is forever taking place. As we compare scripture with scripture, some things progressively become clearer.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is a high mystery. Closely connected to the previous point, it is true to say that the Trinity doctrine is a high mystery. Many minds have wrestled with this matter from the scriptures and have come up with what we presently have. Although crystalized over time, the doctrine is based and founded in scripture. We need to know that by the same token, enemies of this biblical doctrine will pelt it left right and centre! Unitarians, Jehovah's witnesses and Muslims cannot stomach this doctrine. The best we can do is to point them to scripture's claims leaving the rest to the Lord of Glory to make clear. While we do our best to argue and explain this truth, it is the Lord that gives the conviction and perception of the same. Before I became a Christian, as a devout Roman Catholic, I repeatedly tossed this doctrine in my mind, many times suspecting that I could have landed in wrong teaching. This was made worse by our Jehovah's Witnesses neighbours that repeatedly tossed around their Awake, Watchtower and "My Book of Bible Stories" literature, from every conceivable angle bombarding the Trinity doctrine. I feverishly searched, yea combed the Bible for the word "Trinity" to no avail. I however came across numerous scriptures suggesting Jesus's divinity and claims. That was confusing but later, after regeneration, this truth became clear. Later, I was surprised to learn that some of the finest theologians on the Trinity were actually Roman Catholics! I guess sources referred to authorities like St Augustine among others. This high doctrine must be studied by all despite being mysterious in nature. In short, despite being mysterious, Christians need to study this high doctrine.

It is very easy to fall into eisegesis in the quest to establish one's subjective position. A further point we all need to beware is that the temptation to read into the text what it actually may not be saying (at least in the author's mind or intent), we may easily fall into eisegetical practices and thoughts. We may, unknowingly

hurl out sound exegetical principles as Carson (2007) has warned us against. An additional note is handy here: Our systematic theological framework, at times may obscure or skew our thinking in a given direction. Granted, Systematic theology is both the marrow and quality control framework for the sound theologian, it can equally become a trap, boxing our thinking. I am a solid advocate for systematic theology but we need to let scripture speak and then we interpret. Let us escape from every and any potential blind spot. I often laugh at self-acclaimed exclusive “Biblical Theologians” that detest systematic theology. I think, in their commendable evangelical zeal, they sincerely misdirected for sound authentic Systematic theology is biblically based!

Christians need to know about the major and subordinate covenants in scripture. This lesson is a major one! Today’s Christians know very little about the Biblical Covenants and how they function. At best, they have surface level knowledge covenantal teaching taught by the likes of CI Scofield that divides the Bible into at least 7 Dispensations but very little real deep appreciation of what Covenant Theology has to say about this. Pink (2020) makes an interesting observation when he states that at one time, people relished and subsisted on the covenants but these progressively fell out of public discourse only to be replaced by other teachings. The knowledge of the covenants helps us in many ways than one, including our appreciation of the Trinity. Christian, take time to muse over the Covenants in scripture, and you will not regret! Although different views exist on this matter especially between Covenant and New Covenant Theologians, there is much benefit to be drawn from discovering these from the forest of scripture by ourselves! God deals with His people through the covenants. Pick talks about the “Everlasting Covenant” in one of his books and what a sweet truth! The Covenant of Grace is best understood if one combs through scripture for themselves (Lopez 2004; Vebema 2012; Horton 2006; Bolt 2013)!

Hosea 6:7² refers to some covenant Adam broke, could this be the Covenant of works? It is unclear but it is worth mentioning that some argue that the “Adam” in this context could be a place name rather than an individual. If this is true, this may have implications with potential to go in either direction. But a careful and natural reading of this passage suggests it is referring to the historical Adam or a people group having transgressed a covenant (or God’s word) they had with God. Theologians are divided on this, leading to different conclusions. We think this Adam is a person rather than a place name.

Christian need to defend the grand doctrine of the Trinity. It is a pivotal fundamental doctrine without which no one could legitimately claim to be a Christian. With postmodern winds blowing even through orthodox seminaries or thought, it is very easy to either ignore this grand doctrine or relegate it to a

² Actual reading of the text (NASB 1995): “*But like Adam they have transgressed the covenant; There they have dealt treacherously against Me.*” Accessed from: <https://biblia.com/bible/esv/hosea/6/7>, 23rd November, 2021.

secondary issue, as folks religiously holding on to the constructivist Theological Triage are wont or prone to do.

The historical developments of the Trinity over the centuries must be studied and known. We need to revisit those key land mark epochs relating to how we have developed this key doctrine, having suffered varying fortunes over time. In recent times, we have seen a resurgence of Arianist thinking suggesting that orthodox thinking is in retreat from the public sphere or discourses. The best one would find it is in many reclusive seminaries who are many times speaking to themselves, but no, this doctrine needs to be loudly sounded again in the public square!

The Eastern and Western Church split over the procession of the Holy Spirit. From whom does the Spirit proceed, the Father and Son or Father only? This still separates these Churches today.

Conclusions

We may conclude that the Trinitarian doctrine consistently remains vulnerable to attacks from different elements with different agendas but the saints must remain diligently awake to defend what was once for all entrusted to the saints. The Doctrine remains a high mystery to the human mind but what God has revealed in his word is to be upheld and defended as such.

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