

Discussion questions on the Trinity

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

1. The Bible supports the elements of Trinitarian doctrine without ever explicitly stating such a doctrine. Why do you think Jesus never explicitly talked about the Trinity?
2. Jesus offers in Matt 22:41-44 evidence from the OT that the expected Messiah would be more than human,

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied. He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

*"The Lord said to my Lord:
"Sit at my right hand
until I put your enemies
under your feet." [Ps 110:1]*

If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?" No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Peter also argues for the divinity of the Messiah in Acts 2:14-36. If the Messiah was described in the OT as superhuman, then why didn't Jewish theologians struggle with, at least, a bi-nity?

3. Because the Bible is not a single work but a collection of contextually-bound elements, it naturally contains instances of two seemingly opposing views held in mysterious opposition. Examples of this include Faith and Works as well as Predestination and Free Will. Context, then, allows selection of one view rather than its pair as relevant. For instance, the Epistle of James is the Word relevant to those who would fall into "cheap grace," or an overemphasis of atonement at the expense of salvation.

Do the opposing poles of unity vs. trinity (or single substance vs. three persons) constitute such a pair? If so, when is it relevant to focus on God's one-ness and when is it useful to dwell on the individual members of the Trinity and their uniqueness?

4. Jesus prayed to the Father while on earth, and even now serves as our high priest (Heb 7:25), interceding for us. Doesn't this imply a subordinate relationship with the Father? In fact, don't the very terms "Father" and "Son" imply this? If so, how can they be equal?
5. Jesus and the Spirit are both *Lord*, but arguably in a way which is derivative (but non-diminishing) from the Father. When is it appropriate to pray specifically to (or even worship) Jesus? The Spirit? What examples does the Bible present?

HISTORY

6. A tenet of the doctrine of the Trinity is that each of the persons is a participant in every action of the Godhead (this is *appropriationism*, an idea fleshed out by Augustine). The classic examples of this are the creation, the baptism of Jesus, and salvation. What involvement do you see by each of the persons in the (1) revelation of God to believers, (2) worship of God by the body, (3) prayer by individuals, and (4) sustenance and fellowship of the Body?

7. Karl Rahner[†] is famous for saying “The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity.” What did he mean by this? Do you agree? How would Rahner have answered question #2 above?
8. Martin Smith in *The Word is Very Near You* presents prayer as our being drawn into the community of the Trinity and their eternal conversation. Where, in the historical development of the Trinity, did such a view arise?
9. Catherine Mowry LaCugna presented the criticism that “The paradigm of the immanent and economic Trinity hampers the exercise of the doxological character of theology.” Speaking of her, Elizabeth Groppe says, “At the heart of LaCugna’s theology is the conviction that trinitarian theology culminates in doxology, in the praise and adoration of God” [‡] Which do you think should be the primary basis for the Trinity—doxology or economy? Which if either do you find central to *your* understanding of the Trinity?
10. Following LaCugna’s emphasis on the Trinity in worship: What picture does the *Psalter Hymnal* present of the Trinity? What picture can one draw of the Trinity from contemporary protestant American worship? Does the “Jesus-n-me” emphasis prevalent in some conservative worship styles represent an *overemphasis* on the person of Jesus? Has anyone ever overemphasized the Spirit or the Father? (Perhaps contrast the Pentecostal, Roman Catholic and evangelical traditions.) What benefits await she who can develop a trinitarianly balanced worship?
11. James B. Torrance, younger brother of T. F. and professor emeritus of systematic theology at the University of Aberdeen, describes the impact of the Trinity on worship as follows:

As we reflect on the wide varieties of forms of worship... we can discern two different views.

The unitarian view: ...We go to church, we sing our psalms and hymns to God, we intercede for the world, we listen to the sermon (too often simply an exhortation), we offer our money, time and talents to God. No doubt we need God’s grace to help us do it. We do it because Jesus taught us to do it and left us an example of how to do it. But worship is what *we* do before God... Indeed this view of worship is in practice unitarian, has no doctrine of the mediator or sole priesthood of Christ, is human-centered, has no proper doctrine of the Holy Spirit, is too often non-sacramental, and can engender weariness...

The trinitarian view: The second view of worship is that it is the gift of participating through the Spirit in the incarnate Son’s communion with the Father. It means participating in union with Christ, in what he has done for us once and for all, in his offering to the Father, in his life and death on the cross. It also means participating in what he is continuing to do for us in the presence of the Father and in his mission from the Father to the world. There is only one true Priest through whom and with whom we draw near to God our Father... It takes seriously the NT teaching about the sole priesthood and headship of Christ, his self-offering for us to the Father and our life in the union with Christ through the Spirit, with a vision of the Church as the body of Christ... [God] lifts us up out of ourselves to participate in the very life and communion of the Godhead, that life of communion for which we were created. [%]

Discuss.

[†] Karl Rahner was a Jesuit who taught theology in Germany and Austria, a prolific author, and probably the most important and influential Roman Catholic theologian of the 20th century.

[‡] Elizabeth T. Groppe, “Catherine Mowry LaCugna’s Contribution to Trinitarian Theology”, *Theological Studies*, 63, 730 (2002).

[%] *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, James B. Torrance (IVP: Downer’s Grove) 1997.