

What does the Trinity Really Teach?

Historically since the fourth century¹ there has been a struggle to define the doctrine of three-ness/oneness with respect to God in a way that does not overemphasize three-ness to the point of teaching polytheism or oneness to the point of teaching Sabellianism.

It is claimed by some Trinitarian apologists that there is no reason for any confusion as this was all cleared up centuries ago. However, surprisingly (or not!) this is still happening today.

So, who today asserts that the Trinity teaches polytheism (three gods) or Sabellianism (one person)? This list includes:

1. Those who do not understand what Trinitarians teach.
2. Those who understand but do not agree with the doctrine.
3. Those who agree with the Trinity but not a particular formulation of it.

Those who do not understand what Trinitarians teach.

This is not surprising as the terms used are not found in the bible (i.e. person, essence, etc) or “is not used in same way it is in ordinary usage” (person). The adherents to the doctrine say it is “incomprehensible to the mind of man.” and a mystery that “goes beyond the boundaries of human” and that “No man can fully explain the Trinity”² From my own personal experience, it is not uncommon for members of Churches in Christendom to claim that Jesus and his Father are the same person.

Those who understand but do not agree with the doctrine.

Since the bible does not distinguish “being” from person”, and since those terms are not used in the bible, those who do not agree with the doctrine will see that there is no legitimate basis to assert that some Trinitarian formulations really teach three gods and some others really teach that two persons are one and the same person.

In a description of what the Trinity really teaches in light of the multiple formulation/unbiblical definition problem, non-Trinitarian apologetics appeals to the truth of the bible will frequently stress these problems by saying things like:

“the teaching that there are three Gods in one person or as some put it, one God in three persons”³

or in contrast that the Father and the Son are the same person, which I have already related earlier as the belief of one well-studied Trinitarian.

¹ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>

² <https://bible.org/article/trinity-triunity-god>

³ WT July 1882, page 369.

Obviously the statements by non Trinitarians refer to what the doctrine devolves to in contrast to what other proponents of the Trinity say it means. This does not miss-represent the Trinity, for as we will demonstrate, some who agree with the Trinity will make those same claims of others based on their manner of defining it.

Those who agree with the Trinity but not a particular formulation of it.

Let's now consider some formulations that cause divisions within "orthodoxy" as defined by Christendom.

Catholic

The Archbishop of St Paul Minnesota says to "contrast the trinitarian belief in three Divine Personalities in the one God with the unitarian denial of those three Personalities" ⁴

But Christian writer Michael L. Chiavone says

"Karl Barth states that to propose three personalities in God "would be the worst and most extreme expression of tritheism". ⁵

Therefore if one uses the term "personalities" to describe the Father, Son and Holy Ghost, Barth considers these to be three Gods, not one God.

Protestant

Dr. Rick Cornish says of Evangelical Protestantism that "The central ideal of the Trinity is three-in-oneness, three personalities with one essence."

Let's look at yet another comment about this sort of Trinitarian formula:

Barth quoted by Melville Y. Stewart says

"From all this, Karl Barth draws the conclusion that what we today mean by 'personality' should be assigned, in God's case, not to the three prosopa or hypostaseis but to the one essence (ousia). God, he says, is not three personalities but one, not three 'I's but one 'I' three times over. Barth therefore prefers to speak, not of three persons in the Trinity, but of three 'ways of being'. Similarly Karl Rahner talks of three 'manners of subsisting' while John Macquarrie refers to three 'movements of Being.'" ⁶

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<https://books.google.com/books?id=5zMqCgAAQBAJ&lpg=PT186&dq=trinity%20%22three%20personalities%22&pg=PT186#v=onepage&q=trinity%20%22three%20personalities%22&f=false>

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<https://books.google.com/books?id=o7DkCQAAQBAJ&lpg=PT107&dq=trinity%20%22three%20personalities%22&pg=PT107#v=onepage&q=trinity%20%22three%20personalities%22&f=false>

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Note that for Karl Barth and Karl Rahner when a Trinitarian formula uses the word “personality” or “person” in a Trinitarian formula that this is really teaching polytheism, not monotheism. To them God “, is not three personalities but one.” Therefore their criticism would be leveled against any Trinitarian formulation that uses the word “person.” They can be characterized as “one-self” Trinitarians.⁷

Note a reference bible which is endorsed by many in Christendom, the Scofield Reference Bible: “There are three personalities participating in the work of creation as recorded in the Bible.”⁸

Sabellianism

Some Trinitarians take exception to the formulations given by Karl Barth, Karl Rahner and John Macquarrie who can be described as “one-self” Trinitarians. Barth says the three should be considered not as “persons” but as “ways of being”⁹ Rahner says that the three are “manners of subsisting.”

These formulations are considered modalistic or “Sabellian” expressions by those in the other Trinitarian camp. For example, Joe R. Jones, in “A Grammar of Christian Faith” says:

“For the social trinitarians the charges against Barth and Rahner are two-fold: (1) that they are modalists insofar as they do not adequately recognize the real distinctions within God; and (2) that they have God as one person, while there are actually three such persons in God that are relational to one another.”⁹

Who are these scholars?

Karl Barth was a Swiss Reformed theologian who is often regarded as the greatest Protestant theologian of the twentieth century. Pope Pius XII called him the most important Christian theologian since St. Thomas Aquinas.¹⁰

Karl Rahner, S.J. (5 March 1904 – 30 March 1984), was a German Jesuit priest and theologian who, alongside Henri de Lubac, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Yves Congar, is considered one of the most influential Catholic theologians of the 20th century. He was the brother of Hugo Rahner, also a Jesuit scholar.¹¹

Conclusion

My conclusion is that Christendom is responsible for the confusion and lack of clarity. They should not blame others for saying the same things that their scholars have put in print to the effect that some Trinitarian formulas actually teach that there are three Gods while others teach that there is one person but three modes or ‘ways’ of the one person who is God.

⁷ <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>

⁸ (Scofield Reference Bible, page 3, Genesis 1:1, Note 1, Elchim)

<https://books.google.com/books?id=iYwUAWAAQBAJ&lpg=PA86&dq=trinity%20%22three%20personalities%22&pg=PA86#v=onepage&q=trinity%20%22three%20personalities%22&f=false>

<https://books.google.com/books?id=FXGAAAAQBAJ&lpg=PA177&dq=barth%20and%20rahner%20modalists&pg=PA177#v=onepage&q=barth%20and%20rahner%20modalists&f=false>

¹⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Barth

¹¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karl_Rahner