One God in Three Persons, United by One Love

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If you were to ask the average Christian to define the Trinity, their response is likely to be “The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (or Holy Ghost).” However, for most Christians, this answer is insufficient, and will inevitably prompt more questions, such as: “What is the significance and/or purpose of each component of the Trinity? As a Christian, what does the Trinity mean for me? How does the Trinity affect me?” This paper will attempt to answer these questions in addition to others using the Bible and Origen’s Books I and IV of his work, On First Principles. In addition, David Bentley Hart’s contemporary discourse on the Trinity, found in The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth, will be used as a secondary source. Although Hart and Origen do not always have similar ideas about the Trinity, this should not cause a person to question its validity. It simply demonstrates that theology is not “dead,” and that Christians serve a living God who is still revealing things to the people who seek Him. By reading Origen, the Bible, and Hart, a plethora of questions can arise about the Trinity; however, without a concrete understanding of the basic concepts of the Trinity, these questions will be nearly impossible to grasp. Therefore, this paper is attempting to answer the elementary questions regarding the Trinity.

One can find many different definitions of the Trinity from various literary sources. For example, the World Encyclopedia offers the following definition:

Central doctrine of Christianity, according to which God is three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost. There is only one God, but he exists as ‘three in one and one in three’. The nature of the Trinity is held to be a mystery that cannot be fully comprehended. Although this is an extensive definition of the Trinity, one still cannot grasp its full meaning. In order to help gain insight, most of the fragments of this definition will now be discussed separately, and in depth.

First, it is necessary to address the idea that “God is three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit or Holy Ghost.” In Deuteronomy 32:6 it says the following: “Is this the way you repay the Lord, O foolish and unwise people? Is he not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?” (NIV). From this passage, we see that the Father is the creator. The Father is the God we encounter in Genesis who created the heavens, the earth, the waters, the living creatures, and man. At one point in almost every Christian’s life, he or she has heard The Lord’s Prayer, which can be found in Matthew 6:9-13. The prayer begins by saying: “Our Father which art in heaven...” (KJV). When one thinks about this small fraction of The Lord’s Prayer, one cannot help but conclude that the Father is the transcendent dimension of God, the God who is in heaven.

Meanwhile, Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Origen states the following about Christ:
First we must know this, that in Christ there is one nature, his deity, because he is the only-begotten Son of the Father, and another human nature, which in very recent times he took upon him to fulfill the divine purpose. 1

Now, the Father "which art in heaven" knew that because man was born in sin, his nature is imperfect, this imperfect nature would cause man to eventually sin, and this sin would cause His creations to be consumed by evil. However, our Father loved us so much that He sent His only Son to earth to die for us so that we could have salvation. John 3:16-18 explains this idea of God’s love for us:

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son. (NIV)

This act of salvation whereby Jesus came to earth was designed to fulfill the “divine purpose” that Origen spoke about. Although John 3:16-18 explains that Jesus came to save us, it does not explain exactly how Jesus would save us from evil. First John 3:8 says “…The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (NIV). Jesus was created in the image of his Father, who is eternally good. As such, Jesus came to earth to destroy the devil’s evil work by teaching people about the good ways of the Father. This is why Origen points out that Jesus is called “Wisdom,”2 “Word of God,”3 “Truth,”4 “Life,”5 and “Reason.”6 Similarly, in Book V of The Stromata, Clement of Alexandria states, “the Son is the true teacher respecting the Father.”7 Additionally, in the section entitled Changeless Beauty in Hart’s book, we see that Christ is called the “Mediator”8 (he mediates between God and creation). In Hebrews 12:24 it says, “to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant.” We see this idea of Jesus as mediator again in 1 Timothy 2:5-6: “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men—the testimony given in its proper time” (NIV).

In addition to the various names offered for Jesus Christ (the Son), Origen gives extensive explanations of Christ:

For he is a breath of the power of God, and a pure effluence (that is, emanation) of the glory of the Almighty. Therefore, nothing that is defiled can enter into him. For he is the brightness of the eternal light and an unspotted mirror of the working of God and an image of his goodness.9

He also states that “Christ is the way and leads to the Father and he is the Word who interprets and presents to the rational creation the secrets of wisdom and the mysteries of knowledge…”10

However, in order for Jesus to truly save us from sin, he had to die for us. It was his perfect, holy, and divine blood that held the saving power. 1 John 1:7 reminds us of this: “…and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin”11

1 Butterworth, Origen on First Principles, 15.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
6 Ibid.
8 Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite, 199.
9 Butterworth, Origen on First Principles, 18.
10 Ibid., 20-21.
With that being said, as sad as it may be, we realize that Jesus’ crucifixion was necessary. Although it may be easy to accept that Jesus is the Son of God and that he died for our sins, some people may wonder, “How could Jesus continue to teach those who want to learn after he has been crucified?” A response to this question can be found in the Bible. In John 14:25-26 Jesus says the following:

All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. (NIV)

It is evident that we need the Holy Spirit in order to obtain complete salvation, however it is important to note that we cannot receive the Holy Spirit without accepting Jesus Christ as our savior. Origen supports this statement when he writes:

The activity of the Holy Spirit only extends to those who are already turning to better things and walking in the ways of Jesus Christ, that is, who are engaged in good deeds and who abide in God.11

When we read 1 John 2:28, we have further confirmation that Christ is needed to receive the Holy Spirit:

But Christ has blessed you with the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit stays in you, and you don’t need any teachers. The Spirit is truthful and teaches you everything. So stay one in your heart with Christ, just as the Spirit has taught you to do. (CEV)

Through reading these ideas, one can say that the Holy Spirit comes to finish the work that Jesus came to do in the name of his Father. The Holy Spirit gives us grace,12 and he is the "sanctifier and the purifier."13,14

Although the tasks of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit have been discussed extensively, it is important to summarize what has been discovered up to this point. Origen the following words to summarize the individual functions of the persons in the Trinity:

God the Father bestows on all the gift of existence; and a participation in Christ, in virtue of his being the word or reason, makes them rational... Accordingly there is also available the grace of the Holy Spirit, that those beings who are not holy in essence may be made holy by participating in this grace. When therefore they obtain first of all their existence from God the Father, and secondly their rational nature from the Word, and thirdly their holiness from the Holy Spirit.15

Origen also states, “...this which is called the gift of the Spirit is ministered through the Son and worked by God the Father.”16 Similarly, “every act of God, is inaugurated by the Father, effected by the Son, and perfected by the Holy Spirit.”17

It has been understood that the Trinity is comprised of three persons: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Due to our human nature, we often think of the relationship between the three as a relationship that has some form of subordination in it. We think that the Son is subordinate to the Father, and perhaps the Holy Spirit is subordinate to the Son. However, when one reads the section entitled Divine Fellowship in Hart’s

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11 Ibid., 34.
12 Ibid., 37.
13 Ibid., 38.
15 Butterworth, Origen on First Principles, 38.
16 Ibid.
17 Hart, The Beauty of the Infinite, 175.
discourse on the Trinity, one truly realizes that this relationship is full of harmony, unity and equality. Furthermore, the word “fellowship” helps us to arrive to this conclusion because when one thinks about fellowship, one thinks about a group of people with the same interest coming together in harmony and love. In other words, everyone is on the same level. Despite the fact that we may get the impression that Origen believes that there is some form of a hierarchy in the Trinity,\(^{18}\) this idea is abolished when he says:

> Nothing in the Trinity can be called greater or less, for there is but one fount of deity who upholds the universe by his word and reason, and sanctifies by the spirit of his mouth all that is worthy of sanctification...

Each person in the Trinity is vital and essential to our salvation. Origen asserts this when he says we “will not obtain salvation apart from the entire Trinity.”\(^{20}\) The harmony found within this Trinitarian relationship exists because there is “divine difference;” each person of the Trinity has full divinity, but has a different task with regard to our salvation. Hart contends that “difference is peace and joy.”\(^{21}\) He goes on to say,

> The three persons are not economic accommodations of a supreme ontic principle with inferior reality, but are rather all equally present in every divine action, each wholly God, even as they differ.\(^{22}\)

The Trinity is a “circle of glory”\(^{23}\) and it is glorious and harmonious not only because there is divine difference, but because there is love. Each person of the Trinity has love for the other, and all three persons of the Trinity have love for us.

Our discussion on the Trinity up to this point may have unveiled a dangerous misconception: one may think that the Trinity gives rise to polytheism and that there are three separate gods, but this is not the case. The definition of the Trinity in this paper states the following: “...There is only one God, but he exists as 'three in one and one in three.'” This sentence may be hard to grasp, but it just means that there is one God but he “wears three different hats.” For example, I am many things: I am a follower of Christ, a mother, a daughter, a sister, a student, and an employee. Although I am many things (I "wear many hats") and all of these things entail different tasks, this does not mean that I am more than one person. Additionally, God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, but God is not a material substance or a body. He shares all of Himself with those who want to share themselves with Him. However, by sending and sharing the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, this does not mean that they are separated from Him, or that He is not whole when He shares Himself. Origen elaborates on this idea with the following analogy:

> There are many who share in teaching and art of medicine; yet are we to suppose that all who share in medicine have some material substance called medicine placed before them from which they take away little particles and so obtain a share of it? Must we not rather understand that all who with ready and prepared minds gain a comprehension of the art and its teaching may be said to share in medicine? ...A thing in which many have

\(^{18}\) Butterworth, *Origen on First Principles*, 34.
\(^{19}\) Ibid., 37.
\(^{20}\) Ibid., 33.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 182.
\(^{23}\) Ibid., 200.
In addition, as previously mentioned, God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. He always has been and always will be. Regardless of the fact that our imperfect human nature may cause us to think that there was a time where theSon and the Holy Spirit did not exist, this is not the case, because they are all a part of God. Genesis 1:26 states,

Then God said, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground." (NIV)

From this passage, it is understood that the "us" implies that God was talking to the Son and the Holy Spirit. Once again, Origen makes an analogy to support the conclusion that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit have always existed together:

Origen describes the Father as the sun, and the Son as the rays of the sun. The sun is never in existence without its rays. Furthermore, the rays of the sun allow us to feel some of the heat that is derived from the sun, so can we not say that the Holy Spirit is the heat from the rays and by extension the sun? Therefore we can extend this analogy to say that the sun is never in existence without its rays and its heat, just as the Father is never in existence without His Son and His Holy Spirit.

The final part of the definition of the Trinity states that "the nature of the Trinity is held to be a mystery that cannot be fully comprehended." One might think that this statement demonstrates the weakness of the Trinity; however, it can also be argued that this "mystery" is essential and God intended the Trinity to have a degree of "unknowingness." For the average rational human being, knowing about something and fully comprehending it creates satiety and diminishes desire. We lose interest in the subject because we feel as though there is nothing else to learn. The Trinity is one of the many mysteries about God that keeps us in love with Him. Our relationship with the infinite and mysterious God is like a beautiful, romantic love relationship: the mystery about Him keeps us engaged in the relationship, and the more we discover, the more we desire to embark on a spiritual journey in order to learn more about God and connect with Him. Hart truly captures the essence of this:

... A God "seen" only by infinite inflaming desire, whose savor draws one on into ever greater dimensions of his glory, so that one is always at the beginning of one's pilgrimage toward him, always discovering and entering into greater dimensions of his beauty.  

Furthermore, our own salvation depends on our desire to be in love and in communion with God. This is what allows us to join the "circle of glory." Loving the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit allows us to partake in the Trinity, and this is what Hart was trying is attempting to convey when he states the following:

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24 Butterworth, Origen on First Principles, 8.
Certainly the essence of salvation is that souls and bodies should be drawn into the dynamism of the Trinitarian life, as the Spirit integrates them into the co-inherence, the so-bornast, of the body of Christ, where one becomes a true — that is, selfless person: a person in communion. The sanctification bestowed by God’s Spirit is also a light cast upon humanity, as it stands within Christ, the one true man: a light that shows the isolated self to be a trace only, the effaced emblem of a forgotten gift, given before the self is a self, before the I has arrived.27

In addition, Origen asserts that Christ, being the image of the Father, is like an “unspotted mirror.” Coming into communion with the Trinity gives us the opportunity to surround ourselves with the beauty of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit and soak in the “good” and soon enough we too become like “unspotted mirrors.” We get the idea that Hart also believes that we can become images of God (or mirrors) when he says:

We can mirror the infinite because the infinite, within itself, is entirely mirroring itself, the Father’s incomprehensible majesty being eternally united to the coequal “splendor of his glory,” his “form” and “impress,” in seeing whom one has seen the Father; we can become images of God that shine with his beauty because the Father always has his image in his Son, bright with the light of his Spirit, and so is never without form and loveliness.28

To conclude, the Trinity is about love, salvation, harmony, and communion, and these things capture the essence of Christianity. That is why the definition of the Trinity states that it is the “central doctrine of Christianity.” On a final note, it is important to realize that out of all the things that the Trinity is about, love is the most important. Without love, there would be no salvation, harmony or communion. Although God may have three identities, He is united by a single love.

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27 Ibid., 172.
28 Ibid., 203.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


