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## **Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Adapted from Pagan Religious Beliefs?**

### **Introduction**

It should not need to waste more time and energy for answering the above question. However, recently, my denomination, Evangelical Church of Vietnam, has been witnessed some groups leaving the church and enticing a number of members. They argue that the doctrine was adopted from pagan religious beliefs in triads of gods; it is not biblical. They mainly claim that there is only one God the Father, Jesus is not God. Their teaching causes some believers to feel very puzzled.

As a response to the issue, this small research is performed with the purpose of looking for an answer for myself; and as a pastor, I need to equip this kind of arms to protect my flock against the attacks of the heresies that distort the Trinity doctrine.

Even though there are a great number of very persuasive materials of the Trinity doctrine, I insist on doing this research in order to have my own answer. This essay will track down the origins of the doctrine by surveying the teaching of the Old and New Testaments, and the related facts in the early period of theological history.

## The Teaching of The Old and New Testaments

Every true Christian doctrine comes from the Bible, and the Trinity doctrine is no exception. Although the term “trinity” is not from the Bible, it is the best and only term could be used to describe this biblical truth. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit presented from Genesis through Revelation. And the distinction of each Person has been gradually clear. If one doubts that the Trinity doctrine has the pagan origins, he or she should examine it with the lens of Scriptures first rather than looking for what trinity in pagan is. It can be said that the Old Testament intimates the Trinity and the New Testament authors are aware of the triadic nature of God’s work as Father—Jesus Christ—Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

### The Old Testament

In the world of polytheism, Jehovah was presented as the one and only God to Israelites. However, it is not too difficult to realise him in the plural of persons. At his very creation, “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And *the Spirit* of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2 ESV). The Spirit was mentioned clearly; and he appeared as a coworker of God. And how about the Son? It is worth noting that God created everything by or started by his speaking or his Word. And this Word was interpreted by the author of Hebrews, “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us *by his Son*, whom he appointed the heir of all things, *through whom also he created the world*” (1:1-2 ESV). The apostle John began his gospel by proclamation, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without

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<sup>1</sup> Michael F. Bird, *Evangelical Theology, A Biblical and Systematic Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2013), p. 124.

him nothing was made that has been made” (John 1:1-3 NIV). Obviously, the Son played an indispensable role in God’s creative work at the very beginning. Augustine also explains the phrase “God said” as referring to “the Word and the Father of the Word.” Scott A. Dunham clarifies this explanation by saying, “God is the Father, and this time, the Son is identified with the verb ‘said.’ What is ‘said,’ of course, is the Word that the Father speaks from eternity, the Word who is his Son.”<sup>2</sup> Besides, in the creation of humankind, God said, “*Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth*” (Gen 1:26, ESV). After that, in response to the rebellion of humankind in building the Tower of Babel, God said, “Come, let Us go down and there confuse their language, that they may not understand one another's speech.” (Gen 11:7 NKJV). If one did not know the Trinity doctrine at first, he or she could raise a question, “Why did the only one God but said to himself, ‘*Let us,*’ ‘*our image,*’ ‘*our likeness*’?” Or did he say to the angels? If “Yes”, why no scriptures mention angelic beings’ participation in his creative actions? If “No”, whom was God talking to?

Continuously reading, one could discover that sometimes God appeared in a triad (Gen 18), and many times in Pentateuch and Judges, he appeared as the Angel of the Lord whom was also called the Lord Himself. This form of appearance is described by the term *Theophany*, a visible manifestation to humankind of God. In *The Fathers of the Church* (translated by Russell J. DeSimone) the view was reasoned, “Please note that the same Moses says in another passage that God appeared to Abraham. Yet the same Moses hears from God that no man can see God and live. If God cannot be seen, how did God appear? If He appeared, how is it that He cannot be

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<sup>2</sup> Scott A. Dunham, *The Trinity and Creation in Augustine, An Ecological Analysis* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2008), p. 67.

seen?”<sup>3</sup> And the answer would be provided in Colossians 1:15, “He [Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the second person of God] is the image of the invisible God.”

Keep reading to the books of history, one can know more about the third person of God. In some historical books like Judges, Samuels, God powerful acted by the Holy Spirit through his servants, judges, kings, and prophets. Certainly, this fact could not prove the Trinity of God, but it is the way God’s presence could be in more than one person. In psalms, it seems that the psalmists praise another Lord who is equal with the Lord Jehovah of Israel, “The LORD said to my Lord, ‘Sit at My right hand, Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.’” (Psalm 110:1 NKJV).

Maybe the second person of God mentioned the most clearly by the prophets. In Isaiah 9:6, “For unto us a Child is born, Unto us a Son is given; And the government will be upon his shoulder. And his name will be called Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (NKJV). In Micah 5:2, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, Though you are little among the thousands of Judah, Yet out of you shall come forth to Me The One to be Ruler in Israel, Whose goings forth are from of old, From everlasting” (NKJV). While the Lord mentioned ‘another’ Lord, he still affirmed that “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel, and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: “I am the First and I am the Last; Besides Me there is no God” (Isaiah 44:6 NKJV). How can our human mind could comprehend this truth? How can our human language could explain this mystery? The Lord our God is one and only one God, but he also has more than one person.

The Jew, who were direct readers and hearers of the Old Testament. They could read *Shema* daily, “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one!” (Deuteronomy 6:4). Yet

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<sup>3</sup> Russell J. DeSimone, “Novatian, The Trinity-The Spectacles-Jewish Foods in Praise of Purity Letters” *The Fathers of the Church*, Vol. 67 (Washington, D.C: The Catholic University of America Press, 1974), p. 67.

they seem understood that their Lord has more than one person. When Jesus was arrested and stood before Caiaphas the high priest, he said, “I say to you, hereafter you will see *the Son of Man* sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matthew 26:64 NKJV). Immediately, the high priest tore his clothes, saying, “He has spoken blasphemy! What further need do we have of witnesses? Look, now you have heard his blasphemy!” (v. 65). Caiaphas “tore his clothes” because he, just as other Jewish, believed that the Son of God or the Son of Man is the very God. In short, it is surely believed that “the LORD is one” also is plural, at least three, in his persons.

### **The New Testament**

Alister E. McGrath affirms that there are only two biblical verses which are open to a Trinitarian interpretation: Matthew 28:19, “Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of *the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit*” and 2 Corinthians 13:14, “May the grace of *the Lord Jesus Christ*, and the love of *God*, and the fellowship of *the Holy Spirit* be with you all.”<sup>4</sup> However, there are a lot of verses and passages that show us the clear presence of three persons of God through the New Testament.

To begin with, the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, “*I and My Father are one*” (John 10:30 NKJV); “But *the Advocate, the Holy Spirit*, whom *the Father* will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” (John 14:26 NRSV); 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’? 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” (John 14:9-10 NIV).

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<sup>4</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Christianity, An Introduction* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2006), p. 122.

By these words of our Lord Jesus, without any interpretation, we can see crystal clear that our God has three persons.

Because of three years accompanied with Jesus Christ, the apostles understood the truth of Trinity more than anyone. This understanding should influence their ministries, proclamation gospel, and planting the church. As an evangelical theologian, Michael Bird states,

The God we are confronted with in the gospel is the Triune God. The gospel and the Trinity are internally configured toward each other because the saving acts of God point to a God who exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The salvation that the gospel promises portrays the Father as choosing, Christ as redeeming, and the Spirit as renewing—all in a unified work by distinct persons in a single Godhead.<sup>5</sup>

Therefore, reading from the teachings of the apostles, one can know more about the Trinity doctrine. Typically, Paul described the persons of God in detail. In the letter to the church in Rome, he wrote, “I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16). And “I urge you, brothers, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in my struggle by praying to God for me” (v. 30). He also affirmed the uniqueness of the Father and the Son in the first letter to Corinthians, “Yet for us there is but *one* God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but *one* Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live” (1 Cor 8:6 NIV). He also mentioned the Holy Spirit as an individual could be sorrowed by his children, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption” (Eph 4:30 NASB). Especially, in his benediction, Paul brought to every Christian and church the acknowledgment of the Trinity God, “May the grace of *the*

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<sup>5</sup> Michael F. Bird, p. 92.

*Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all*” (1 Cor 13:14).

Furthermore, in Revelation, the Son of God appears as the almighty and glory God.

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. So it is to be. Amen.

“I am the Alpha and the Omega,” says the Lord God, “who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty.” (Rev 1:7-8 NASB)

These words were echoed in other verses (2:8; 21:6; 22:13). These words also echo the words of Jehovah in the Old Testament (Exodus 3:14, Isaiah 41:4; 44:6; 46:10; 48:12). This absolutely confirms that Jesus Christ is the very Jehovah, the one and only God. Here, one could raise a question about the Holy Spirit. He seems to play a less important role in the Trinity. It seems Revelation concentrates much on the Son, and ignores the Spirit. However, just with a few verses we can understand that the Holy Spirit’s presence associated with the throne of God, and of course, he is God. “Out from *the throne* come flashes of lightning and sounds and peals of thunder. And there were seven lamps of fire burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God” (4:5). “And I saw between the throne (with the four living creatures) and the elders a Lamb standing, as if slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God, sent out into all the earth” (5:6). “The seven Spirits of God” indicate that the Holy Spirit is omnipresent, from the throne to all the earth. I believe that the Holy Spirit has been acting in the church, in and through every Christian during history, and no need to mention him in more detail in Revelation. And now, Revelation is mainly devoted to describing the coming kingdom of God and the returning of the Lord Jesus Christ. So, Revelation could pay less attention to the Holy Spirit, but it does not mean he is less present there. Furthermore, in the last chapter of the book, the Holy Bible close with a reference to the Trinity:

“I, *Jesus*, have sent My angel to testify to you these things in the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star.”

And the *Spirit* and the bride say, “Come!” And let him who hears say, “Come!” And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely. I testify to everyone who hears the words of the prophecy of this book: if anyone adds to them, *God* will add to him the plagues which are written in this book (Rev 22:16-18 NKJV).

Therefore, even if the Trinity doctrine was not shaped, people of God would still believe firmly and understand clearly that there are three distinctive persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the only one God. And there exist only these three persons, if we have a desire to look for one more person, we could never ever find out that fourth person. Now, the task of theologians is simply to systemize the biblical teachings related to the works and the nature of the persons of Godhead so that Christian theology has a simple doctrine that every believer could understand and confess his or her faith.

## **The Historic Merit of the Trinity Doctrine**

History of the Trinity doctrine is a very long story that cost how much ink of tears, energy, and pain. The doctrine has been suffered how many challenges during the history of Christianity. It was tempered extremely in the early period of shaping, faded down over time, but never stopped, even now.

As the purpose stated, however, this paper just pays attention to some major characters and facts in the early chapters of the story.

First, Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (155/160 – 220/240 AD), a theologian and prolific Christian author, who has been considered to be father of the Trinity doctrine. He was trained in Greek and Latin and became a lawyer. He used juristic language in a skillful way so that it became decisive for the future.<sup>6</sup> Maybe with the mind of a lawyer, he was enthusiastic with pursuing the biblical truths and fighting against heresy. He defended the unity of the Old

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<sup>6</sup> Paul Tillich, *A History of Christian Thought* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1968), p. 46.

and New Testaments against Marcion, who had argued that they related to different gods. By doing so, he laid the foundations for a doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>7</sup> He wrote *Against Praxeas*, in which the term *trinity* was used to describe the Godhead with three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Tertullian claimed, “These three are one substance, not one person.” It can be said that the doctrine of Trinity was formed at this point. It is noteworthy that Tertullian described the unity in the Trinity, denied any form of tritheistic tendencies.<sup>8</sup> (Tritheistic means three distinct gods, the popular idea in pagan religions). Therefore, people cannot assume that he borrowed the idea of trinity from pagan.

Second, the negative character Arius, a Libyan presbyter and priest in Baucalis in Alexandria, Egypt. He believed that Christ had not been a version of God or part of a trinity, but only a mortal man.<sup>9</sup> This character claimed that the Word who became incarnate in Jesus, although pre-existing before the rest of creation, was not “God of very God,” but rather the first of all creatures.<sup>10</sup> In the First Ecumenical Council, in Nicea 325 AD, though Arius was not allowed to voice because he was not a bishop, but his view was presented by a bishop, his close friend Eusebius of Nicomedia, who also held the view. When the bishops heard the explanation of Eusebius, their reaction was the opposite of what he had expected. The assertion that the Word or Son was no more than a creature, no matter how high a creature, provoked angry reactions from many of the bishops: “You lie!” “Blasphemy!” “Heresy!” Eusebius was shouted down, his speech was snatched from his hand, torn to shreds, and trampled underfoot.<sup>11</sup> This is so easy to understand. How the bishops could accept that the Lord whom they worship, witness, and

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<sup>7</sup> Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology, An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought*. (Malden, Massachusetts: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Tillich, p. 46.

<sup>9</sup> Michael C. Thomsett, *Heresy in the Roman Catholic Church, A History* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2011), p. 33.

<sup>10</sup> Justo L. González, *Church History, An Essential Guide* (Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press, 1996), p. 38.

<sup>11</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity, Complete in one volume, the Early Church to the Present day*. Vol. 1 (Peabody, Massachusetts: 2004), p. 164.

willing to be imprisoned, tortured, exiled or even to be a martyr for him, now he was considered a creature! From this point, we can see that the controversies, debates, attacks just prove the firmness of the Trinity doctrine. The great result from controversies and the Council was the ‘Nicene Creed’ as an official affirmation of the Trinity doctrine. The following is quoted from the Creed.

We believe in one God the Father All-sovereign, maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible;  
And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, Begotten of the Father before all the ages, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made...  
And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceedeth from the Father, who with Father and Son is worshipped together and glorified together, who spake through the prophets.<sup>12</sup>

Third, confronted with Arius, Athanasius of Alexandria appeared as a hero, who was the great advocate of the decisions of the Council of Nicea. He presented at the Council of Nicea as a deacon but later became the champion of the Nicene cause.<sup>13</sup> Because of protection the truth, he had to suffer many times of exile, and had to seek refuge among the monks in the desert. His persistent and constant combat with the heresy Arianism brought the right understanding to most of the church. Eventually, the whole Trinity doctrine was ratified at the Council Constantinople in 381 AD. Although Athanasius never saw the final victory of the cause to which he devoted his life, his writing clearly shows that he was convinced that in the end Arianism would be defeated. As he approached his old age, he saw emerge around himself a new generation of theologians devoted to the same cause.<sup>14</sup>

The story continued with many notable characters and cliffhanger episodes. It has been associated with the bigger story, History of Christianity. However, as it stated in the introduction, this small research just focuses on tracking down the origin of the Trinity doctrine so that it can

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<sup>12</sup> Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder. *Documents of The Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1, p. 166.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 180.

crush all doubts of believers about the biblical truths of the Trinity. Therefore, with three major characters and some facts described above, we can see from the historic angle, the Trinity could not derive from pagan religions.

## **Conclusion**

Undoubtedly, it is so difficult to comprehend the Trinity doctrine, but it is still much easier to believe and assent than to refuse it. How could one believe in God and simultaneously reject his presence in his distinctive persons? How could one take the teaching of the Bible as the standards for his or her belief but decline or distort the great biblical truth of the Trinity, the revealed nature of God. I do believe that people who read the Bible diligently, will spontaneously see the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit without being taught about the Trinity doctrine. Negatively, it is very dangerous to ignore or renounce this doctrine. In reality, it is heartbreaking to see that people who deny the doctrine of Trinity, often depose the Second Person of God, the Savior Lord Jesus Christ down from their heart's throne, and publicly offend him. Stephen R. Holmes states that, "Recent writers have found in the Trinity not just the essence of Christian faith, but a seemingly endlessly generative doctrine for ethical and social ideas. Right belief about the Trinity will determine our understanding of the church, of the proper shape of human society, and of many other pastoral and political questions."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the church should not neglect teaching this crucial doctrine, both biblically and historically. It is well advised that we must remember that the Trinity has antecedents in the biblical materials and that these were teased out and developed in the early church."<sup>16</sup> And

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<sup>15</sup> Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity, The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012), p. 1

<sup>16</sup> Michael F. Bird, p. 124.

certainly, the answer for the raised question as the title is NO, the doctrine of Trinity is totally biblical.

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