Trinity: A Biblical-Theological Analysis
[An article originally written by Mrs. Santhi and Rev. Sudhakar Mondithoka for Apologia[1]]

Introduction: Trinity is the distinctively Christian understanding of the nature of God. It is the most enigmatic of all Christian doctrines. It is the most difficult and yet one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith, because it is concerned with what God is like in Himself in His very being and other vital things (or truths) like our salvation and the deity of Jesus Christ. Trying to understand the Trinity is, in one sense, trying to understand the nature of the God of the Bible. If we understand something fully then it is not God. We can understand God only to the extent He gives us self-disclosure and our limited faculties grasp it. This means that we might only see hints and hear rumours of God's existence and nature from the world around us, but only God's revelation of himself gives us a deeper insight into His nature and that there is bound to be mystery in our understanding of what God is like. Stanley Grenz says that grasping the concept of God as triune is the most difficult one out of the different aspects of our Christian understanding of God. He thinks that this is closer to the heart of the mystery of the God we have come to know than any other dimension of the Christian confession. Grenz further observes that the confession that the one God is Father, Son, and Spirit is what sets Christianity apart from the other religions.[2]

Christianity is unique among world religions in its Trinitarian understanding of God. Christianity is not simple theism but Trinitarian theism. There is no other religion that gives us this kind of insight into the nature of God. This perhaps is why this doctrine has been a widely disputed one and has provoked debate throughout the history of the Church. This doctrine is sometimes attacked as being insufficiently monotheistic and Jews, Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses and others accuse Christians of tritheism (belief in three Gods) or polytheism.

People often say that Christians have invented this doctrine because it is not explicitly taught in the Bible and the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible. Therefore, in this article we will focus on how the Bible progressively reveals God to us as a Trinitarian being. Alister McGrath observes, "the doctrine of the trinity is the end result of a long process of thinking about the way in which God is present and active in his world. It is the result, not the starting point, of a long process of thinking which can be seen going on in the first four centuries of the Christian era, as Christian theologians wrestled with God's self-revelation in Scripture and tried to understand it."[3] This means that Christians have not invented the doctrine of the Trinity, but just uncovered it and we hope to show that it is the response of the Christian community down the centuries as it has responded to and reflected upon God's revelation of himself in history as the Bible records it. We will analyze the subject broadly under three headings: Trinity in the Old

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[2] Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 53.
[3] Alister McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990), 115.

Testament, Trinity in the New Testament, and a theological analysis of the doctrine of Trinity.

Trinity in the Old Testament: Many people think that the doctrine of Trinity is found only in the New Testament (NT) but not in the Old Testament (OT). But it is not true. If God has eternally existed as 'one God in three persons' and revealed himself progressively, then there must be some indications of this in the OT. Trinity was not fully revealed until the Incarnation and Pentecost had given men fuller understanding of the Son and the Spirit, and their relationship to each other and to the Father. Therefore, we should not expect to find the doctrine in its full form in the OT, but we can find anticipations of the Trinity in it.

The primary emphasis in the OT is on the 'oneness' of God. According to the OT there is only one God and He is the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. This is captured for us in Deuteronomy 6:4 – Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Verses 4-9 constitute a section which has meant more to the Jews throughout their history than any other passage in the OT. Verse four is recited twice every day, along with Deut. 11:13-21 and Numbers 15:37-41, by every devout Jew. The Talmud (interpretation of the Mishna which is the interpretation of the Torah, the Law) opens with it and it is known as *Shema*, from the Hebrew word with which it begins. But there is some kind of plurality within the being of this one God as it is indicated in the different sections of the OT. The following are some of the strands of evidence for trinity, or at least plurality in the personality of the Godhead in the OT.

God Speaks in the Plural: The first person plural of Genesis 1:26; 3:22 and 11:7 is generally regarded as an anticipation and as needing the doctrine of the Trinity to explain it. Some try to explain it away by saying that it is a plural of majesty (a form a speech that a king would use, the royal 'we' or 'us'). But this does not carry much weight because in the OT Hebrew there are no other examples of such use of the first person plural (verb or pronoun) by a monarch. There are others who suggest that God probably was speaking to the angels. But this cannot be sustained, because the Bible never says that the angels participated in the creation of man. Moreover man is not created in the image of angels, but in the image of God. We need not be too dogmatic about this, because this line of reasoning is not used in the NT. But this seems to be the most reasonable conclusion and if is correct it has some interesting implications in these passages. The creation narrative tells us that God created man in His own image and that 'male and female he created them' (1:27). This perhaps suggests that man in community reflects the Divine image more fully than man in isolation, because God is Himself a holy Community of Persons. Commenting of this Grudem say, "The best explanation is that already in the first chapter of Genesis we have an indication of a plurality of persons in God himself. We are not told how many persons, and we have nothing approaching a complete doctrine of the Trinity, but it is implied that more than one person is involved."[4]

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[4] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994), 227.

The Angel of the Lord: In the Bible angels are normally treated as being created by God and altogether inferior to Him. They are His servants sent to perform His will. However, this is not true of the Being referred to in the OT as 'the Angel of the Lord'. He is clearly in some sense a separate Person from God, and yet He speaks as if He is God (Gen. 21:17-19; 22:11ff.; 31:11-13; Judges 6:11-24; 13:21 ff. etc.). The very first occurrence of this phenomenon is in Gen. 16:7-15. It should be noted that the identification of the angel of the Lord with the Lord Himself is not simply Hagar's own. If this had been so she might have been mistaken. But the inspired writer also makes this identification (v. 13). It would be very interesting to study Genesis 18 also in this light. It seems that we are intended to understand the angel of the Lord to be distinct from the Lord and yet a manifestation of the Lord Himself.

Two Persons are called God (Heb. *Elohim*) in the OT: There are passages in the OT where two separate persons are called God. One person is called God or the Lord and is distinguished from another person who is also said to be God (Psalm 45:6-7). In the NT, the author of Hebrews quotes this passage (Heb. 1:8) and applies it to Christ. In Psalm 110:1 David refers to two separate persons as 'Lord'. It seems clear that David was aware of a plurality of persons in one God. In the NT we notice that Jesus understood this. When he asked the Pharisees for an explanation of this passage none of them were able to give an answer (Matt. 22:41-46) and unless they are willing to admit a plurality of persons in the Godhead, even today, the Jewish interpreters of the OT will have no satisfactory explanation of Psalm 110:1.

The personification of Wisdom in Proverbs 8: Here we find that 'wisdom' is personified and that she invites men to receive instruction from her (vv. 1-21). From verse 22 onwards the writer says things about 'wisdom' that seem to go far beyond mere personification for literary effect. In this section the relationship of 'wisdom' to God is expounded and the impression is created that this is a relationship between two persons. The work of a 'craftsman' at God's side in the creation clearly suggests the ides of distinct personhood. The apostle Paul spoke of Christ as the Wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24, 30; Colossians 2:3). So 'wisdom' here seems to really refer to the Son of God before he became man. But some phrases in verses 22-25 seem to speak of the creation of this person who is called 'wisdom'. The present day Jehovah's Witnesses like the fourth century Arians (who deny the deity of Jesus) argue that verse 22 should be translated as 'The Lord created me . . .' (the NIV translation also suggests this). But the orthodox argued (during the Arian controversy) that it should be rendered ' The Lord possessed me . . .' as the KJV and NASB translations have it. This rendering is supported by the fact that the Hebrew word that commonly means 'create' (*bara*) is not used here. The word used is *qanah*, which occurs eighty-four times in the OT and almost always means 'to get or acquire' and the expression 'brought forth' in verses 24 and 25 is a different term but could carry a similar meaning.

The Spirit of the Lord is distinguished from the Lord: Isaiah 63:10 says that God's people rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit. It suggests that the Holy Spirit is distinct from God and that the Holy Spirit can be grieved, thus suggesting emotional capabilities which can be true only of a distinct person. Isaiah 61:1 also distinguishes 'the Spirit of the Lord' from 'the Lord'. Right in Genesis 1:2 we see the Spirit of God.

Isaiah 48:16 mentions three distinct divine persons: Here we notice an abrupt change of the speaker in verse 16. The speaker (seems to be the servant of the Lord) says, "And now the Lord God has sent me and his Spirit." The Servant Songs of Isaiah, which consist of at least 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12, start from the nation but focus more and more on the Individual whose mission involved suffering and death for the sins of others and who alone can be in the picture in chapter 53. It is certainly possible that He speaks in Isaiah 48:16 in preparation for His longer utterance in chapter 49. This means that both the servant of the Lord and the Spirit of the Lord are sent by the Lord God on a particular mission and we have to recognize the two objects of sending ('me' and 'his Spirit') to be distinct persons. From a NT perspective where Jesus the Messiah is recognized to be the true servant of the Lord, Isaiah 48:16 has very clear Trinitarian implications and it gives us a remarkable glimpse of the Trinity. Let us now consider the more explicit NT teaching on the Trinity.

Trinity in the New Testament: Having looked at the partial revelation of the triunity of God in the OT, we are now turning to the more complete and explicit revelation in the NT. We have to begin by noting that like the OT, the NT also emphasizes that there is only one God (Matt. 23:9; Mark 10:18; 12:29; John 5:44; 17:3; Romans 3:30; 1 Cor. 8:4; Gal. 3:20; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2:5; James 2:19; 4:12; Jude 25). So one important conclusion we can draw at this point is that both OT and NT are united in asserting that there is only one God and the OT indicates that there is plurality of Persons within the unity of Godhead. But the NT goes on to make clear statements about the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and thus makes the concept of trinity much more explicit, although it does not delineate the theological concept of trinity.

Jesus Christ is God-incarnate or Lord and God: In the NT the fundamental Christian insight that Jesus is God in human form (God incarnate) is stated explicitly. McGrath summarizes the NT witness to Jesus by saying, "Jesus is understood to act as God and for God: whoever sees him, sees God; when he speaks, he speaks with the authority of God; when he makes promises, he makes them on behalf of God; when he judges us, he judges as God; and so forth."[5] The NT even states that Jesus was active in the process of creation itself as the creative agent (John 1:3; Colossians 1:16; Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is clearly recognized to be the one who can be called God and Lord, creator, saviour and judge, who is worshipped, and to whom prayers are addressed. What is amazing is that the disciples who were given this revelation were Jews and strict monotheists. But in the face of overwhelming evidence, especially after the resurrection, they could not but recognize the Lordship of Jesus. It must have been a long and difficult journey for them.

John shows that as the Word of God, the Son (John 1:14, 18) is eternal by saying that he was 'in the beginning' (v. 1), an expression surely intended to remind the Jewish reader of Gen. 1:1, as the Agent of creation (v. 3) and that he was 'with God' (v. 1) having intimate fellowship (v. 18). The most striking expression is the statement 'The Word was God'. Attempts to reduce the significance of this to 'the Word was a god' betray a faulty understanding of Greek. The omission of the definite article in this kind of

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[5] Alister McGrath, *Understanding Trinity*, 121.

sentence was normal even though the noun was really definite. It also shows a failure to appreciate that for a Jew 'a god' could only mean a pagan deity, and so no god at all. So John's prologue prepares us for the climax in the confession of Thomas (20:28) – 'my Lord and my God'. So here we find One who is distinct from God, the Father and yet utterly one with Him. In John 8:53 and other places (6:35; 8:12; 10:7, 11-14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1) we find Jesus' 'I am' statements which reveal his identification with Jehovah, the great 'I am' of the OT (Exodus 3:14). The use of present tense in 8:58 ('before Abraham was, I am') suggests that He is the timeless God, and at this Jews threw stones at him because they understood what he was claiming for himself. John 10:22-39 also teaches (through the use of Father and Son relationship between Jesus and Jehovah) that Jesus is a distinct person from God the Father and yet one in essence.

Paul also teaches that Jesus was not just a man, but God in the human form (Romans 9:5; Titus 2:13; Colossians 2:9; 1 Cor. 8:6; 12:3 etc.). In the rest of the NT also again and again the name 'Lord' (Gk. *Kurios*), the equivalent of the Hebrew name for God is applied to Jesus Christ and often it plainly carries its full OT significance (Luke 2:11; 1:43; Matt. 3:3; 22:44; Hebrews 1:10-12; Revelation 19:16 etc.). We can summarize the entire NT teaching about Jesus by saying that he is essentially God who took humanity upon himself in his historical incarnation to reconcile man to God (Phil. 2:5-11; Col. 1:15-22). Let us now turn our attention to what the NT says about the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is also God: Through out the NT we find the explicit teaching that the Holy Spirit is a separate person (from the Father and the Son) and fully God (Acts 5:3-4). He is classified on an equal level with the Father and the Son (Matt. 28:19; 1 Cor. 12:4-6 etc.). We also notice that divine characteristics are attributed to him (1 Cor. 2:10-11; Heb. 9:14; Romans 15:19 etc.). In Jesus' teaching found in John's gospel (chapters 14-16) we have tremendous insight into the personality and Deity of the Holy Spirit, both of which are established by the expression 'another Counsellor' (14:16). Greek possesses two words which could be translated as 'another'. One (Gk. *allos*) means 'another of the same kind' and the other (Gk. *heteros*) means 'another of a different kind'. It is the first one which is employed here. So if Jesus is the Lord of all, and the Holy Spirit takes His place, surely He too must be a Divine Person.

The term 'spirit' (Gk. *pneuma*) is neuter in Greek. But surprisingly there are places where the masculine pronoun *he* (Gk. *ekeinos*), rather than the neuter pronoun *ekeino*, is applied to the Holy Spirit (14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14). Moreover, the word translated 'counsellor' or 'comforter' (Gk. *parakletos*) describes the office of a person. It could not conceivably be used of a mere impersonal influence or power. In sum, the NT evidence is showing very clearly that the Holy Spirit is a person and that He is also fully God. Now we will conclude the survey of the NT evidence for the Trinity by listing the passages where all the three persons are named together.

The three Persons of the Trinity are named together: There are at least nine places (1 Cor. 12:4-6; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; Jude 20-21 etc.) where all the three persons of the Trinity are named together. In the narrative of Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:16-17) we see the Son being baptized, the Spirit descending on Him and the Father speaking from

heaven. In the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19) we see Jesus telling the disciples that they should baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

So far, we have surveyed the Biblical evidence for Trinity. But we still do not have a statement of the doctrine. What becomes progressively clear as we move from the OT to the NT is that there is one God and there are three distinct persons who are God. The early Christians had to integrate both of these into a composite understanding of who God is. They confessed the one true God of the OT, proclaimed the lordship of Jesus Christ, and they experienced the reality of the ongoing presence of God through the Holy Spirit. Discovering the conception of God that could bring together these three strands challenged the minds of Christian thinkers or theologians during the first four centuries of the Christian era. The result of their work was the formulation of the different Creeds. The Athanasian Creed states the doctrine very clearly: "And the Catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity; neither confounding the persons, nor diving the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one, the glory equal, the majesty co-eternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son, and such is the Holy Spirit." So we will consider the theological analysis of Trinity briefly.

A Theological analysis of the Doctrine of Trinity: The theological term 'Trinity' designates the one true God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one 'essence' (Gk. *ousios*) of the Godhead there are three 'persons' (Gk. *hypostaseis*) who are neither three gods nor three parts or modes of God, but coequally and coeternally God. This doctrine is an attempt to bring together the incredible richness of the Christian understanding and experience of God. It is a tool that enables us to bring together the remarkably complex biblical witness to God in a more sophisticated whole. McGrath says, "It is a way - in fact, really the only way - of making sense of the biblical witness to God. It takes what is already there, what is already known, and shows how it is all related together as a consistent whole. It is a tool, a method, for handling the kaleidoscope of biblical affirmations about the nature and character of God, and bringing them together."[6]

This doctrine affirms that all of God's actions reflect the fact that God is eternally what His revelation in history demonstrates Him to be – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the threeness of the one God is eternal or threeness is the way God actually is in his essential being. So despite their varying functions in the one divine programme, the three members of this one Godhead are united in everything the Triune (three-in-one) God does. The three Trinitarian persons are all involved in every area of God's working in the world. Grenz explains this in these words: "Although the Father is the ground of the creation of the world, the Son and the Spirit act with the Father in the creative task. . . . Likewise, although the Son is the redeemer of humanity, the Father and the Spirit are involved together with the Son in the program of reconciliation. . . . Finally, although the Spirit is the completer of the divine program, he is joined in this eschatological work by

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[6] Alister McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity*, 117-118.

the Son and the Father. . . . As these examples indicate, in each divine work the Father acts through the Son and by the agency of the Spirit."[7]

Grudem summarizes the teaching of the Holy Scriptures (the Bible) in three statements: God is three persons, each person is fully God, and there is one God and Grudem demonstrates that errors have come by denying any one of these statements.[8] Grenz summarizes the *contents* of the doctrine of Trinity with four statements: God is one, God is three, God is a diversity, and God is a unity and explains each of these concepts.[9] Norman Geisler summarizes the doctrine in these words: "By saying God has one essence and three persons it is meant that he has one "What" and three "Whos." The three Whos (persons) each share the same What (essence). So God is a unity of essence with a plurality of persons. Each person is different, yet they share a common nature. God is one in his substance. The unity is in his essence (what God is), and the plurality is in God's persons (how he relates within himself)."[10]

Conclusion: In conclusion, we just want to say that if we truly worship this triune God (the only true God there is that deserves the worship of all humans) who is a community of three Divine Persons (the redeemer God) eternally existing in a bond of love, we as the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ (the redeemed and redeeming community) should show to the world that we are a community of God's people bound by love and unity.

We should also make the pattern of relationship among the three members in the Holy Trinity as our pattern in our families and different circles of relationships. After all, if we truly worship the Triune God, we have to become like Him and will be transferred in our Character into His likeness (Psalm 115: 8; 135:18; Hosea 9:10; 2 Kings 17: 15), because, as a principle, the worshippers becomes like the object of their worship. If this transformation of our character into the likeness of the object of our worship is not happening (however slow the rate of transformation might be), then there is something fundamentally wrong with our worship. This was the desire and prayer of Jesus Christ as we can see from His high priestly prayer that we find in John 17: 11 and 21- 22. Jesus sends us, His people, the Church into the world as His Father had sent him into the world (John 17: 18) and so He says that the world would recognize Him as the heaven-sent one or the Savior-God from heaven when the world finds unity and love among His disciples that resembles the love and unity that existed and continues to exist between Him and the Father (and by implication in the Holy Trinity). Therefore, this transformation of character through the process of sanctification in which we work together with the Triune God should be one of our preoccupations in this life and this world, as we represent the Triune God to the people in this world.

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[7] Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 67-68.
[8] Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 231-247.
[9] Stanley Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God*, 66-69.
[10] Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 732.