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Why Didn't God Explain the Trinity Explicitly in Scripture?

October 17, 2022



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about whether the Old Testament believers were regenerate, how the work of the Spirit is different in the New Testament, and why God didn't explain the Trinity explicitly in Scripture.

* Were Old Testament believers regenerate, and how is the work of the Spirit different in the New Testament?

* I agree the Trinity best explains all the biblical data, but why didn't God lay it out explicitly in Scripture?

Transcript

[Music] [Bell] I'm Amy Hall, I'm here with Greg Koukl and you're listening to #STRask. Today, Greg. Good morning, Abes.

[Laughs] Good morning. Today, we have a question about the Old Testament and it comes from Robert. Were Old Testament believers regenerate? If yes, how is the work of the Spirit different in the New Testament? If no, isn't this a form of semi-plegianism? Well, the answer is no because the concept of regeneration, which is the new birth, is a function of the new covenant, which wasn't inaugurated until Pentecost.

So, I mean, we dispatch that. I don't know why it would be a form of semi-plegianism. Now, semi-plegianism is the idea that it's probably the simplest way to put it, is Jesus plus works.

You need Jesus to be saved, but you've got to work your way to heaven. Plagius thought you can get to heaven. There was no fallen nature and we could work ourselves.

We could develop our characters to the point of being noble and righteous enough to be self-justified, essentially. He was a contemporary of Augustine in the 4th century and they were head-to-head on these issues. Semi-plegian is a version of that.

Faith in Jesus is necessary, but works play a decisive role. And I would consider Roman Catholicism in practice to be semi-plegian. And actually, sometimes not even semi-maybe fully-plegian because, especially with their inclusivist doctrine, you don't have to have faith in Jesus.

Jesus is necessary in God's bookkeeping for anyone to be saved, but a religious person could reject Christ on religious grounds because they're being faithful to their own religion. And God honors that faithfulness to their own religion, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, whatever, as faith in Christ. And so, as long as they're good, they're a good Jew and they're righteous people.

But by the way, a good Hindu is an idol-worshiper. And a Hindu who doesn't worship idols is not a good Hindu. So, the same thing with Buddhist, at least some forms of it, like in Thailand, where I used to live.

So, anyway, I'm not sure I even understand the point, Richard's point about, or Robert's point about, how this could be semi-plegian if there's no regeneration in the Old Testament. Paul's appeal to Old Testament saints, or regarding Old Testament saints, was always based on faith. And he would go back, say in Romans 4, back to the archetype of salvation, justification by faith, which was Abraham, long before the time of Christ, long before regeneration.

Regeneration is New Testament concept, not a concept, a New Testament function, or a New Covenant detail. This is what makes the New Covenant better than the Old, because now we are given a heart through regeneration to keep the law in a way that wasn't available to Old Testament believers. The spirit was available, but not in the same way, not in regeneration.

The spirit was available as a helper under certain circumstances, so the spirit would come upon them, but would not indwell them in the sense that we have the indwelling spirit in the New Testament economy. So, maybe you would agree with this, Greg. I think I would say, I think what he might be saying in terms of this being semi-plegianism is the idea that they could believe that they could have faith in God apart from the Holy Spirit's regeneration.

But I agree that the New Testament is very clear that it's a different thing now. The regeneration, the new creation, is a different thing. The Holy Spirit is indwelling us in a way that he didn't before, which is the whole point of Romans 7 and 8, where he talks about the fact that we couldn't follow the law because we didn't have the spirit, and the spirit enables us to kill our sin and to bear fruit for God.

That's also the theme of Galatians 5, in beginning of 6, fruit of the Spirit, and if you walk by the Spirit, you're not under the law because, in my sense, you're fulfilling the law and the power of the Spirit already. The principles of the law so the law doesn't have the

same role in your life. So, that's the same concept there in Galatians.

So, there's definitely a difference. Now, you also see in the Old Testament that the Holy Spirit will obviously speak through people. There's inspired prophecies.

There's scripture. There's all sorts of places where the Holy Spirit works through people. But it's in some way different from the way that he indwells every believer, because that's another point made about the New Covenant, is that now it's not that the Holy Spirit will come on someone for a time or for a specific purpose, but now he is indwelling us in a different way and regenerating us.

But I don't think any of this is to say that God did not before choose and call people and enable them to have faith. It's not the same motif. It's not the same as it is now.

Would you say that? Sure. Okay. Well, let's go on to a question from James.

I'm thoroughly convinced the Trinity best explains all of biblical data. But why do you think the Lord didn't lay it out explicitly in scripture? I dialogue with many Jews, Muslims, and one is Pentecostals, and they often bring up this question. Well, you know, like with almost every question that starts with why did God or why didn't God? It's very difficult to come up with a decisive or authoritative answer because this is a question about the mind and intentions of God and God hasn't spoken on this.

Okay. Now, one, I guess I have a couple of thoughts on this. One is it strikes me that scripture is rather clearer on this issue.

It's clear that there's one God, crystal clear. It's also crystal clear that Jesus, the Lord, is God. He's called God.

He exercises divine prerogatives, and he has divine characteristics. All right. He was the one who created everything that was ever created, John 1-3.

And you can do the same thing I'm doing here with the Holy Spirit, but just for the sake of economy of time. And he's called God, he exercises divine prerogatives like receive worship, and he has divine qualities. So you have at least there are just two centers of consciousness in the one God.

Okay. So I don't think it's that hard. I think it's odd, and that's difficult for people, but I don't think it's that hard.

And that the persons are distinct is pretty obvious because they interact with each other in personal ways. So Jesus prays to the Father, the Father speaks at Jesus, baptism, etc., and the transfiguration, etc., etc. So there is a sense of which to me it is fairly clear.

Now if what one is looking for is kind of a straightforward characterization like, okay, I'm a trinity. So by the way, that means I'm three centers of consciousness and one being.

You don't have hardly anything like that in the Bible.

You know, you have God communicating what he needs at a certain time. And let's see, Fred Sanders, our friend over at Biola, has written a lot on the trinity. I think it was Fred that made this point.

The reason more the details of the trinity don't come out early on, like in the Old Testament, so you see potentially some hints at it, but you get more details that guide us to that conclusion in the New Testament is because that information wasn't necessary in the Old Testament, okay? And I can see how there could be confusion. You already had a polytheistic culture. And though the trinity is not polytheism properly understood, it takes a careful, a nuanced characterization to see that it isn't polytheistic.

Look at that the Jews couldn't even get their polytheism squared away, their monotheism squared away, you know, throughout all that history until the time of Christ, they finally had it squared away. So there was no real reason to go into that detail in the Old Testament. However, in the New Testament, you have the economy of the trinity and different persons doing different things regarding the New Covenant.

The Holy Spirit regenerating Jesus dying for sins of Father sending Christ in all these different roles. And this is, I think what Fred Sanders pointed out, in the New Testament economy, it was necessary to give more definition to these aspects of God's character because these things are all involved in understanding the nature of the Atonement. In fact, we had a call in the last show, as I recall, the question about how is it that a man could pay for all the sins of mankind and eternal punishment, et cetera? And only the God-man could do it.

But it was the understanding that Jesus was the God-band that made more sense of the notion of the man Jesus dying for the sins of the world. So you can see how when we come to the time of the Atonement being made, then more detail that is given to the church so they understand the roles of the different persons in the economy of salvation. So I think that's the best speculation.

Why did God just say, "Well, first of all, there was no need." He had enough to deal with it in a certain sense with the Jews, through the whole Old Testament period. And then in the New Testament time, we do get more clarification of that. In fact, I think undeniable verification of this concept.

But even after the New Testament revelation, it still took a couple hundred years into the fourth and fifth century for Christians to really dial down on what this looked like metaphysically. Not that the early Christians were confused because the most common way of characterizing Jesus was the Lord. Not a Lord.

Not a nice master. The Lord. And all kinds of New Testament characterizations of Jesus,

the Lord, fulfilling responsibilities and functions that according to the Old Testament, God Himself alone fulfilled.

So they were clear on these facts, but they didn't know how to make sense of it. Go ahead. And I clarify, you're not saying that they didn't think Jesus was God until centuries later.

They knew all the parts. They just had trouble fitting them together. Yes, that's right.

Lewis had in the story of reality, I cite Lewis and I cite him also in the street smarts on this issue of the character, person of Jesus. Because I talk about this, I have two chapters talking about Jesus as the Lord and Jesus as the Savior. They knew there was one God and then Jesus shows up and then Jesus does the things that God does and all these other stuff.

They said, well, He was the Lord and so there was that. And then they realized that somehow God was in all of them in the person of the Spirit. And so there's this slow realization of these peculiar things and then it took them a while to put it together, wasn't totally until the end of the second century that coined the term trinity even though the notion was in play before that.

So I think that there's progressive revelation and could God have made it more clear? Well, to us here now, we can imagine ways He could have spoken that would have made it easier, but it's kind of like Jesus saying, I am God. Jesus never said I am God. This is a complaint that's raised by Muslims, for example, or Jehovah's Witnesses or other.

I said, and my response is, yes, He did. He said it a bunch of times, but He said it in words that were meaningful in the culture that He found Himself in. This is what's required now.

Actually if Jesus said, I am God, it still wouldn't be enough for a lot of people because this is not a controversial claim for people to make now. We are all kind of divine in a certain sense and this is a main claim of new age. So I don't know.

Any other way of doing it would have caused just as many problems. It seems to me God has his reasons and I can't think of a better way to have it done. It wouldn't be more problematic.

Well, it occurs to me as I think about this and again, this is speculation. Obviously we're speculating there's no definitive answer on why God did it this way. But it does occur to me that it is a lot easier to misunderstand or twist a simple statement of the Trinity than it is to misunderstand or twist the broad explanation which is the entire revelation of the Bible from all sorts of different angles so that you can put them all together and put it together.

That's a great observation Amy. So if God had said, I'm one God and three persons, well, without all the explanation and the illustrations and the ways that He worked and looking at everything, people could say they could put their own meaning into that. So I think that could be what's going on here.

In fact, this is similar to the complaint about scripture. Well, why didn't God inspire one document and just have that one document? I was thinking about the same parallel when you were making that point Amy. So go ahead.

It's a good parallel. So if he had only had one document and that was the one we're all supposed to look to, well, that can be manipulated. But when you have a whole range of documents and different families over time, now it's much harder to take something out or put something in because you have so many to compare it to.

Thousands of exemplars, copies made and write exactly. That's why there are so many variations because there are so many documents. There are so many manuscripts.

But the massive number of manuscripts that results in many variations allows us to solve the variation problem. So incidentally, I think J Warner Wallace's reality last weekend in Southern California did a magnificent job here. We've got five more realities coming up in different parts of the country.

RealityApologetics.com you get the information. But we don't usually promote reality on this show, but it was so magnificent last weekend. I'm hoping people will sign up.

There is a session that Jim Wallace does just on this issue and it's really great. Certainly even with this breadth of information that I do think stabilizes our understanding, there still was all kinds of discussions about what these concepts meant. And so you had different heresies, why you have the Calcedonian formula because that's like fourth or fifth century.

You have to, it's trying to let's nail these concepts down. But the way they were able to nail the concepts down, if they had just one statement, that's ambiguity in that. You could read all kinds of things.

But when you have this, all this breadth of revelation where Jesus says this and this and this and this and this and this, you have all these examples. He says these things. The Holy Spirit is characterizes it with the Father's character.

In all these different ways, you have this massive breadth of information that allows you to stay within a certain range of understanding of what they must have been talking about. In a way that the simple statement would not have allowed. I think it's a great observation, Amy.

Give yourself a raise. And I think after 2000 years, we overestimate how simple it would

be to understand that. Because now our minds and our ideas have been trained over thousands of years and thinkers and all of these people so that this makes a lot of sense.

But I love the point you made, Greg, about having to start off saying there's one God because that was different from all the other cultures and having to shape their understanding of reality in that way because that was the most important thing to start with. And if you had started with a statement about the Trinity, there would have been a huge misunderstanding right at the beginning. Incidentally, this little observation Amy's making now will help you understand a lot of weird things in the Old Testament.

Hinotheism is the idea that each nation has their God and the success of a nation was a reflection on the strength of the gods. And so a lot of times when you see these conflicts in the Old Testament, even battles, it is characterized by the culture as not just one tribe against another tribe, but one God against another God. So when David Goliath Goliath comes out, he is cursing David and the Jews by his gods.

And David understands this, you know, who is this uncircosized Gentile who had taught the armies of the living God, the one true God. And so this is the way they understood it. And the ten plagues in Egypt were all assaults against some Egyptian deity.

It's a way of God trying to train the peoples that there is one God. These are other false gods. There are other gods.

They can't sustain. And then of course when the Jews go south and they disobey and then God abandons them for a season, part of the complaint of David and the Psalms is look at the other nations are going to say, you got a crummy God. You know, so this is a whole way of looking at the world that it takes time for God to repair.

And at different times you'll see different prophets, different people making a clear statement, you are God and you're the only God. There's no one but you. Isaiah does very clearly famous Jehovah's Witnesses statements versus the you've proof text, but that you're the only one.

And so this is another thing that's going on in that culture that hopefully that observational help the scriptures to make more sense to people who read them. We really take ideas for granted. There are things that we take for granted that we think are just obvious that are not obvious.

They're the result of centuries of thought. And I think this is part of the problem that we have in the society now where people think they can cut off the Christian roots from everything and maintain these ideas that they like that came from Christianity. And it's just not the case.

They're taking those ideas for granted. So I think we do the same thing and we don't realize what a magnificent thing God did over all this time in developing a culture that

would give birth to Christ eventually. There's also the tendency to read current understandings and values and make them incumbent upon people of an ancient culture who had had not in a certain sense matured enough to understand some of these concepts.

So I mean this is kind of the cancel culture going back. We even see it in short term. That is politically incorrect now they apply to people's lives 30 years ago when it was not politically incorrect and then they cancel them out for what they did 30 or 40 years ago kind of thing.

Well, we do the same thing with there's a term for it. It's like the tyranny of the present or something like that where we try to take present sensibilities and import them back at a time that they just didn't apply. And then that creates difficulties.

How could these things happen in the Old Testament? We know better now. Well, there was something else going on at that time. And usually the seeds of those that the we knowing better now was back there in the law and took that time to develop it.

All right. Well, thank you James and Robert. We love hearing from you.

Send us your questions on Twitter with the hashtag STRS. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cogle for Stand to Reason.

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