

On the Trinity

What to believe and why to believe it

Summary: “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Ps 34:8). Indeed, there is nothing better than knowing God, but what will we discover when we let Him reveal Himself to us?

Scripture: Romans 5:1-5; John 16:12-15¹

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Introduction

Today is Trinity Sunday. Why set aside a day on the Christian calendar specifically for worship to celebrate a doctrine? Why celebrate a teaching of the Christian faith which is, quite possibly, the most difficult of orthodox Christian doctrine?

Notice that term I just used: *orthodox*. I use that term for two very good reasons. Firstly, because there exists in the world, and always has existed, many “ravenous wolves” who desire to confuse and deceive the “sheep”, a biblical simile for the faithful followers of Jesus (Mt 7:15; cf. 10:16; Ac 20:29). Secondly, because it is also the case there are people who seem to sincerely profess to be Christian, but who are so befuddled that we have to be concerned at just who they think they are worshipping (Mt 7:21-23). They may *do* the right things, yet without truly *knowing* Almighty God.

So, the term “orthodox” refers to beliefs or teachings about God that conform to the accepted historical teachings of the Church, the Apostles’ Creed being a good example. I use the term intentionally because the triune nature of God is an essential belief of Christianity, right alongside the physical resurrection of Jesus (1 Cor 15:17).

Opposition to this teaching comes from many sources of which you are likely aware—Mormonism, Jehovah’s Witness, the Oneness theology of Unitarianism and some forms of Pentecostalism (i.e., T.D. Jakes). Thus, we would do well to admit this doctrine is a hurdle to faith for many people. Nevertheless, it is important to clear away the confusion so we know what to believe, but, just as importantly, to also investigate why we should believe this doctrine in the first place.

What to Believe

The following definition of the Trinity is quite concise and accessible, and is borrowed from James R. White, author of *The Forgotten Trinity*:²

Within the one Being that is God, there [exists] three coequal and coeternal Persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. (James R. White)³

This definition contains the three foundations for the doctrine of the Trinity which are based firmly upon the biblical witness of God’s nature.

Foundation 1: God is one

This foundation refers to the monotheism of Judeo-Christianity, the belief in one god. Both the Old and New Testaments affirm unequivocally that God is a singular being:

Listen, Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. (Deuteronomy 6:4)

You believe that God is one. Good! Even the demons believe —and they shudder. (James 2:19)⁴

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints —or Mormons, as its members are more commonly called— for example, deny this foundation. In reference to the Holy Spirit, they teach that

From the Prophet's account of the First Vision and from his other teachings, we know that the members of the Godhead are three separate beings ... Although the members of the Godhead are distinct beings with distinct roles, they are one in purpose and doctrine.⁵

This teaching —that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are separate in being— is an expression of polytheism, the worship of multiple gods —of course, they might want to argue that point, but I don't make up the definitions!⁶

The difficulty here is the use of the word *being*. As James R. White describes,

*Being is what makes something what it is. Person is what makes someone who he or she is [...] when speaking of the Trinity, we speak of one what (the Being of God) and three whos (the three divine Persons).*⁷

In reference to myself, my *being* is human, but my *personality* is uniquely Ian Forest-Jones —that's my story and I'm sticking to it!

This distinction between *being* and *person* naturally leads us to the second foundation.

Foundation 2: There are three divine persons

This foundation refers to the fact that the one being that is God is made known to us in three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is not the Son is not the Holy Spirit. They are all divine, but separate.

Consider the following biblical passages:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Since Jesus is “the Word”, John is clearly asserting here that Jesus is divine —do not be distracted by the implied use of the term “God” as a proper name —it is His divine being that is highlighted.

“Ananias,” Peter asked, “why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit ... You have not lied to people but to God.” (Acts 5:3–4)

The Holy Spirit is also equated with God in other passages:⁸

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19)

The use of the definite article *the* here indicates the three persons are most definitely distinct from one another, yet they share a single name. So, we can conclude the Father is divine, Jesus is divine, and the Holy Spirit is also divine, and that the three, while different persons, share a singular being. In this way, we maintain that God is one.

A good analogy of their separateness and unity is the person who suffers a multiple personality disorder—an unfortunate analogy, but useful nevertheless. Such a patient is a singular being, but with three personalities. In this case, though, only one personality can be expressed at a time, while, with God, all three exist simultaneously.

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As with the first foundation, there are opponents of this foundation also. Unitarians and some branches of Pentecostalism promote a Oneness theology, believing that while there is only divine being, that being is expressed in three *modes* or *manifestations*:

In distinction to the doctrine of the Trinity, [United Pentecostal Church International] holds to a oneness view of God. It views the Trinitarian concept of God, that of God eternally existing as three distinctive persons, as inadequate and a departure from the consistent and emphatic biblical revelation of God being one [...] God is manifested as Father in creation and as the Father of the Son, in the Son for our redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in our regeneration.⁹

For those holding a oneness view of God, he appears as the Father at one time, then as the Son or the Holy Spirit, at other times. Thus, God cannot be all three at the same time. That is why this theology falls apart at Jesus' baptism when all three persons are present (Mt 3:16-17),¹⁰ but Oneness preachers try their best to downplay such passages.

Foundation 3: The persons are co-equal and co-eternal

This foundation refers to the revelation that, while there is only one God, and while that divine being is known to us as three persons, those three persons are equal in power and have also always existed. God did not decide one day that maybe His creation might understand His nature better if He made Himself known in three ways rather than merely one. God simply always was three persons bound together in a relationship of mutuality.

[Jesus] is before all things, and by him all things hold together. (*Colossians 1:17*)

How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God... (*Hebrews 9:14a*)

Clearly, both Jesus and the Holy Spirit are *eternal*—that is, existed for all time and always will. There never was a time when any of the three did not exist.

For the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily in Christ (*Colossians 2:9*)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (*John 1:1*)

Such “fullness” also indicates Jesus had all the power and knowledge of the Father, as did the Holy Spirit.

In reference to John 1:1, while the Jehovah's Witnesses like to insert the indefinite article *a*, so as to argue Jesus was only “a god”, not “the God”, the fact is John was not equating Jesus

with the Father—as we have already seen—but asserting His divinity (cf. Jn 1:14)—that is, His divine being. They want to make Jesus subordinate to the Father, His creation, but that does not hold up under scrutiny of the biblical description. They argue

The Bible is clear and consistent about the relationship of God to Jesus. Jehovah God alone is Almighty. He created the pre-human Jesus directly. Thus, Jesus had a beginning and could never be coequal with God in power or eternity.¹¹

This position is just not substantiated by the full testimony of the Bible, despite their claims.

In complete agreement with the “Statement of Beliefs” of the *Fellowship of Congregational Churches*, I do not want to bar anyone from communion with the Church or with God simply because they do not agree with my beliefs about God. However, I do believe the doctrine of the triune nature of God clearly falls into the category of the *essentials* of the faith and thus requires our unity on this point. Besides, there are good reasons for believing in the Trinity.

Why to Believe

Let us turn to the apostle Paul’s *Epistle to the Romans*:

Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ ... This hope will not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (*Romans 5:1–5*)

From this passage in the apostle’s letter, we can see there is no question all three persons of the Godhead are actively involved in our salvation. Our reconciliation with God the Father is made possible by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus (the Son of God). We are assured of the certainty of this salvation by the Holy Spirit, which provides the power that transforms us into the image of the Son, so that we may give glory to the Father.

Do not let the language overwhelm you! While there is an aspect of mystery in this definition of the nature of the Godhead, the Trinity is made accessible and real to us as we grow and mature in our understanding and fall in love with this doctrine’s truth.

Without reference to all three persons, our worship is shallow and empty, and our faith is incomplete. Our sins cannot be forgiven nor our relationship with our Sovereign Creator be restored unless we have an appreciation of just what was accomplished through Jesus the Son (Jn 14:6).

Unfortunately, Jesus is “ascended into heaven, where He is seated at the right hand of the Father” (Apostle’s Creed; cf. Jn 14:2). Until He returns, it is the Holy Spirit who reminds us of everything that Jesus taught (Jn 14:26) and empowers us to endure the trials of life (Rom 5:3–4).

Indeed, we can have peace with the Father through Jesus (Rom 5:2), and the love of God will be poured into our hearts and lives, and overflow, by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). When we encounter the Three-In-One, all our assumptions about the nature of the universe in which we live will be realigned in respect of that which created us. We will walk

confidently in a united faith and mature knowledge of God (Eph 4:13), being filled with hope for a certain future in an eternal paradise.

Taking all this in, really, what better reason can you think of for knowing all there is to know of God, and exactly as he has revealed himself to us?

Conclusion

I will not deny the Trinity is a doctrine that can be troubling. It has most definitely kept some people from faith in Christ, when it should have been that which drew them to faith.

The doctrine of the Trinity is one example of how the Wesleyan Quadrilateral can be helpful—where Scripture, tradition, reason, and experience combine to inform us on the truth about Christian faith and practice.

It is a fact the term “Trinity” does not itself appear in the Bible, yet that fact does not diminish the biblical testimony on the nature of God. There are quite a number of passages that explicitly link the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together as I have already described, yet do not use the term “Trinity”:

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit *(Matthew 28:19)*

But we ought to thank God always for you, brothers and sisters loved by the Lord, because from the beginning God has chosen you for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and through belief in the truth. *(2 Thessalonians 2:13)*

Now there are different gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different ministries, but the same Lord. And there are different activities, but the same God works all of them in each person. *(1 Corinthians 12:4–6)*

Now it is God who strengthens us together with you in Christ, and who has anointed us. He has also put his seal on us and given us the Spirit in our hearts as a down payment. *(2 Corinthians 1:21–22)*

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. *(2 Corinthians 13:13)*

[I have been called] to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, serving as a priest of the gospel of God. God’s purpose is that the Gentiles may be an acceptable offering, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. *(Romans 15:16)*

There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to one hope at your calling—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all. *(Ephesians 4:4–6)*

All of these passages, and more, link God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together without using the language of the godhead having a triune nature. Therefore, we apply church tradition and our reason to these and other passages of scripture, and intuit the triune nature of God. There just is no way to make sense of how the Bible describes the nature and work of God without accepting the triune nature of God. Hence, the doctrine of the Trinity.

Search the scriptures; search the Spirit. Believe and be reconciled to the triune God!

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Bloomington, MN, USA: Bethany House, 1998).
- 3 James R. White, “Loving The Trinity”, Statement DT250, *Christian Research Journal*, volume 21, number 4, <https://bit.ly/3tpBFYU> (accessed 30-May-2007).
- 4 See also Mk 12:29; Jn 5:44; Rom 3:30; 1 Cor 8:4, 6; Gal 3:20; and, Eph 4:6.
- 5 “Doctrinal Study: Godhead”, *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints*, <https://bit.ly/3ND7Hsr> (accessed 9-Jun-2022).
- 6 Some Mormons, recognising their theology is polytheistic, prefer to soften it by referring to their religion as “henotheistic”, which means the belief in many gods but the worship of one chief god.
- 7 James R. White, “Loving The Trinity”, including a reference to an analogy belonging to Hank Hanegraaff.
- 8 Cf. 2 Cor 3:17-18; see also Heb 9:14, Ps 139:7, and 1 Cor 2:10-11, in which the Holy Spirit is described as having the incommunicable attributes of God.
- 9 “About Us: Oneness of God”, *UPCI.org*, <https://bit.ly/3O6i6N4> (accessed 2-Jun-2007).
- 10 Cf. Jn 1:1, 17:5, and Php 2:6.
- 11 “Should You Believe In The Trinity?”, *Jehovah’s Witnesses Official Website*, <https://bit.ly/3QduwEK> (accessed 2-June-2007).