What Difference Does the Trinity Make?

Greg Crosthwait examines the Christian teaching of the Trinity—one God in three Persons—with a view toward how it impacts one's daily life.'

How much do you love the Trinity? Strange question, isn't it? Well, it certainly struck me as strange the first time I read it. But James R. White, in his article *Loving the Trinity*,{1} both asks the question and then addresses why it's so important.

On the issue of the Trinity in the contemporary church, he writes, "For many Christians, the Trinity is an abstract principle, a confusing and difficult doctrine that they believe, although they are not really sure why in their honest moments. They know it is important, and they hear people saying it is 'definitional' of the Christian faith. Yet the fact of the matter is . . . little is taught about the relationship of the divine Persons and the Triune nature of God. It is the great forgotten doctrine."{2}

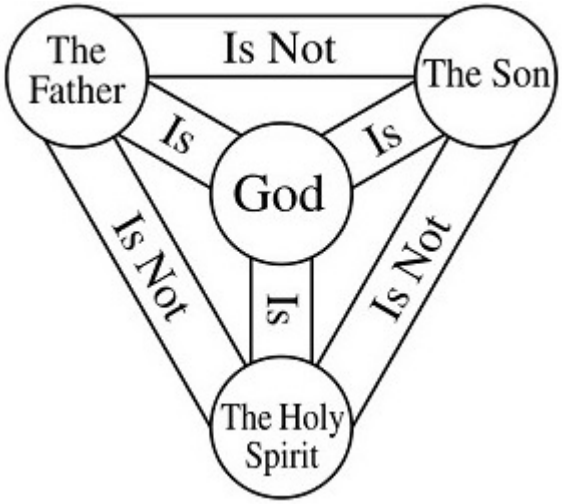
When I hear that, it prompts me to ask two questions. First of all, to what extent as Christians are we consciously Trinitarian? Well, that softens the question. Perhaps I should ask more accurately, To what extent as Christians are we relentlessly, doggedly, and fervently Trinitarian? Secondly, why should we be?

In this article I'll examine why the Trinity is important. And hopefully we'll lay some groundwork so that we may happily realize that to be truly Christian is to be consciously Trinitarian.

Why the Trinity is Important: An Overview

Perhaps some find it easier to think that the Trinity is the "secret handshake" of Christian theologians. Or maybe some may consider the Trinity of value only so we can sing the hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy*. At the root of these notions is the idea that the Trinity serves no place in the real life of one who holds a Christian worldview. But that's a mistake. A. W. Tozer begins his book *The Knowledge of the Holy* saying, "What comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."{3} This statement follows his comment in the preface that reads, "It is impossible to keep our moral practices sound and our inward attitudes right while our idea of God is erroneous or inadequate. If we would bring back spiritual power to our lives, we must begin to think of God more nearly as He is."{4}

Before moving on in our discussion, though, it may be helpful to give a brief explanation of what I mean when I refer to the Trinity. Of course, we could borrow a short phrase from *Holy, Holy, Holy*, "God in three persons, Blessed Trinity." Another handy definition is this, "Although not itself a biblical term, 'the Trinity' has been found a convenient designation for the one God self-revealed in Scripture as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It signifies that within the one essence of the Godhead we have to distinguish three 'persons' who are neither three gods on the one side, nor three parts or modes of God on the other, but coequally and coeternally God."{5}



Even though it's short, this definition is both a mouthful and a mind full. But let's settle on four basic concepts before we move on to the implications. At the heart of the definition of the Blessed Trinity we have: one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal. With this sketch in place, then, we are ready to move out and survey the importance of the Trinity with respect to the Christian worldview and its practical aspects for the Christian life. At the end of our discussion I truly hope that we can affirm together our love for the Trinity.

The Trinity and the Christian Worldview

Having established a short, working definition of the Trinity—one God, three Persons, who are coequal and coeternal—let's look at the implications of the Trinity on your worldview.

When it comes to discussing worldviews the starting point is the question, Why is there something rather than nothing?{6} As you may already know, there are three basic answers to this question. The pantheist would generally answer that all is one, all is god, and this "god with a small g" has always existed. Second, the naturalist would say that something, namely matter, has always existed. Third, the theist holds that a personal, Creator-God is eternal and out of nothing He created all that there is.

When we look around at what exists, we see an amazing collection of seemingly disparate elements such as gasses, liquids, and solids, planets and stars, horses, flowers, rocks, and trees. And seeing all of these things we notice that they all exist in some sort of equilibrium or unity. How is it that such diversity exists in such apparent unity? And

are we as human beings any more important than gasses or ants?

Because the pantheist believes that everything melds into a gigantic oneness, he ultimately has no place for individual things or people. As Scott Horrell argues, “When a worldview begins with an all-inclusive, apersonal deity, there is no final place for the human being or for ethics on either an individual or a social level.”{7}

The pantheist’s commitment to an all-inclusive oneness leaves no room for the real world in which people live, where I am not you and neither of us is one with a tree or a mountain. The naturalist has no problem accepting the reality of the physical world and the diversity present in it. However, there is no solid ground for understanding why it is all held together. In short, there is no infinite reference point so we are left with the circular argument: everything holds together because everything holds together; if it didn’t, we wouldn’t be here to see it. What a coincidence! In fact, coincidence, or chance, is the only basis for anything. As a result human beings are left with an absurd existence. “Without a unifying absolute, everything exists by chance and chance alone. . . . The human being is reduced to either a cog in a cosmic machine or an astronaut adrift in space. . . . If there is no infinite, absolute reference in the universe, then all of the particulars . . . have absolutely no meaning.”{8}

Trinitarian theism is the only option that contains within itself an explanation of both the one and the many while saying that people are important. In the Trinity, God has revealed Himself as the eternal, infinite reference point for His creation. Moreover, the Trinity provides the only adequate basis for understanding the problem of unity and diversity since God has revealed Himself to be one God who exists in a plural unity. Ultimately then, as Horrell concludes, “Every thing and every person has real significance because each is created by and finally exists in relationship to the Triune God.”{9}

The Trinity and Salvation

In reference to the Christian worldview I used the term *Trinitarian theism*. I used that term because the doctrine of the Trinity separates Christianity from any other type of theism. And, most importantly, it's the only view that adequately describes God's work in salvation.

There are other religions beside Trinitarian theism that believe in one God. Judaism, Islam, and so-called Unitarian Christianity (an oxymoron to be sure) all hold to a mono-personal God. This understanding of "God in one person" suffers in two important respects.

First of all, if we understand God to be self-existent, eternal, and personal, characterized by such an action as love, then a mono-personal God cannot be adequate, for love demands an object. Consider Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The first part of this passage is one of the great texts affirming the essential unity of God. And love is the proper human response to Him. This love is not some squishy feeling, but rather an expression of devotion from someone to someone. Love has a source and love has an object. Since human beings are created in the image of God, then He must be capable of love in His very self. So, when we hear, "God is love," (1 John 4:16) we must realize that in Himself God must be at least two. Scott Horrell writes, "In short, it seems from every vantage that for God to be infinitely personal and to be love, he must exist as at least two persons. A mono-personal God is not 'big enough' to be God."{10}

The other area in which a strictly mono-personal God is inadequate is in the relationship between God's mercy and His justice. In Romans 3:25-26 we read of Jesus Christ, "a sacrifice of atonement" (NIV) and God the Father who is "just

and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus." Simply stated, a mono-personal God cannot be both just and the justifier. Horrell argues, "[I]f God, as Moral Absolute of the universe, shows mercy and forgives the sinner, then he has violated his righteous justice. And if God exercises justice against the sinner, then he has denied his mercy. For a mono-personal God, compassion contradicts holiness, forgiveness is finally contrary to justice. God's judgment and mercy are arbitrary, if not capricious."{11}

So far we have seen the work of God the Father, the righteous judge, and God the Son, the only One who can satisfy the judgment of God the Father, and therefore the only worthy object of saving faith. The Trinity is complete as we understand that the Holy Spirit is the One who, in Jesus' words, "when He comes, will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). The Holy Spirit is the active agent in the hearts of men and women, and He "works in the fallen world convicting and leading sinners to salvation. With God's absolute holiness satisfied at the cross, true forgiveness can be freely offered to all who believe."{12}

So we see that the gospel, the story of the God who saves His people, is Trinitarian at its very core. Otherwise God would not be truly just, in which case grace would be far less than amazing.

The Trinity and the "Everydayness" of Everyday

What greater reality can be contained within the Christian confession of the Trinity than that of a God who is able to exercise perfect justice and perfect mercy perfectly? Such a self-revelation from God regarding His activity in salvation should encourage confessing Christians to focus on and revel in the Trinity rather than ignoring or dismissing it as though

it were some eccentric, old uncle at a family reunion. And according to James R. White, this is what is happening in parts of the church.

> *Entire sections of the modern church are functionally "non-Trinitarian." I did not say "anti-Trinitarian," for that would involve a positive denial of the doctrine. Instead, while maintaining the confession that the Trinity is true, many today function as if the Trinity did not exist. It has no impact on their theology, their proclamation, prayer, or worship.{13}*

This observation leads us into the final section of our discussion. Since we covered the importance of the Trinity with regard to the Christian worldview and the gospel, let's not leave it on the shelf or in the text book. Let's dress the doctrine of the Trinity in some work clothes and allow this blessed truth to change our lives where we live them, in the everydayness of everyday.

Trinitarianism impacts three important areas: worship, prayer, and the local church.

Worship

Worship is a debated topic these days. But in the midst of the opinions and preferences about drums, organs, guitars, hymns, praise choruses, and seeker sensitivity, how often does someone declare that our worship is not Trinitarian enough?

Though it seems like a dry, academic issue this is an important question in two ways. First of all, if our worship is not Trinitarian enough, then we fail to worship the God of the Bible. And in biblical terms worshiping anything other than the Most High God is idolatry. As Isaiah records, "Remember the former things long past, For I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is no one like me" (Isa. 46:9).

Would a visitor to a typical worship service realize that a Christian church confesses and worships the Triune God? Most certainly someone would realize that we worship Jesus. That person might even hear Him called God's Son. But would this person hear prayers addressed to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Holy Spirit? Would this visitor hear songs to the different Persons of the Trinity, about the different Persons of the Trinity?

Good examples of this type of song are the classic hymn *Holy, Holy, Holy* and the chorus *There is a Redeemer*, with the refrain, "Thank you, O my Father, for giving us Your Son; And leaving Your Spirit 'til the work on earth is done." That last example is not foggy theology, but an expression of gratitude to the Living God for who He is and what He has done, is doing, and will do.

I am not arguing that all Christian worshipers must hold doctorates in theology, but simply that we exercise care in the content of our worship so that we truly worship the one true God in three Persons. We can focus on Jesus, and indeed we ought to for He is our Savior. But we must not exclude confession and adoration of the Father and the Holy Spirit, much less the blessed Trinity.

Prayer

In his book, *God: Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better*, J. Carl Laney includes a helpful section on prayer. He writes, "Although God is one divine essence, He is also three persons. Which of these should we address in our prayers?"{14} Though this question may seem like an unnecessary trifle, we must be informed by Scripture. We are taught by Jesus to address God the Father, "Pray, then, in this way: Our Father who is in heaven, hallowed be Your Name" (Matt. 6:9). In another statement on prayer Jesus says, "Truly, truly, I say to you, if you ask the Father for anything in My name, He will give it to you" (John 16:23). We see that, in Laney's words,

“Christian prayer involves requesting the Father on the basis of the Son’s merits, influence, and reputation”{15}—that is to say, ask of the Father in the name of the Son. We can also address our prayers to Jesus, who says, “If you ask Me anything in My name, I will do it” (John 14:14).{16}

The Spirit is also active when we pray. Paul writes, “In the same way the Spirit also helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words” (Rom. 8:26). So then we pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, by the power of the Spirit who assists us in our weakness. What a wonderful provision from the Triune God who not only desires us to ask of Him, but also enables us to do it.

The Local Church

As we seek to apply the Trinity in the everydayness of everyday, let’s consider life in the local church. And here we encounter an important application of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity serves as a model for the local church. For as there are three Persons united in the Godhead, all of whom are equally God, so also those who are children of God, united in Christ, and members of the church universal are all equally sons and daughters of God and coheirs of His promises. As Scott Horrell writes, “Believers are to be given real value and dignity by the local church, not left as anonymous spectators amidst professional performances.”{17} The foundation of the value and dignity of believers, regardless of gender or training, rests in the Trinity.

However, this does not negate the need for order in the church. For, though each member of the Trinity is equally God, we see that there is a functional order within the Trinity. The Father sends the Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Father and the Son together send the Spirit, and the Spirit bears witness of the Son. So also we have a functional order

in the local church. There are those who are responsible to exercise authority, elders and deacons, and those who are responsible to submit to authority. But it's important that we realize that submission does not imply inferiority. The Trinity models this truth. "Whether in the church, family, or society, submission to another does not admit inferiority any more than the Son, by his obedience, is inferior to the Father."{18}

Though brief in some respects, I hope this discussion has been profitable for you. It's only a beginning point, and I encourage you to press on, for the deep well of the greatness of our Triune God can never run dry. May we then remove the concept of the Trinity from our dusty shelves and proudly display it as the jewel of God's revelation that it is.

Notes

1. James R. White, "Loving the Trinity," *Christian Research Journal*, Volume 21, Number 4.
2. Ibid., 22.
3. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1961), 1.
4. Ibid., viii.
5. G. W. Bromily, "Trinity" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1984), 1112.
6. For a fuller discussion on worldviews see Worldviews by Jerry Solomon at www.probe.org.
7. J. Scott Horrell, *In the Name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Constructing a Trinitarian Worldview* (1998), 1.
8. Ibid., 8.
9. Ibid., 8.
10. Ibid., 11.
11. Ibid., 11.
12. Ibid., 12.
13. White, 22.
14. J. Carl Laney, God: *Who He Is, What He Does, How to Know Him Better* (Nashville, TN: Word, 1999), 122.

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. J. Scott Horrell, *The Self-Giving Triune God, The Imago Dei and the Nature of the Local Church: An Ontology of Mission*, 13.
18. Ibid.

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"God is One, Not Three"

Many questions remain unanswered [concerning the article "What Difference Does the Trinity Make?"]. Why just three? Is not three not big enough also according to your own logic to contain all that God is? Is he not only Father, Son, Spirit as well as healer, brother, provider, salvation etc.? The list goes on as you well know. Consider this—that it pleased the Father that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him (Jesus) bodily. Again your logic would say that Jesus would not be big enough to contain all that God is. Why bring human logic into this at all? It is human logic that cannot contain all that God is. The Father of Jesus is the Spirit since it was the Spirit that overshadowed Mary. God is a spirit according to Jesus himself. All things were created by Jesus according to Colossians. God robed himself in flesh according to John 1:14. Why do you have a problem believing that Jesus is God? Jesus told Peter to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in Matthew. Peter then according to his instruction baptized in Jesus' name on the day of Pentecost. You are mistaking all the attributes of God for persons of God. There is no scripture to justify you claim that God is more than one person. You quoted "Hear ye O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one." There are no other Gods besides me.

there is none like me. I alone created the heavens and the earth. Do not let logic cloud your reasoning. God is not logical in human terms. His ways are above our ways. God/Jesus both said I am alpha and omega. Once you get a revelation of who God is and the duality of the man/God Jesus you will understand that God cannot be relegated to any number of persons but one.

Thanks for your patience in waiting for me to reply to your email regarding my article on the Trinity.

> *Many questions remain unanswered [concerning the article "What Difference Does the Trinity Make?"]. Why just three? Is not three not big enough also according to your own logic to contain all that God is? Is he not only Father, Son, Spirit as well as healer, brother, provider, salvation etc.? The list goes on as you well know. Consider this—that it pleased the Father that the fullness of the Godhead dwelt in him (Jesus) bodily. Again your logic would say that Jesus would not be big enough to contain all that God is.*

With regard to, Why just three? I'll have to say, because that is all that biblical revelation gives us. Your question centers on a confusion between the ontological Trinity (who God is) and the economic Trinity (what God does). The orthodox formulation of the Trinity is concerned with who God is, not what he does. Therefore, your categories of healer, brother, provider, salavation, etc. could not be designations of the persons within the Trinity, for to an extent all of the Godhead is involved in all that the Godhead does.

> *Why bring human logic into this at all? It is human logic that cannot contain all that God is. The Father of Jesus is the Spirit since it was the Spirit that overshadowed Mary. God is a spirit according to Jesus himself. All things were created by Jesus according to Colossians. God robed himself in flesh according to John 1:14. Why do you have a problem*

> *believing that Jesus is God?*

I agree with you that human logic cannot contain all that God is. We are dependent, created creatures and His ways are indeed higher than ours. I wouldn't exactly say that the Spirit is the Father of God, but that the entire Trinity participated in the Incarnation. And finally, I don't have any problem believng that Jesus is God. He is God. The Scriptures plainly teach this and it is one of the most important aspects that motivated the development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

> *Jesus told Peter to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit in Matthew. Peter then according to his instruction baptized in Jesus' name on the day of Pentecost. You are mistaking all the attributes of God for persons of God.*

If you are arguing against the Trinity based on Peter's call, that would be insufficient evidence. Granted, Matthew's formulation is unique, but its uniqueness in no way disqualifies the Trinity. Early in the same speech Peter says, "God has raised this Jesus to life and we are witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he (Jesus) has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear." Peter clearly had more than Jesus *only* in mind on the day of Pentecost.

> *There is no scripture to justify you claim that God is more than one person. You quoted "Hear ye O Israel the Lord our God the Lord is one." There are no other Gods besides me. there is none like me. I alone created the heavens and the earth.*

If by this you mean that there is no single Scripture that says, "God exists in Trinity: one God, three persons who are coequal and coeternal," you are exactly right. There is also

no Scripture in which Jesus says, in as many words, “I am God.” However there are clearly passages where Jesus claims to do things that only God can do. Likewise with the Trinity, we are collecting Scriptural “data” by which we can conclude that the Father is God, the Son (Jesus) is God, the Holy Spirit is God, yet God is One (Deut. 6:4). That’s just doing theology, an inescapable process for anyone who reads the Bible.

> *Do not let logic cloud your reasoning. God is not logical in human terms. His ways are above our ways. God/Jesus both said I am alpha and omega. Once you get a revelation of who God is and the duality of the man/God Jesus you will understand that God cannot be relegated to any number of persons but one.*

I disagree with you. While God is not reducible to the point where we can understand Him, He does “make sense” or “make Himself known to us.” He is, to some degree, understandable and we know this because He has condescended to make Himself known. We understand things through our rational faculties. This does not give us comprehensive knowledge of God, but it does give us intelligible knowledge of God. As far as your conclusion goes, the two natures of Christ are precisely what motivated the kind of theological reflection that lead to the doctrine of the Trinity. Finally, God is not relegated to anything. God has revealed Himself and we must respond to what He has said. If you’re holding to a mono-personal God, the burden of proof is on your side. The church as confessed the trinity for over 1500 years and it has done so for good reason.

Thanks for your interest in dialogue, and thank you for reading the article. I hope that this has been of some help or interest to you. Feel free to write back. Keep reading and thinking.

Greg Crosthwait

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