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UNDERSTANDING THE TRINITY

*The crucial importance
of the Father, Son,
and Holy Spirit*

JOHN PECKHAM

Is light a wave or particle? In some ways light behaves like a wave, and in other ways light behaves like a particle. How can both be true? Scientists still struggle to make sense of this.

Have you ever wondered how God could be one *and* three? If so, you have wondered how the Trinity doctrine makes sense. This article addresses this question and the even more important issue of why it matters—exploring how the Trinity is vitally important to our entire faith and practice.



THE BASIC BIBLICAL DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

In my last Discipleship of the Mind article we saw that Scripture teaches the basic Trinity doctrine: There is only one God, and God is three distinct fully divine persons.¹

Laid out in three points:

1. There is only one God (e.g., Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; James 2:19; John 5:44).
2. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each (fully) divine (e.g., Acts 5:3, 4; Heb. 9:14; 1 Cor. 2:10, 11; John 1:1-3; 8:58; 20:28; Col. 2:9; Heb. 1:2, 3, 8).
3. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons (e.g., Eph. 4:30; 1 Cor. 2:11; 12:11; John 14:26; 15:26; cf. Matt. 3:16, 17; 28:19).

These three points, repeatedly taught by Scripture, amount to the basic Trinity doctrine.

HOW CAN GOD BE ONE AND THREE?

But does the teaching that God is one and God is three persons amount to a contradiction? No. This would be contradictory only if it claimed God is one and three *in the same way*.

Think of a three-leaf clover. It is only one clover, but has three leaves. A three-leaf clover, then, is one and three in *different* ways. This involves no contradiction. I do *not* mean to suggest that the Trinity is one and three in the same way as a three-leaf clover. All analogies for the Trinity are inadequate because God—as Creator—is incalculably greater than any creaturely reality. I mention a three-leaf clover only to show that something can be one and three in different ways without any contradiction. According to Scripture, God is one in the sense of being one God and three in the sense of being three persons. The *three* persons are united as *one* God.

But, you might ask, *how* are the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit united? The Bible does not directly tell us. God is far beyond our understanding. We know God only through what He has chosen to reveal (see Deut. 29:29). Given this, it is best not to speculate beyond what God has revealed.

The Bible does teach, however, that there is only one God and that God is three distinct fully divine persons. Precisely *how* is this so? I don't claim to know. I also don't know *how* God is eternal or *how* God is all-powerful. Do you? Of course not. But we do not need to know *how* God is eternal and all-powerful in order to believe and affirm *that* God is eternal and all-powerful. I believe these teachings



The Trinity doctrine is not an extraneous theological puzzle, but is central to everything.

because Scripture teaches that God is eternal (Ps. 90:2; 1 Tim. 1:17) and all-powerful (Jer. 32:17; Rev. 19:6). Even if these teachings are beyond our limited human understanding, believing and affirming these things does not involve any contradiction. There is mystery here, but no contradiction.

As noted earlier, even the brightest human thinkers still don't understand how to make sense of the fact that light sometimes appears to behave like a wave and other times like a particle. We should not be surprised, then, that we do not fully understand God's nature. As the Creator of all, God transcends all creaturely limitations (Ps. 145:3; Isa. 55:9) and is beyond all conceptions of being that are familiar to us.

One might be tempted to try to put God in a conceptual box—to limit what is true about God to what we currently understand. But that would be a huge mistake if we want to know the living God of the Bible. God is always greater than even our best understanding of Him. The things I believe about God, then, should be not be grounded in what I think I have grasped according to my puny human "wisdom," but should be grounded in that which is far greater than myself or my understanding—what God has revealed in Scripture.

As John Wesley once put it: "I believe . . . that God is Three and One. But the manner how I do not comprehend." Yet "would it not be absurd . . . to deny the fact because I do not understand the manner? That is, to reject what God has revealed, because I do not comprehend what he has not revealed?"²

WHY DOES THE TRINITY DOCTRINE MATTER?

Yet why does this matter? What difference does it make for our faith and practice? I will list just seven ways the Trinity is essential to our faith and practice. The Trinity matters because:

1. Biblical truth matters, and whom we worship matters.

Only God is worthy of worship (e.g., Ex. 34:14; Matt. 4:10). If Christ is not God, it is blasphemy to worship Christ, and Christianity is utterly false. But Christ is God and the Father Himself commands creatures to worship Christ (Heb. 1:6).

2. Christ's identity is essential to our faith and practice.

We cannot be *Christians* without following *Christ*. If we do not know the truth about Jesus' divinity, we cannot answer for ourselves the all-important question Jesus asked: "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). It is no coincidence that the enemy attacks the Trinity doctrine and the divinity of Christ specifically. The question of who is worthy of worship is central to the great controversy.

3. The Holy Spirit's identity is essential to our faith and practice.

The Holy Spirit's identity is inseparable from the Spirit's crucial role in the plan of salvation. Jesus promised that He and the Father would send the Holy Spirit as another "Helper" or advocate in Christ's place (John 14:16, 17; 15:26). But the Holy Spirit could be another advocate like Christ only if He is also fully divine.

Further, we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Holy Spirit "makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered" (Rom.

8:26). Only one who is God could intercede for us in this way. And the Holy Spirit inspired Scripture, without which we would know very little about God. But who could know the things of God except the Spirit of God (1 Cor. 2:11)? In these and many other ways the Holy Spirit's identity is essential to our connection to God.³

4. The plan of salvation could not make sense apart from the Trinity.

Only One who is both God and human could reconcile God and humans. And if Christ is not God, the crucifixion was merely a human sacrifice—akin to pagan child sacrifice. Rather than providing the ultimate display of God's love and justice (Rom. 3:25, 26; 5:8), the cross would display only the worst kind of injustice. But Christ is God, and thus God (in Christ) chose to *give Himself* for us (see John 10:18; Gal. 2:2). God "has not required human sacrifice; he has himself become the human sacrifice."⁴ In this and other ways the very the story of redemption—the way God saves us in the great controversy—makes sense only if God is Father, Son, and Spirit.

5. God is love.

"God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). But Christ's giving His life for us could provide the ultimate demonstration of God's love only if Christ is God. And, Paul wrote, "the love of God has been poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit" (verse 5). But the Holy Spirit could pour God's love into our hearts only if He is God. In this and other ways (see, e.g., John 10:18), love itself is grounded in the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

6. The Trinity makes sense of how God could freely create the world.

The Trinity explains how God could be love prior to the creation of the world. Think about it. Before God created the world, there was nothing but God. How, then, could it be that God *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16)? Before the world was, who did God love? If there was no one or nothing to love, how could God be love?

If, on the other hand, God is more than one person, then God could enjoy love within the Trinity before there was any creation. Before the world was, the Father loved the Son and the Spirit, the Spirit loved the Son and the Father, and the Son loved the Spirit and the Father.

God did not need to create the world. God needs nothing (Acts 17:25). But God freely created the

world as a manifestation of His love, despite knowing the cost to Himself. His creation of this world, despite the incalculable cost to Himself, was a free decision. God is thus "worthy . . . to receive glory and honor and power," for God "created all things," and by God's "will they exist and were created" (Rev. 4:11).

7. God's identity deeply affects our relationship with God.

Understanding God's identity as Father, Son, and Spirit deeply affects our relationship with God. The kinds of relationships we have depend on the nature of those involved. I care for Brenda, Joel, Lucy, and Bo. I have a unique kind of love, however, for Brenda, who is my wife, another unique kind of love for Joel, my son, and a very different kind of affection for Lucy and Bo, our two cats.

Much more so, the nature of God dramatically impacts the way we can and should relate to God and everyone else. In this and other ways, the Trinity doctrine is not an extraneous theological puzzle, but is central to everything. God is love. And, amazingly, we are invited to enter into love relationship with the one true God who is love (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Trinity of love), whose unfailing love endures forever.

CONCLUSION

There is so much more to say about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We've only begun to scratch the surface. Of the things Jesus did during His earthly ministry alone, John wrote, "If they were written one by one, I suppose that even the world itself could not contain the books that would be written" (John 21:25).

This should remind us how much more there is to know—more than we can imagine. Recognizing this should prompt us to be humble regarding our own "wisdom" and more committed to studying and clinging to what God has revealed about Himself in Scripture. ▀

¹ See John Peckham, "Is the Trinity Biblical? The Trinity Doctrine in Three Points," *Adventist Review*, February 2024, pp. 56-59. See, further, John C. Peckham, *God With Us: An Introduction to Adventist Theology* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Andrews University Press, 2023), chaps. 4-6.

² John Wesley, "On the Trinity," in *The Works of John Wesley* (Albany, Oreg.: Ages, 1997), pp. 220, 221.

³ For more on the Holy Spirit's works, see Peckham, *God With Us*, chap. 5.

⁴ Fleming Rutledge, *And God Spoke to Abraham: Preaching From the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 302.

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