Searching Issues

# Is The Trinity Unbiblical, Unbelievable, and Irrelevant?

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# Is the Trinity Unbiblical, Unbelievable, and Irrelevant?

The word "Trinity" is derived from the Latin word *Trinitas*, which is a theological term invented to describe a threefold unity. Christianity rests on the doctrine of the threefold reality, the tri-personality, of one God. The word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, and therefore, it is sometimes also suggested that the idea of the Trinity is unbiblical.

Others suggest it is unbelievable because it is incomprehensible. The Athanasian Creed[1] (c. AD 500) sums up the doctrine of the Trinity like this: "… that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Holy Ghost is God, and yet there are not three gods, but one God."

In Lewis Carroll's sequel to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Alice Through the Looking Glass*, the White Queen made a habit of believing six impossible things before breakfast. Many wonder whether as Christians we are required to do something similar with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Still others regard the doctrine as an irrelevance. They may believe it is true, but they do not think it is of great importance to their daily lives. Sermons on the Trinity are not exactly crowd-pullers.

Why should we believe in the Trinity? Is it biblical? Is it believable? Is it comprehensible? Is it relevant to our lives today?

## Is it biblical?

As mentioned above, the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible. It was first used in its Greek form by an early Christian writer called Theophilus, Bishop of Antioch, in c. AD 180. But as Professor F. F. Bruce remarked, "Let us not be misled by the foolish argument that because the term 'Trinity' does not occur in the scriptures, the doctrine of the Trinity is therefore unscriptural."

Christianity arose out of Judaism, which was a monotheistic faith (Deuteronomy 6:4) in contrast to the polytheism of the nations that surrounded it. The New Testament itself affirms that there is only one God (John 5:44; Romans 3:30; 1 Timothy 1:17; James 2:19).

The early Christians were faced with two historical events which revolutionized their understanding of God. First, they were faced with the revelatory events of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the wake of these revelations, they came to see that something about Jesus pointed to Him being God Himself. They soon found themselves worshiping Jesus as God (for example, John 20:28) and yet they totally rejected the polytheistic pattern of Roman religion. Instead, they came to see him as a man whose identity was God and yet who was not identical to God.

Second, they had an experience of the Holy Spirit that lifted them out of the realms of human experience—one of being caught up in a relationship within the Godhead. They realized that the Holy Spirit was identified with God and Jesus and yet was not identical to either. He was not the Father, nor the Son, but He was one of them. They came to believe in the deity of the Father, the deity of the Son, and the deity of the Holy Spirit. Yet they never surrendered the belief there was only one God.

We can see how John, for example, sets this out in his Gospel. He asserts, with the other New Testament writers, that there is only one God (John 5:44; 17:3). Yet, in the opening sentences of his Gospel, he introduces us to two distinct persons within the unity of the Godhead: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." As J. I. Packer of Regent College in Vancouver, puts it:

> The Word was a person in fellowship with God, and the Word was himself Personally and eternally divine… but this is not all that John means us to learn about the plurality of persons in the Godhead…

> Our Lord [in John's gospel] now gives parallel teaching, to the effect that the divine Spirit is also a person… Thus John records our Lord's disclosure of the mystery of the Trinity: three persons, and one God…[2]

The concept of the Trinity permeates the pages of the New Testament. Some would say that there are hints of this doctrine even in the Old Testament, as far back as the very beginning in Genesis 1:1–3a. In verse 1 we read of *God* the Creator. In verse 2 (italics mine), "The *Spirit* of God was hovering over the waters." Verse 3 begins, "And God said…"—God created through His *Word*. John, in his Gospel, tells us that the Word is none other than Jesus Himself (John 1:14). Thus, God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit were there at the very beginning.

In the New Testament we find several prayers and blessings that very deliberately mention the Father, Son, and Spirit together. Baptism takes place in the name (singular) of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Paul ends his second letter to the Corinthians with what we now call "The Grace": "May 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 13:14). While these two texts do not expressly state the doctrine of the Trinity, they point strongly towards it.

Paul sees virtually every aspect of the Christian faith and life in trinitarian terms. As the church leader and writer John Stott argued in commenting on Ephesians 1, both halves of the chapter are "essentially trinitarian… both are addressed to God the Father… both refer specifically to God's work in and through Christ… both sections of the chapter allude—even if obliquely—to the work of the Holy Spirit… Christian faith and Christian life are both fundamentally trinitarian."[3]

In chapter 2 of the same letter, our relationship with God and prayer is seen in trinitarian terms. We pray "to the Father," through Jesus, "by one Spirit" (Ephesians 2:18—for more detailed exposition see *Questions of Life*, chapter 5). In chapter 3, the filling of the Spirit is described in trinitarian terms, as we shall see later in this chapter. In chapter 4, Christian unity is urged for trinitarian reasons: "There is… one Spirit… one Lord… one God and Father of all" (Ephesians 4:4–6). In his ethical instruction in the second half of Ephesians 4, as John Stott points out, "It is natural for him, in issuing his moral instructions, to mention the three Persons of the Trinity. He tells us to 'copy God,' to 'learn Christ,' and not to 'grieve the Holy Spirit.'"[4]

Finally, when he refers to our worship, Paul again speaks in trinitarian terms (Ephesians 5:18–20). "Once again the doctrine of the Trinity informs and directs our devotion. When we are filled with the Holy Spirit we give thanks to God our Father in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ."[5]

Nor is Ephesians the only place where Paul's trinitarian thinking emerges. In 1 Corinthians he describes the gifts of the Spirit in this way: "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same *Spirit*. There are different kinds of service, but the same *Lord*. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work." (1 Corinthians 12:4–6, italics mine).

In 2 Thessalonians, Paul speaks in trinitarian terms once more when he talks of taking the initiative and providing both the means and goal of salvation: "*God* chose you... to be saved through the sanctifying work of *the Spirit*… that you might share in the glory of our *Lord Jesus Christ*" (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14, italics mine).

Finally, in Romans 8, Paul describes the believer's relationship with God in terms of Father, Son, and Spirit together:

> The *Spirit* you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, *"Abba, Father."* The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with *Christ*, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.
>
> **Romans 8:15–17, italics mine**

For Paul, we call God Father along with Christ, in the power of the Spirit.

Paul is not the only trinitarian writer in the New Testament. For example, at the beginning of his first epistle, Peter describes the way we are chosen by God in trinitarian terms: "To God's elect… who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of *God the Father*, through the sanctifying work of *the Spirit*, to be obedient to *Jesus Christ* and sprinkled with his blood" (1 Peter 1:1–2, italics mine).

In spite of these and many other similar passages in the New Testament, the Bible has no formal credal statement about the Trinity—the identity and relationships of the Father, Son, and Spirit—that is set out like the Athanasian Creed we mentioned above. The early church originally

simply experienced and reflected upon the reality of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It was only later that a coherent and systematic doctrine was defined in response to very different and dangerous views of the Trinity that were being offered.

On the one hand, for example, Arius (c. AD 250–336), who was excommunicated from the church for heresy, argued that Jesus was divine but that His divinity was only partial and derivative. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were three distinct beings. "The Three he envisages are entirely different beings, not sharing in any way the same nature or essence."[6] In the sixth century, Philoponus of Alexandria held that there are three gods, who are all of the same sort, and yet distinct and separate from each other. This theology amounts to polytheism.

At the other extreme, Sabellius reduced the Trinity to a unity with three modes of expression. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were no more than symbolic names for one God in His different activities. Instead of three persons, there was one being who changed mask according to whether He was acting as Creator, Redeemer, or Sanctifier. There was one person with three names.

Against such heretical views, the council of Constantinople in AD 381, building on the council of Nicaea in AD 325, spoke of one God (one substance) and three persons. This view of the Trinity has been held by every orthodox church since that time. The traditional doctrine is summed up by the later Athanasian Creed:

> We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Divine Being. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit: but the Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost is all one.

## Is it believable?

Those who find the doctrine unbelievable because they think it is incomprehensible might point to some other words in the Athanasian Creed: "The Father incomprehensible, The Son incomprehensible, and The Holy Ghost incomprehensible… Not three incomprehensibles… but… one incomprehensible." As the theologian Alister McGrath points out, many are sorely tempted to add, "the whole thing incomprehensible!"[7] In fact "incomprehensible" does not mean "beyond our understanding;" rather it "means that the Persons cannot be grasped or pinned down.

They cannot be contained or limited by human beings."[8] Certainly, we have to concede that it is not an easy doctrine to understand. We are dealing here with the nature of God Himself, so it is not surprising that He stretches the limits of our understanding. One of the greatest theologians of the church, Augustine of Hippo (AD 354–430), wrote fifteen volumes on the Trinity, synthesising and adding the finishing touches to the most profound and exact statements which have ever been made on the subject. Yet even he never plumbed the full depth of this doctrine. God cannot be put in a neat box and easily understood.

A preacher speaking on the Trinity asked the congregation at the end of his sermon, "Have I made it clear?" One man in the congregation said, "Yes," to which the preacher replied, "In that case you have got it wrong!" St. Augustine himself said, "If you can understand it, it's not God!" He did not mean that we could not or should not seek to understand it, otherwise he would not have written fifteen volumes on the subject. What he meant was that there will always be an element of mystery about God.

In that case one might ask, "Why bother to try to understand?" and, "Does it really matter?" The answer is that it does matter and we need to try and understand it as far as we can, because it is fundamental to the Christian faith. Our God is Trinity.

Many have sought human analogies to help us to understand the doctrine. David Prior, the pastor of St. Michael's, Chester Square in London wrote to *The Times* in June 1992 suggesting a novel analogy:

> Last Sunday I dragged myself away from watching the end of the Test match at Lord's in order to preach at our evening service on the theme of "What Christians believe about the Trinity." The last three balls I watched being bowled were by Ian Salisbury, England's exciting new spin bowler. The first was a leg-spinner, the second a top-spinner, the third a googly.
>
> I had been ferreting around for a helpful illustration of the Trinity —and there it was: one person expressing himself in three different, but very similar ways. The leg-spinner's stock ball represents God the Father, who created us to "feel after him;" the top-spinner, which goes straight through, represents the direct activity of God the Son; the googly represents the surprising activity of God the Holy Spirit.[9]

In any case, David Prior's letter elicited two interesting replies. The first, from R. A. Morris, who wrote, "David Prior's trinitarian illustration will have to be called wide. It reflects a serious theological error, identified in the early church as the idea that one God merely acts in different ways at different times. Better stick to three stumps in one wicket."[10] The second, from Timothy Russ: "Perhaps David Prior should have been studying the fathers of the church rather than watching the cricket on Trinity Sunday, for he seems to have expressed very concisely the Sabellian heresy 'one person expressing himself in three different ways,' instead of three persons in one substance. My own anxiety as I dragged myself away from the screen was: 'Will there be anyone at all in church?' "[11]

This correspondence illustrates the difficulty in seeking to find an appropriate human analogy.

The most basic analogy is a triangle: three sides but one triangle. Slightly less crude is the shamrock leaf as suggested by St. Patrick. Each of the three portions of the leaf is an essential part of that leaf, but the leaf itself is greater than all its parts. In a similar way, Great Britain's Union Flag is made up of the combination of the flags of St. George, St. Andrew, and St. Patrick. Others point to the sun—its source, its heat, and its light.

Perhaps a better illustration is that of the universe itself, being made up of space, time, and matter: space, with its length, breadth, and height; time, with its future, past, and present; matter, consisting of energy, motion, and phenomena.

John Eddison, in *Talking to Children*, used the analogy of a book. A book exists in three different and distinct ways at once—in the mind of the author, on the shelf in the library, and in the imagination of the reader. Others use the analogy of a house. The architect (God the Father) can say, "It's My house." The purchaser (God the Son) can say, "It's My house." And the tenant (God the Spirit) can say, "It's My house."[12]

The difficulty with all these analogies is that they are impersonal. However, they are illustrative of God's threefold nature. Of course, ideally, an analogy of the Trinity should be personal. However, there are difficulties with such analogies. Some have used the parallel of a family with a father, mother, and child. This tends towards the heresy of Philoponus as it suggests three Gods and not one. On the other hand, the idea sometimes used of a father, who is a fireman most of the time, a soccer player on Saturday and a fisherman on Sunday evening, is Sabellian as it suggests one God with three modes of expression.

When we try to understand the Trinity, we always come up against three human limits. First, we face the limits of human language. The Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein pointed out that human words are completely incapable of describing something as mundane as the aroma of coffee. How much more difficult it must be to describe God in human language.

Second, we face the limits of human intellect and understanding. "Our little intellectual systems find themselves groaning under the strain of trying to accommodate God."[13] In describing the Trinity we have to resort to paradox. As defined by the *Concise Oxford English Dictionary*, a paradox is a "seemingly absurd though perhaps actually well-founded statement." Scientist and theologian Alister McGrath gives an example of the paradox from the world of science:


> An example of this from the world of science concerns the nature of light. By the first decade of the twentieth century, it was clear that light behaved in a very strange way—sometimes it seemed to behave as if it was a wave, and sometimes as if it was a particle. It couldn't be both at once, and so the cry "contradiction!" was raised. How could it be two totally different things? But eventually, through the development of the Quantum Theory, it was found that this contradiction expressed a fundamental difficulty in grasping what the nature of light really was. In other words, the contradiction did not arise on account of light, but on account of our difficulties in conceiving it.[14]

He goes on to show that the nature of light was such that two contradictory models had to be used to account for its behaviour (with God we require three contradictory models).

> Most of us know what light is without needing to think about waves, particles or Quantum Theory. Light is what we need in order to see, to do our everyday business, to read and write. It is what comes out of

> the sun, and to a lesser extent from the moon. It is what we get when we switch on electric light bulbs or strip lighting. If we were physicists, we might want to think about light in much more detail and go into the full complexities of i—and so we might start talking about waves, particles and Quantum Theory. But we don't need to do this in order to make use of light or to recognize it when we see it.[15]

The fact that we cannot fully comprehend the Trinity does not mean that it does not make sense. When I switch on the television I do not understand how it works, but there is an explanation beyond the limits of my understanding and which does make sense.

Third, we face the limits of our finite world and finite human lives. C. S. Lewis uses the most helpful analogy I have come across. He writes:

> And now, for a few minutes, I must ask you to follow rather carefully. You know that in space you can move in three ways—to left or right, backwards or forwards, up or down. Every direction is either one of these three or a compromise between them. They are called the three Dimensions. Now notice this. If you are using only one dimension, you could draw only a straight line. If you are using two, you could draw a figure: say, a square. And a square is made up of four straight lines. Now a step further. If you have three dimensions, you can then build what we call a solid body: say, a cube—a thing like a dice or a lump of sugar. And a cube is made up of six squares.
>
> Do you see the point? A world of one dimension would be a straight line. In a two-dimensional world, you still get straight lines, but many lines make one figure. In a three-dimensional world, you still get figures but many figures make one solid body. In other words, as you advance to more real and more complicated levels, you do not leave behind you the things you found on the simpler levels: you still have them, but combined in new ways—in ways you could not imagine if you knew only the simpler levels.
>
> Now the Christian account of God involves just the same principle. The human level is a simple and rather empty level. On the human level one person is one being, and any two persons are two separate beings—just as, in two dimensions (say on a flat sheet

> of paper) one square is one figure, and any two squares are two separate figures. On the Divine level you still find personalities; but up there you find them combined in new ways which we, who do not live on that level, cannot imagine. In God's dimension, so to speak, you find a being who is three Persons while remaining one Being, just as a cube is six squares while remaining one cube. Of course we cannot fully conceive a Being like that: just as, if we were so made that we perceived only two dimensions in space we could never properly imagine a cube. But we can get a sort of faint notion of it. And when we do, we are then, for the first time in our lives, getting some positive idea, however faint, of something super-personal—something more than a person. It is something we could never have guessed, and yet, once we have been told, one almost feels one ought to have been able to guess it because it fits in so well with all the things we know already. You may ask, "If we cannot imagine a three-personal Being, what is the good of talking about Him?" Well, there isn't any good talking about Him. The thing that matters is being actually drawn into that three-personal life, and that may begin any time—tonight, if you like.[16]

## Is it relevant?

The doctrine of the Trinity is highly relevant because it sheds light on the nature of God and His interaction with His creation.

First, the Trinity shows that God is self-sufficient. Some people might be tempted to think that God can only be God if He has a world to be God of. The Trinity tells us that God had no need to create outside of Himself in order to be who He is. Some people also assume that before creation God was somehow lonely. The Trinity shows us that the three persons of the Trinity existed before the creation of the universe in a perfect life of love and communication. God did not create the world or humanity because of any lack or need, but out of the overflow of the love and communication of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

Second, it tells us that

> three essential models must be used if the full depth of the Christian experience and understanding of God is to be expressed adequately. No one picture, image or model of God is good

> enough—and these three models are essential if the basic outline of our Christian understanding of God is to be preserved. The first model is that of a transcendent God who lies beyond the world as its source and creator; the second is the human face of God, revealed in the person of Jesus Christ; the third is that of the immanent God who is present and active throughout his creation. The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that these three models combine to define the essential Christian insights into the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead. None of them, taken on its own, is adequate to capture the richness of the Christian experience of God.[17]

Third, it is the triune God who meets our most fundamental psychological needs as human beings. An occupational therapist, trained in psychology in a humanist secular framework, told me that she had been taught that we all need three things. First, we need a point of reference. We need to know who we are, where we have come from, and where we are going. Second, we need a role model (who might be, for example, a therapist) and third, we need a facilitator to help us to get there (this might come from a counselor or from some group help). When this woman became a Christian she said she realized that God is our point of reference, Jesus is our role model and the Holy Spirit is our facilitator. She saw that the Trinity meets the deepest psychological needs of every human being.

Fourth, the doctrine of the Trinity is relevant in that it teaches us that there is an inherent threefoldness about every act of God's revelation. Again and again we see single doctrines expressed in threefold ways, showing both the oneness and threeness of God, and requiring us to think in trinitarian terms of the nature of God. In the New Testament, virtually every doctrine in experience—baptism, grace, salvation, election, ethics, worship, unity—is described in trinitarian terms. In order to understand God and every doctrine about God, we need to think in this way.

I want to end this chapter by looking at one example in more detail. In Ephesians 3 Paul describes the fullness of the Spirit in trinitarian terms when he prays that the Ephesian Christians will be filled with the Spirit.

> For this reason I kneel before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name. I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his *Spirit* in your

> inner being, so that *Christ* may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of *God*.
>
> **Ephesians 3:14–19, italics mine**

The fullness of the Spirit is an experience of the fatherhood of God. His prayer is to the Father Who is the initiator of the process. In Romans 8 Paul speaks more explicitly of the involvement of the Father in the experience of the Spirit, because "those who are led by the Spirit of God are children of God. The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, 'Abba, Father.' The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children" (Romans 8:14–16).

The fullness of the Spirit is also an experience of the love of Christ. He prays that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God" (Ephesians 3:17–19).

Finally, the fullness of the Spirit is an experience of the power of the Spirit. Paul prays that God would strengthen them "with power through his Spirit in your inner being" (verse 16). This is the power that Jesus promised to His disciples in His very last words before His ascension (Acts 1:8).

When the Holy Spirit fills us, we experience the Fatherhood of God, the love of Christ, and the power of the Spirit. Yet the three cannot be separated. He prays for "His Spirit," "Christ," and "all the fullness of God" to fill them. The three are in one and one in three. God is not meant only to be understood in our minds but also experienced in our hearts and lives. To be filled with the Spirit is to experience God as Trinity.

# Endnotes

1. The Athanasian Creed is a widely accepted statement of what Christians believe, which emphasizes ideas about Jesus, and about the Trinity.
2. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Hodder & Stoughton, 1973), pp. 68–70.
3. John Stott, *God's New Society* (IVP, 1979), p. 52. (Now reissued in the series *The Bible Speaks Today*.)
4. *Ibid.*, p. 191.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 207.
6. J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (Adam and Charles Black, 1960), p. 229.
7. Alister E. McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine* (Zondervan, 1997), p. 342.
8. Cited in Gerald Bray, *Creeds, Councils & Christ* (IVP, 1984), p. 178.
9. *The Times*, 25 June 1992.
10. *The Times*, 1 July 1992.
11. *Ibid*.
12. John Eddison, *Talking to Children* (H. E. Walter Ltd, 1979), p. 15.
13. Alister McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Kingsway Publications, 1987).
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 138–39.
15. *Ibid*.
16. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Collins, C. S. Lewis Signature Classics Edition, 2012), pp. 161–63.
17. Alister McGrath, *op. cit.*, pp. 136–37.

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**What does the Bible say about the Trinity?**

**Why should we believe in the Trinity?**

**How does the Trinity meet the deepest psychological needs of every human being?**

In this thought-provoking booklet, Nicky Gumbel tackles the answers to these and other key questions people may be contemplating.

*Is the Trinity Unbiblical, Unbelievable, and Irrelevant?* is taken from the book *Searching Issues* by Nicky Gumbel.

Nicky Gumbel is the pioneer of Alpha. He studied law at Cambridge and theology at Oxford, practiced as a lawyer and is now the senior pastor of HTB in London, one of England's most vibrant churches.

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