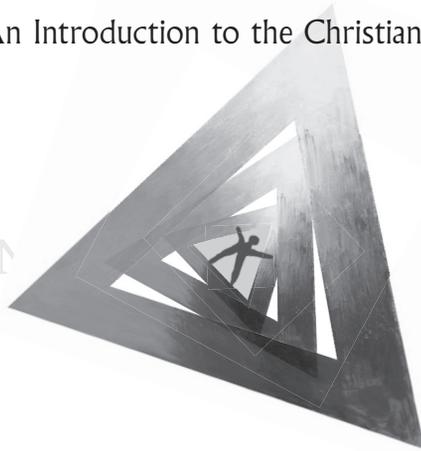


DELIGHTING IN THE TRINITY

An Introduction to the Christian Faith



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 IVP Academic
An imprint of InterVarsity Press
Downers Grove, Illinois

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Introduction

HERE BE DRAGONS?

“God is love”: those three words could hardly be more bouncy. They seem lively, lovely and as warming as a crackling fire. But “God is a Trinity”? No, hardly the same effect: that just sounds cold and stodgy. All quite understandable, but the aim of this book is to stop the madness. Yes, the Trinity can be presented as a musty and irrelevant dogma, but the truth is that God is love *because* God is a Trinity.

This book, then, will simply be about growing in our enjoyment of God and seeing how God’s triune being makes all his ways beautiful. It is a chance to taste and see that the Lord is good, to have your heart won and yourself refreshed. For it is only when you grasp what it means for God to be a Trinity that you really sense the beauty, the overflowing kindness, the heart-grabbing loveliness of God. If the Trinity were something we could shave off God, we would not be relieving him of some irksome weight; we would be shearing him of precisely what is so delightful about him. For God is triune, and it is *as triune* that he is so good and desirable.

But I must congratulate you for having read so far as this. The Christian books that really fly off the shelves are the “how to” books, the ones that give you something immediate to *do*. And to the “how to” junkies, the thought of reading a book on the Trinity must feel like having to say “Theodore Oswaldtwistle the thistle

sifter sifted a sack of thistles”—rather hard going but pointless. Yet Christianity is not primarily about lifestyle change; it is about knowing God. To know and grow to enjoy him is what we are saved *for*—and that is what we are going to press into here.

Nonetheless, getting to know God better does actually make for far more profound and practical change *as well*. Knowing the love of God is the very thing that makes us loving. Sensing the desirability of God alters our preferences and inclinations, the things that drive our behavior: we begin to *want* God more than anything else. Thus, to read this book is not to play an intellectual game. In fact, we will see that the triune nature of this God affects everything from how we listen to music to how we pray: it makes for happier marriages, warmer dealings with others, better church life; it gives Christians assurance, shapes holiness and transforms the very way we look at the world around us. No exaggeration: the knowledge of this God turns lives around.

Spooky, Huh?

There is, of course, that major obstacle in our way: that the Trinity is seen not as a solution and a delight, but as an oddity and a problem. In fact, some of the ways people talk about the Trinity only seem to reinforce the idea. Think, for example, of all those desperate-sounding illustrations. “The Trinity,” some helpful soul explains, “is a bit like an egg, where there is the shell, the yolk and the white, and yet it is all one egg!” “No,” says another, “the Trinity is more like a shamrock leaf: that’s one leaf, but it’s got three bits sticking out. *Just* like the Father, Son and Spirit.” And one wonders why the world laughs. For whether the Trinity is compared to shrubbery, streaky bacon, the three states of H₂O or a three-headed giant, it begins to sound, well, bizarre, like some pointless and unsightly growth on our understanding of God, one that could surely be lopped off with no consequence other than a universal sigh of relief.

Now, of course, if the Trinity is seen as a weird and fantastic monstrosity, then small wonder it is seen as irrelevant. How could the eggishness of God ever be more than a weird curiosity? I am never going to fall down in awe or find my heart drawn to a God so ridiculous. And yet in many ways that is just where we are at today. For all that we may give an orthodox nod of the head to belief in the Trinity, it simply seems too arcane to make any practical difference to our lives. In other words, the egg illustration and its kind may not be the way to go.

Another way to go that can reinforce the idea that the Trinity is essentially a problem is to stick solely to saying what the Trinity is not. We explain that the Father is not the Son, the Spirit is not the Father, there are not three gods and so on. All of which is true, but it can leave one with the hollow sense that one has successfully avoided all sorts of nasty-sounding heresies, but at the cost of wondering who or what one is actually to worship.

Enter the word *mystery*, a word so soothing it lets us feel that our absolute cluelessness about how God can be both one and three is actually how things are supposed to be. “God is a mystery,” we can whisper in our most piously hushed tones. “We are simply



Figure I.1. Question mark

not meant to know such things.” But while such sentiments score high for their ring of reverence, they score pretty low for accuracy. When in Ephesians 3, for example, Paul writes of the “mystery” that the Gentiles are now included in salvation, the word *mystery* simply means secret. Paul is sharing a secret with us. Now we know. We

are not left wondering what he could possibly mean. The Gentiles are now included. There is nothing of what we would call “mysterious” about this mystery.

So it is with God. God is a mystery, but not in the alien abductions, things-that-go-bump-in-the-night sense. Certainly not in the “who can know, why bother?” sense. God is a mystery in that who he is and what he is like are secrets, things we would never have worked out by ourselves. But this triune God has revealed himself to us. Thus the Trinity is not some piece of inexplicable apparent nonsense, like a square circle or an interesting theologian. Rather, because the triune God has revealed himself, we can understand the Trinity. That is not to say we can exhaust our knowledge of God, comprehend and wrap our brains around him, simply cramming in a few bits of information before moving on to some other doctrine. To know the Trinity is to know God, an eternal and personal God of infinite beauty, interest and fascination. The Trinity is a God we *can* know, and forever grow to know better.

All of which is to say, the Trinity is not a problem. In looking at the Trinity we are not walking off the map into dangerous and unchartable areas of pointless speculation. Far, far from it. Pressing into the Trinity we are doing what in Psalm 27 David said he could do all the days of his life: we are gazing upon the beauty of the Lord. And as we do so, I hope you will begin to feel as David did, and that you could do the same.

Bored Monks on Rainy Afternoons

There is one other problem people can have with the Trinity: that the word never appears in the Bible. Now that doesn't sound good, and it's given rise to the legend of the Trinity as the invention of some cloister-bound theologians with too much time on their hands. The story goes that the Bible knows only a simple, boiled-down monotheism, but that with some ingenuity, wild speculation

and a whole lot of philosophical rigamarole, the church managed to cook up this knotty and perplexing dish, the Trinity.

That just isn't how the history goes, though. The apostle Paul, for example, didn't show any sign of struggle to confess "that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11). You don't see a cloudy ignorance of the Father, Son and Spirit in A.D. 50 which is all cleared up by A.D. 500. And while later church theologians would use philosophical terms and words not seen in the Bible (like *Trinity*), they were not trying to *add* to God's revelation of himself, as if Scripture was insufficient; they were trying to express the truth of who God is *as revealed in Scripture*. Particularly, they were trying to articulate Scripture's message in the face of those who were distorting it in one way or another—and for each new distortion a new language of response was needed.

Quite deliberately, then, I want to demonstrate that, through



SCRIPTURAL, REALLY?

"Then what about Deuteronomy 6:4?" I hear my many Muslim readers cry. "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*." One, not three. But the point of Deuteronomy 6:4 is not to teach that "The Lord our God, the Lord is a mathematical singularity." In the middle of Deuteronomy 6, that would be a bit out of the blue to say the least. Instead, Deuteronomy 6 is about God's people having the Lord as the *one* object of their affections: he is the only one worthy of them, and they are to love him alone with all their heart, soul and strength (Deut 6:5). In fact, the word for "one" in Deuteronomy 6:4 really doesn't convey "mathematical singularity" at all well. The word is also used, for example, in Genesis 2:24, where Adam and Eve—*two* persons—are said to be *one*.

We'll be looking at many such verses, and through them all I think it will become clear: the more we push into the Scriptures, the more we see that the God they present really is triune.

and through, the Trinity is a *scriptural* truth—and I want even the layout of the book to make that clear. So we'll get to hear from many of the great minds who've thought on this, but I want to avoid giving the impression that they were at some higher stage of religious evolution than the Bible. They were mere heralds of the triune God revealed in Scripture.

The Christian Distinctive

Exactly how important is the Trinity, though? Is it the sticky toffee pudding of faith—a nice way to round things off, but incidental, or is it the main course? Steel yourself for the thunders of the Athanasian Creed, a statement of faith from the fifth or sixth century, which begins: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic [that is, the church's orthodox] faith; which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled, without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. And the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity.”

Now today that sounds overwrought to the point of being hysterical. We must believe in the Trinity or “perish everlastingly”? No, that goes too far, surely? For while we might be happy enough to include the Trinity in our list of “things Christians believe,” the suggestion that our very salvation depends on the Trinity comes across as ridiculously overinflated bluster. How could something so curious be necessary for salvation “before all things”?

And yet. The unflinching boldness of the Athanasian Creed forces us to ask what is essential for Christian faith. What would we say is the article of faith that must be held before all others? Salvation by grace alone? Christ's atoning work on the cross? His bodily resurrection? Now certainly those are all things “of first importance” (1 Cor 15:3), so absolutely critical that they cannot be given up without the very nature and goodness of the gospel being lost; however, they do not stand “before all things.” By themselves

THE PROTESTANT BUDDHISTS

Francis Xavier was a Roman Catholic missionary to Asia. When he reached Japan in 1549 he came across a particular sect of Buddhism (*Yodo Shin-Shu*) that stank, he said, of what he called “the Lutheran heresy.” That is, like the Reformer Martin Luther, these Buddhists believed in salvation by grace alone and not by human effort. Simple trust in Amida, they held, instead of trust in self, was sufficient to achieve rebirth into the pure land. If we call on him, they taught, then despite our failings, all his achievements become ours.

Of course, the “salvation” in view here was nothing like Christian salvation: it was not about knowing Amida or being known by him; it was about enlightenment and the achievement of Nirvana. It was, nonetheless, a salvation grounded on the virtues and achievements of another, and appropriated by faith alone.

they are not what make the Christian gospel Christian. Jehovah’s Witnesses can believe in the sacrificial death of Christ; Mormons in his resurrection; others in salvation by grace. Granted, the similarities are sometimes only superficial, but the very fact that certain Christian beliefs can be shared by other belief systems shows that they cannot be the foundation on which the Christian gospel rests, the truth that stands “before all things.”

We need not be disturbed by such similarities. That which distinguishes Christianity has not been stolen. For what makes Christianity absolutely distinct is the identity of

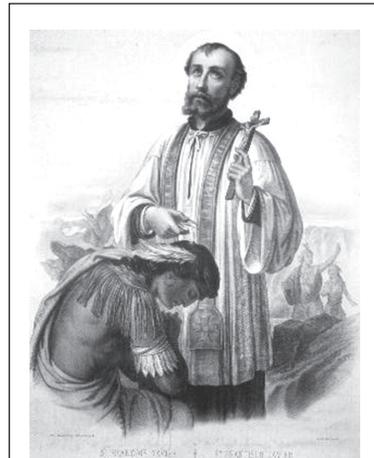


Figure I.2. Francis Xavier (1509-52)

our God. *Which* God we worship: *that* is the article of faith that stands before all others. The bedrock of our faith is nothing less than God himself, and every aspect of the gospel—creation, revelation, salvation—is only Christian in so far as it is the creation, revelation and salvation of *this* God, the triune God. I could believe in the death of a man called Jesus, I could believe in his bodily resurrection, I could even believe in a salvation by grace alone; but if I do not believe in this God, then, quite simply, I am not a Christian. And so, because the Christian God is triune, the Trinity is the governing centre of all Christian belief, the truth that shapes and beautifies all others. The Trinity is the cockpit of all Christian thinking.

Can't We Get Along with Just "God"?

Strangely enough, who and what God is like tend to be things we assume we already know and so do not need to think much more about. Especially in the post-Christian West, where the identity of God seems to have been pretty much universally agreed on for centuries, it seems obvious. Thus Christians ask non-Christians if they believe in "God"—as if the very idea of "God" is self-explanatory, as if we will all be thinking of the same sort of being.

Yet the temptation to sculpt God according to our expectations and presuppositions, to make this God much like another, is strong with us. You see it all down through history: in the Middle Ages it seemed obvious for people to think of God as a feudal lord; the first missionaries to the Vikings thought it obvious to present Christ as a warrior God, an axe-wielding divine berserker who could out-Odin Odin. And so on. The trouble is, the triune God simply does not fit well into the mould of any other God. Trying to get along with some unspecified "God," we will quickly find ourselves with *another* God.

That, ironically, is often why we struggle with the Trinity: instead of starting from scratch and seeing that the triune God is a

radically different sort of being from any other candidate for “God,” we try to stuff Father, Son and Spirit into how we have always thought of God. Now, usually in the West, “God” is already a subtly defined idea: it refers to one person, not three. So when we come to the Trinity, we feel like we’re trying to squeeze two extra persons into our understanding of God—and that is, to say the least, rather hard. And hard things get left. The Trinity becomes that awkward appendix.

So used are we to fashioning God according to our assumptions that our minds simply rebel at the thought of a God who is not as we would expect. We imagine God would be a simpler being—a single-person God. Perhaps, then, it is not so much the seemingly bad math of the Trinity that puts us off as the sheer imposition of an unexpected sort of God.

And it is not just that we are quick to replace the living God with gods of our devising: the world is already filled with innumerable, often wildly different candidates for “God.” Some are good, some are not. Some are personal, some are not. Some are omnipotent, some are not. You see it in the Bible, where the Lord God of Israel, Baal, Dagon, Molech and Artemis are completely different. Or take, for example, how the Qur’an explicitly and sharply distinguishes Allah from the God described by Jesus:

Say not “Trinity.” Desist; it will be better for you: for God is one God. Glory be to Him: (far exalted is He) above having a son.¹

Say: “He, Allah, is One.

Allah is He on Whom all depend.

He begets not, nor is He begotten.

And none is like Him.”²

In other words, Allah is a single-person God. In no sense is he

¹Surah 4.171.

²Surah 112, my emphasis.

a Father (“he begets not”), and in no sense does he have a Son (“nor is he begotten”). He is one person, and not three. Allah, then, is an utterly different sort of being to the God who is Father, Son and Spirit. And it is not just incompatibly different numbers we are dealing with here: that difference, as we will see, is going to mean that Allah exists and functions in a completely different way from the Father, Son and Spirit.

All that being the case, it would be madness to settle for any presupposed idea of God. Without being specific about which God is God, which God will we worship? Which God will we ever call others to worship? Given all the different preconceptions people have about “God,” it simply will not do for us to speak abstractly about some general “God.” And where would doing so leave us? If we content ourselves with being mere monotheists, and speak of God only in terms so vague they could apply to Allah as much as the Trinity, then we will never enjoy or share what is so fundamentally and delightfully different about Christianity.

The Shocking Joy

The irony could not be thicker: what we assume would be a dull or peculiar irrelevance turns out to be the source of all that is good in Christianity. Neither a problem nor a technicality, the triune being of God is the vital oxygen of Christian life and joy. And so it is my hope and prayer that as you read this book, the knowledge of Father, Son and Spirit will breathe fresh life into you.