

Chapter 14

IS THE TRINITY A LOGICAL BLUNDER? GOD AS THREE AND ONE

Paul Copan

Any Christian who has interacted with Muslims or Jehovah's Witnesses will eventually hear questions such as: How can God be three and one? Or, If Jesus was God, to whom was He crying out from the cross, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt 27:46).¹ Unfortunately, in our age of vanishing biblical literacy, the average Christian's understanding of the Trinity is minimal or even heterodox. This ignorance is tragic for several other reasons: many fail to recognize Christianity's unique doctrine of God; they are therefore unable to defend Christian orthodoxy; and they perhaps are not being assisted within the Christian community to worship God "in . . . truth" (John 4:24). First, trinitarianism distinguishes the Christian faith from other versions of theism—namely, Judaism and Islam, which are unitarian; many Christians seem unaware of this unique and central tenet of their faith in the triune God as Father, Son, and Spirit. Second, Christians tend to be inept at responding to the antitrinitarian thought and argumentation of Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Mormons; many are incapable of articulating an effective doctrinal response to alternate theological perspectives, not to mention defining and appreciating their own. Third, the Christian's worship is often uninformed and misguided because of this doctrinal

¹ Unless otherwise noted, Scripture quotations are from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

ignorance; I have heard elders and even pastors thank the Father for dying on the cross or refer to the Holy Spirit as “It.”

Challenges exist not only *within* the church but also *outside* it. In our post-September 11 world, we commonly hear the slogan, “Christians and Muslims worship the same God.” Yes, Arab Christians used the term *Allah* for the triune God long before the time of Muhammad, and many of them still do! However, these two Abrahamic faiths diverge sharply regarding the nature of God: Muslims reject the tri-unity of God as heretical and blasphemous; this is *shirk*—ascribing partners to God.

The New Atheists have taken their potshots at Christian doctrine and the concept of God. Richard Dawkins, for instance, seems to have little patience with (or, I might add, understanding about) Trinitarian discussions in church history:

Rivers of medieval ink, not to mention blood, have been squandered over the “mystery” of the Trinity, and in suppressing deviations such as the Arian heresy. Arius of Alexandria, in the fourth century, denied that Jesus was *consubstantial* (i.e. of the same substance or essence) with God. What on earth could that possibly mean, you are probably asking? Substance? What “substance”? What exactly do you mean by “essence”? “Very little” seems the only reasonable reply.²

To add to such challenges, popular Western culture tends wrongly to assume that “God” refers to a *supreme person*. Not a few Christian philosophers—I won’t mention any names—have referred to God as “a person.” This is misleading. *Three persons*—Father, Son, and Spirit—fully share in the *one true God’s* identity. From eternity there has existed not one solitary *person* but a God-in-relation, three divine persons fully loving and enjoying one another. Personal relationships did not come into existence when God created finite personal beings (angels and humans). Relationship has *always* existed in this triune divine family. Christians should not think of God apart from His self-revelation as triune, and this should inform us in our worship of God and in our life in the world. Unlike many philosophical conceptions

² R. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2006), 54.

of God as “wholly Other,” an “Unmoved Mover,” “First Cause,” or the “Ground of all being,” the Christian understanding rejects such non-relational abstractions in favor of a God who is personal, intrinsically relational, and history engaging. This tri-personal God, though “over all” (*transcendent*), is also “in all” (*immanent*) and “not far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27).

Three Dangers to Avoid

The Athanasian Creed (c. AD 500) attempts to make sense of the biblical data that affirm God’s threeness and oneness:

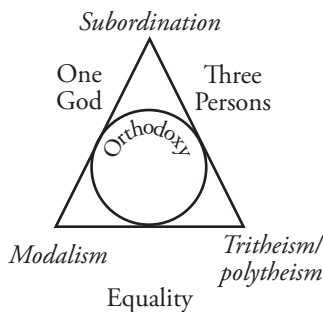
Now the catholic faith is that we worship One God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity, neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one Person of the Father, another of the Son, another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, is One, the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. . . . And yet not three eternal but one eternal, as also not three infinites, nor three uncreated, but one uncreated, and one infinite. So, likewise, the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty; and yet not three almighties but one almighty. So the Father is God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God; and yet not three Gods but one God. . . . For like as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge every Person by Himself to be both God and Lord; so are we forbidden by the catholic religion to say, there be three Gods or three Lords. . . . So there is one Father not three Fathers, one Son not three Sons, and one Holy Spirit not three Holy Spirits.

In the history of Christianity, the Western church (Catholic and Protestant) has stressed God’s *unbreakable oneness of God’s being* whereas the Eastern Orthodox church has emphasized the *distinctiveness of the three persons*. That said, orthodox Christian formulations of the Trinity should attempt to avoid *overemphasizing/denying* one of three

Trinitarian fundamentals; doing so could lead to doctrinal significant error:³

- Overemphasizing *threeness* leads to tritheism—a version of polytheism (many gods). This error, which is found in one version of Mormonism, *denies God's oneness* (monotheism).
- Overemphasizing *oneness* leads to modalism—that God is just one person who appears in different modes or manifestations (e.g., as Father in the Old Testament, Son in the New Testament, and Spirit during the New Testament church age). This unitarian (as opposed to trinitarian) view of God is characteristic of much liberal theology which, for example, rejects Jesus' divinely authoritative status; it *denies God's threeness*.
- Rejecting *equality* leads to subordinationism. In this case the three persons do not *possess alike* the divine nature but are a kind of hierarchy. According to Jehovah's Witnesses, the Father alone is God; Jesus is "a god" and the first creature God made; and the Holy Spirit is not personal but merely a force. This subordinationist error *undermines the equality of the divine persons*.

By contrast, the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity emphasizes that only one God exists (oneness). This God exists eternally in three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Spirit (threeness). Also, these persons are fully equal in their essential divine attributes and perfections (equality).



³ R. Nicole, "The Meaning of the Trinity," in P. Toon and J. D. Spiceland, eds., *One God in Trinity* (Westchester, IL: Cornerstone, 1980), 1–4.

The Divine Family

From eternity, the triune God has existed. Indeed, the self-sufficient Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit have existed in their free, mutual self-giving and self-receiving love. Relationship or communion is intrinsic to this “household” (or economy) of divine persons who, though distinct from one another, are inseparably united in other-oriented love. This divine inter- (and inner-) connection of mutuality, openness, and reciprocity has no individualistic competition among the family members but only joy, self-giving love, and transparency. Rather than being some isolated self or solitary ego, God is supremely relational in His self-giving, other-oriented nature. Within God is intimate *union* as well as *distinction*, an unbreakable communion of persons. The persons of the Godhead can be *distinguished* but not *separated*. God is both *community* and *unity*.⁴

Although some analogies of the Trinity can be problematic (e.g., water’s three states, which implies modalism), other analogies may prove more accurate, useful, and illuminating. Consider the mythological three-headed dog Cerberus that guards Hades’s gates. Though a single organism (substance), one dog (not three dogs), he has three distinct centers of awareness, each with the same canine nature. (In the world we have comparable analogies in, say, two-headed snakes or even inseparable Siamese twins; in such cases we have distinct centers of awareness within one unified organism.) Likewise, God is one immaterial soul (substance) with three distinct centers of consciousness, rationality, will, and agency (persons) who are deeply and necessarily interconnected, and they share the same unique divine nature.

Because a relational God exists and chooses to create humans in His image, relationality is central to *our* identity as humans. No wonder the Ten Commandments divide into two tables—our relationship to God and our relationship to fellow human beings. Jesus Himself summarizes our twofold duty: “love the Lord your God” and “love your neighbor” (Mark 12:30–31). We have been made for communion with God first and foremost, but how we regard fellow human beings

⁴ D. B. Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 174.

reflects our spiritual condition (1 John 4:20). We recognize what love is by the model of the self-giving God in Christ (1 John 3:16).

Christians have long pondered the mystery of the Trinity, and we're not here trying to demystify the God whose nature and purposes can't be reduced to tidy formulas or manageable boxes. We should celebrate the unfathomable God, who's under no obligation to human demands to clarify everything about Himself (Deut 29:29). And why think our puny minds could grasp these "secret things" (NASB) anyway?

Paul reminds us that we know partially and lack the clarity about God's nature and ways (1 Cor 13:9; cf. Isa 55:9). "The great things of the gospel" (as theologian Jonathan Edwards put it) *are* astonishing, but *mystery* or *partial knowledge* doesn't imply *contradiction*. Let's keep this in mind as we consider the divine Trinity.

Toward a Clearer Understanding of the Trinity

What *do* the Scriptures mean when they tell us that God is both *three* and *one*? If Father, Son, and Spirit are divine persons, aren't there three Gods rather than one? Classical New England Unitarians—who stressed the fatherhood of God, the brotherhood of man, and the neighborhood of Boston (!)—and their ilk have suggested that Christians just can't count: 1+1+1 equals 3! Anthropologist Pascal Boyer, a naturalist who claims that religion is simply a matter of brain function and survival enhancement, is disdainful of religious believers. He claims that they don't think critically, don't check out evidence, and believe what can't be falsified. He adds that Christians seem particularly gullible and can't think correctly. Boyer specifically mentions the "irrational" doctrine of the Trinity. As it turns out, Boyer himself isn't displaying the appropriate critical thinking and evidence-checking he claims believers are lacking: ironically, he presents a doctrine that *no* orthodox Christian believes—"that three persons are one person."⁵ No, the Christian believes that there are three necessarily inseparable persons (not "one person") who share one divine nature and substance.

⁵ P. Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 6; cf. P. Boyer, *Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 300.

Without trying to reduce God to human formulas and grids, how can we, in faithful humility, better grasp this central Christian doctrine of the Trinity? Perhaps the following considerations can assist us.

First, Scripture reveals both a oneness to God and a threeness. Jesus' first followers were religious Jews, orthodox monotheists. They were firmly committed to God's unique *oneness* in contrast to the polytheism of the surrounding nations. Twice daily they would recite the *Shema* ("Hear, O Israel"), declaring God's *oneness*: "The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Deut 6:4; cf. Mark 12:29). An early Christian creed (AD 53) affirms Jesus' sharing in the divine identity as the "one Lord" (1 Cor 8:4–7), while steadfastly declaring that "there is no God but one." Even the demons hold to an orthodox monotheistic belief (Jas 2:19).

God's *threeness* is also apparent. In the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20), Jesus tells His disciples to go and make disciples of all nations, "baptizing them in the *name* [not *names*] of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." At Jesus' baptism, a reenactment of the exodus, Father and Spirit are also present (Matt 3:16–17). Paul's benediction expresses God's threeness: "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 Cor 13:14 NIV; cf. 1 Cor 12:4–6). So while God is one, three self-distinctions exist within the Godhead.

Second, God is one in essence or nature but three in person. Three and one aren't in contradiction here; to be in conflict, *the same category or relationship* must be involved. But *threeness* pertains to persons; *oneness* pertains to God's nature or essence. There isn't one divine nature *and* three divine natures; there aren't three persons *and* one person in the Godhead.

A nature is what makes a thing (or person) what it is. God has certain characteristics that make Him what He is. He can't *not* exist and is all-good, for example. And just as the Earth's billions of humans possess a common nature that sets them apart from angels and aardvarks, the triune persons are equally and fully God, sharing in the same nature though at a much deeper, more unified level than humans. Crucial to overcoming the contradiction charge in the doctrine of the Trinity is

distinguishing between the only one divine *nature* and the three *persons* who possess it. There aren't three Gods, but one.

When Jehovah's Witnesses or Muslims ask Christians, "If Jesus was divine, to whom did he cry, 'My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?' (Matt 27:46)," these questioners assume that if Jesus is God, then it is impossible that another can share the same divine nature. We can reject this without inconsistency and even respond, "If the *Father* is God, to whom is He speaking when He says *to the Son*, 'Your throne, O God, is forever' or 'You, Lord, . . . laid the foundation of the earth'" (Heb 1:8,10 NASB)?

Third, to distinguish between person and nature, we must keep in mind two ways to use "is"—identity versus predication. Mark Twain is the pen name for Samuel Langhorne Clemens, the 26-cigars-a-day smoker and author of *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer*. Twain does not have characteristics that Clemens does not have. In other words, when we say, "Samuel Langhorne Clemens is Mark Twain," we can just as easily reverse the names: "Mark Twain is Samuel Langhorne Clemens." Each of those statements indicates identity: Mark Twain = Samuel Langhorne Clemens (and vice versa). The names, which refer to the same person, are fully interchangeable and thus identical.

When it comes to the Trinity, to say "Jesus is God" *isn't* identical to "God is Jesus." *Unlike* the Mark Twain example, "Jesus" *doesn't exhaust* what it means to speak of "God." *Jesus and God are not identical.* According to the Bible, Father and Spirit are called divine, just as Jesus is.⁶ In the statement "Jesus is God," we use *is* to *describe* or *predicate*, not to identify or equate: Jesus is God in that He shares in the nature that only two other persons share; so there isn't just one person who can properly be called God.

Again, threeness pertains to persons, and oneness pertains to nature or essence. There is only *one* divine *nature*, but three *persons* share in it. For God to be God, He must possess certain qualities or properties—being all-knowing, all-powerful, and all-good. Only Father, Son, and Spirit participate in this divine nature and can thus be called "God." Each of these *three persons* is also a center of consciousness, responsi-

⁶ On the Trinity's biblical foundations, see P. Copan, "*That's Just Your Interpretation*" (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001).

bility, and activity and is *distinct* from the other; for example, Jesus *isn't* the Father; the Father *isn't* the Spirit. So there's simply no logical contradiction when Christians say, "Three *persons*, one *divine nature*."

Fourth, the members of the Trinity share the same being—not simply the same nature. That is, God is one substance (Lat. *substantia*) that exists (or subsists) on its own; God is His own self-contained entity. The Triune God isn't a mere assemblage of three divine beings (which would be polytheism—the belief in many gods), who happen to have a common purpose. Think back to the analogy of the three-headed Cerberus. The three centers of consciousness exist or are contained in one organism, a self-contained being. In the case of God, a *personal* being, we have three persons who similarly exist in one *soulish* being. God is not three beings but one. Just as one head of Cerberus is not a being, so none of the persons of the Trinity is *a* being. Just as one of the dog's heads cannot exist apart from connection (subsistence) with the other two in a single organism, likewise none of the persons of the Trinity can exist in being without the other. So this is radically different from polytheism/tritheism, in which we have distinct beings that are capable of existing on their own. The necessary unity of Father, Son, and Spirit is like the angles of a triangle. If we remove one angle, we no longer have a triangle; all three must be in place.

Fifth, the Triune persons are deeply interrelated or mutually indwell one another, sharing a necessary, unbreakable relational oneness. We earlier noted that humans possess a common nature. You and I have the same nature as Socrates and Plato. This nature makes us what we are, human. When it comes to God, we need further clarification. Though I share the same human nature with, say, my students, they are separate and distinct from me; it's possible for me to exist without them or vice versa. The members of the Trinity, however, are inseparably related. One can't exist without the other two. As we've seen, a triangle can't exist if we take away one of its angles since by definition a triangle is tri-angular. Likewise, God by definition is Triune. Unlike Unitarians, we can't have just the Father without Son or Spirit. The triune persons are necessarily and permanently interrelated.

Greek theologians used the term *perichoresis* (in Latin, *circumincensio*) to describe the Trinity's necessary interrelationships. Jesus spoke of

being “in” the Father and the Father “in” Him to describe their unique relationship (cf. John 10:30,38; 17:21). There’s a “mutual abiding” in the Godhead—unlike human relationships, however close they may be. The relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit is not some miscellaneous collection of distinct persons who just happen to share some generic divine essence (“God-ness”) so that they can be classed together.⁷ Rather, they *mutually, inseparably share* in the life of one another in a remarkable way—a life without isolation, insulation, secrecy, or fear. They enjoy a penetrating, transparent, mutual knowledge of the other as other, as co-other, and as loved other.⁸ So while the divine persons each fully possess the same nature (each one can rightly be called “God”), more fundamental is their sharing a common, mutually indwelling unbreakable life together.

Consider the analogy of *the mutual interaction of the soul and the body*. The Scriptures speak of a *deep unity* between body and soul: the body interacts continually and deeply with the soul and the soul with the body. If I feel nervous in my soul, my stomach starts churning. If I cut off my arm, my soul must make certain adjustments in light of this loss. So there’s a kind of mutual indwelling or interdependence in this body-soul relationship. The soul may temporarily separate from the body at death—the believer’s absence from the body means being at home with the Lord (2 Cor 5:6–9). But there’s normally a deep, interactive unity between them; they act as one.

Sixth, because the members of the Trinity share the same essence and mutually indwell one another, they also act as one and not in isolation from one another. All that the three divine persons do, they do as one. Whether creating, revealing, or redeeming, the three persons of the Trinity necessarily act as one. For example, when God creates, Father, Son, and Spirit are involved (e.g., Gen 1:1–2; John 1:3). Or when Jesus is raised from the dead, He is said to be raised by the Father (Gal 1:1; cf. Acts 2:24,32) and the Spirit (Rom 1:4), but Jesus declares that He has authority not only to lay down His life but also to take it up again (John 10:18; cf. 2:19: “I will raise it up”). The persons of

⁷ C. Plantinga, “The Threeness/Oneness Problem of the Trinity,” *Calvin Theological Journal* 23 (1988): 51; C. Plantinga, “The Perfect Family,” *Christianity Today* 28 (March 4, 1988), 27.

⁸ C. Plantinga, “The Perfect Family,” 27.

the Trinity also indwell believers (John 14:16,18,23; Rom 8:9). Even though each person has a distinct center of awareness or consciousness and a distinct will, only one harmonious will is expressed in divine action. Rather than acting as three independent persons (as with Greek and Roman gods), each member of the Godhead is equally present in every divine action.⁹

In the depth of His being, God is *relational*. God is relating within Himself, and He is relational toward us. This God is *for us*. He has created us to *love* Him and to *cling* to Him (Deut 10:20; 13:4)—like a husband and wife must cling to each other (Gen 2:24). When God came to this planet, He sat at tables with the marginalized and outcasts of society, showing God’s deep interest in them. When the Spirit brings us into God’s family, He pours God’s love into our hearts (Rom 5:5), giving us the confidence that we’re God’s adopted children (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:5).

These three divine persons are one in at least five important ways: (1) They share the same being (compare the three-headed being Cerberus). (2) They share in the same divine nature. (3) They mutually indwell one another (*perichoresis*), being bound together in relationship. (4) They necessarily act in perfect harmony. (5) Only one harmonious will is expressed in their actions. As we look at the story of Scripture, we can gather that, first, only one God exists and, second, three persons can legitimately be called “God.” The Holy Trinity is indeed a mystery but not an incoherent one.

The Philosophical and Practical Relevance of the Trinity

The doctrine of the Trinity is not simply coherent and biblically rooted. Its incredible richness can direct us to live and think wisely not only within a loving, relating Christian community but also within society as public citizens and within a pluralistic global village as witnesses to the great things of the gospel.

In the *public square* of Western democracies, people tend to view God as a singular, unitary person who is a rule-setting monarch endowed with sheer power to impose His arbitrary standards on

⁹ Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite*, 182.

humans.¹⁰ Obviously, many distrust and resist the idea of a God who only commands, calls for obedience, and judges the resistant. The doctrine of the Trinity, however, can explode this barren ethical arrangement. What if people viewed God as Triune, relating, self-giving, and other-centered by nature? What if God's rule includes not coercion or bullying but a desire for friendship with humans? What if God reveals and commands so that humans, by His grace, may freely "choose life" (Deut 30:19) and experience it "abundantly" (John 10:10 NASB)? And what if, rather than portraying a unilateral, top-down arrangement, we can present a relational God who wants none to perish but all to experience the holy warmth of His company (2 Pet 3:9)? Thus, if people continue to resist God's wooings (Acts 7:51), they will not only damage themselves, but they have the capacity to separate themselves from God's grace, and God will reluctantly allow them to go their own way forever. In the public square Christians should proclaim a relating God who is the foundation for ethics and personal responsibility, for human dignity and rights, for reason and truth, and for tolerance and cooperation.

Furthermore, Trinitarian doctrine can give the Christian valuable insights in *dialogue with other religions*. Today's "unknown God" (cf. Acts 17:22–23) is "something out there" that's unknown and unknowable; "It" may be the cause of the universe's existence and remarkable arrangement, but that's about all, we're told. Yet surely we can go further. Although Eastern or New Age philosophies often espouse an abstract, impersonal view of the Ultimate Reality, why think an *impersonal* entity or force offers a secure basis for the *personal* virtues—love, humility, kindness, compassion—elevated within such views? How can "It" serve as a foundation for human rights and personal dignity? In the monistic all-is-one philosophies of the East, there are no real I-You relationships, no distinctions between the compassionate and the pitied, between good and evil. All differences are illusory (*maya*). And why think this impersonal "God" is responsible for creating and sustaining the world we experience? It can't create anything that's

¹⁰ Some comments here are taken from L. Newbigin, "Trinity as Public Truth," in *The Trinity in a Pluralistic Age: Theological Essays on Culture and Religion*, ed. K. J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), chap. 1.

not God or act on anything since there's nothing to act on.¹¹ Even if Eastern religions stress *duties* or *societal roles* rather than *rights*, their emphasis on not harming others but respecting them still takes human worth and dignity for granted, an assumption that an impersonal metaphysic/Ultimate Reality can't easily accommodate.

We naturally give priority to persons over impersonal objects in our everyday lives: "The most important things in life aren't things," we're told. Why then favor some Eastern ideal of "nothingness" (*sunyata*) or pure consciousness (Brahman) that's beyond personality or beyond good and evil? By contrast, the triune God offers a more fruitful context to ground and make sense of loving human relationships and interpersonal virtues, in addition to the existence of a finite universe.

Also, *feminist philosophers* have objected to a power-asserting "male," "hierarchical" conception of God in Western philosophy. But the biblical God, who makes male *and* female in His image, is a relational, personal being without gender. And although male pronouns are typically used to refer to God, Scripture contains metaphors of God's mother-like actions and emotions as tender, care-giving, compassionate, and protecting: giving birth to Israel (Deut 32:18); a nursing mother (Ps 131:2); a mother in labor (Isa 42:4); a mother bear and lioness (Hos 13:8). In addition, God's essentially other-oriented relationality goes a long way in addressing certain concerns and misconceptions feminists raise regarding an autocratic, dictatorial male deity.

Finally, the Trinity contributes to a resolution of *the problem of the One and the Many*—what philosopher William James called philosophy's most central problem. The ancient philosopher Heraclitus said that ultimate reality is *many* and *changing*—that is, *no unity*. On the other hand, the philosopher Parmenides claimed that reality is *one* and *unchanging*—that is, *no plurality*. We live not in a *multiverse* but a *universe*, a unity that holds diverse things together, and the three-in-one God furnishes us with resources to account for both unity and plurality.¹²

¹¹ F. G. Kirkpatrick, *A Moral Ontology for a Theistic Ethic: Gathering the Nations in Love and Justice* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), 56.

¹² C. Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).