

LOGOS QUESTIONS

Why Do Christians Believe In The Trinity?



University of
St Andrews



LOGOS
Institute for Analytic and
Exegetical Theology

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Introduction

From the moment they are called, Christ's disciples seek to better understand the God-man whom they follow. Jesus of Nazareth preached the kingdom of God and brought the kingdom by the power of God's Spirit. He commanded his followers to do likewise, and to baptize newcomers in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This booklet investigates our reasons for believing the doctrine of the Trinity. But what is that doctrine, and why should we examine our beliefs in it? At its core the doctrine of the Trinity holds that there is one God which is three distinct, fully divine persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). In the Athanasian Creed, early Christians declared the importance of this doctrine in no uncertain terms, stating up front, "Whomever will be saved, before all else must hold the catholic faith...and the catholic faith is this: that we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity." For these believers, Trinitarian doctrine is at the heart Christian faith.

Before proceeding it will be helpful to clarify what precisely we are asking. The question 'Why do we believe in the Trinity' is not the same as 'What is our evidence for the Trinity'. Evidence is the facts and information we use to show someone that a claim is true. While Christians have excellent evidence for their Trinitarian beliefs, this booklet does not aim to convince anyone that the doctrine is true or that they should believe it. Instead, the goal is to investigate the grounds of Christianity's core doctrine – to explore the foundations of the foundation. Even if some of us have never given it much thought, we already hold this doctrine:

we pray to our heavenly Father that his kingdom will come and that his will be done; we worship our saviour Jesus as our king; we seek to be filled with his Spirit to become more like Jesus and to better serve him. In short, Trinitarian roots have already taken hold in us, and below we search out four grounds which most nourish that belief: scripture, church creeds, experiences of the divine persons, and traces of the Trinity in the world.

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Scripture: A Trinitarian Autobiography

Scripture is the primary source material for Trinitarian belief. It tells a remarkably unified story about the one God who progressively reveals his tri-personal nature. How does scripture do this? As the biblical narrative unfolds, we learn more and more about its main character, God! God creates the universe, calls Israel to be a people over which he will rule, and he remains steadfastly loyal despite their habitual disobedience. True to its name, the New Testament testifies to God's continuing activity in creation, but also delivers some startling news: in the fullness of time the God of Israel reveals that he is actually a *they*. The one God is in fact a gracious Father who sent his Son and sends his Spirit to save and sanctify all people.

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Both books of the bible point to God's tri-unity. The Old Testament emphasizes God's unity and foreshadows God's tri-personal revelation. For instance, God creates through word and spirit. Or take the passage which New Testament writers quote the most, Psalm 110. There David describes a conversation between The LORD (Yahweh) and David's Lord (or messiah, Adoni). The LORD promises to make the messiah a triumphant king of kings who will be a priest forever. Where the Old Testament gives hints and whispers, the New Testament virtually shouts the good news of how the Father sent his Son and Spirit. One way it does this is by giving stories and instruction where

the three divine persons stand side-by-side in stark relief. For example, Jesus' final command to his disciples is to go out, preach, heal, and make disciples by baptizing them in the name of God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). Look also at Paul's exhortation to the church at Ephesus (Ephesians 4:1-16). There he pleads with them to remain unified in love through the Spirit, because they have one Lord (Christ) and one Father.

It is tempting to look for the Trinity in scripture by simply combing the bible in search of passages where the three divine persons are mentioned in relative proximity. Certainly such passages exist, and are rightfully dear to Christian hearts. But scripture has a more nuanced, and far more interesting relationship to the Trinity. The bible is not only a book about the triune God, but a book in some sense written *by* the Trinity. The Father sent his Son to act on behalf of fallen humanity, but he did not stop there. He did not leave us to make sense of his wonderful achievements on our own. Instead, he sent his Spirit to help humans compose scripture (2 Timothy 3:16). God did not only enter into our world and act powerfully in it, but also gives us a commentary on his handiwork so that we may

comprehend the meaning of that work, the depths of his grace, and his triune nature. Further, through scripture God gives us pieces of a divine conversation that has been happening since before creation. We hear heavenly voices discussing how they will create (“let us make them in our image”), how they will save (“the LORD said to my Lord”), and how they relate to us and one another (“This is my Son, whom I love. Listen to him”). The Trinity not only speaks to mankind, but invites us to listen in on their own conversation so that we may better know them!

We can summarize this way. The one God revealed himself as three persons when the Son came as sent from his Father and sending his Spirit. Scripture points to this pivotal event through foreshadowing (the Old Testament) and reflective commentary (the New). And scripture itself is written by the tri-personal God precisely to help us understand this work and the three-fold nature of the God who does it. The church father Hilary of Poitiers perhaps puts it best, “That true and absolute and perfect doctrine, which forms our faith, is the confession of God from God and God in God.”

Church Creeds

Where scripture has pride of place among sources for belief in the Trinity, church creeds have the honour of guiding our thoughts about scripture. Essentially, a creed is a statement of faith in the core truths of the gospel – a commentary on the commentary.

The most important creeds are the four from the councils of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451). These councils are *ecumenical*, that is, they are accepted by Christians ranging from Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Protestants. What do these creeds say? Among other points, each affirms the divinity of the Son and Spirit, who are sent by the Father. All three are divine, but they are not three gods, but one God.

The creeds play an important role in the Trinitarian life of the church. They help us understand Scripture by guiding our understanding of what the bible says, or doesn't say, about the Trinity. In this way creeds can be thought of as a signpost, leading us along, pointing us in the right direction and, at times, pointing us away from theological dangers. One danger in trinitarian doctrine involves viewing God as solely one person who acts in the world as a Father, Son, or Spirit (modalism). The opposite extreme is viewing the divine persons not as one God, but as three independent gods (tritheism).

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Experiencing the Triune God

Scripture attests to God's revelation of his tri-unity, and the creeds help guide our understanding of scripture. However, we cannot ignore the continued activity of the Father, Son, and Spirit among us today. God manifests his tri-personal nature in the world in many ways. Let us briefly look at three.

First, Jesus appears in person to people today. Soon after his resurrection, Jesus ascended to heaven and took the place of honour at the right-hand of the Father. There he intercedes for us at this very moment. And yet Jesus presents himself in times and places in the world as he sees fit. For example, there is a growing body of former Muslims who have dedicated their lives to this messiah after being visited by him. In almost all cases a man appears clothed in light, undeniably holy and divine. He directs the beholder to a place where he or she will hear the gospel. Often the direction is something like, "there you find a book, read it" or, "at that place you will be approached by someone with good news, listen to them". In each of these powerful encounters Jesus directs people to read or listen to scripture.¹ Perhaps this is to be expected after having seen the intimate relationship between the Trinity's autobiography (scripture) and the Trinity's people (Christians).

That Jesus personally meets with non-Christians should not be too surprising. He did so early on, motivating Saul of Tarsus to repent and serve Christ as Paul the Apostle. And yet, experiences with Jesus, powerful and wonderful as they are, seem rare compared to encounters with his Spirit. The Holy Spirit's ministering to new and non-believers is more pervasive, often during times of reading scripture or hearing a sermon or bible story. These experiences are not with the visible, risen Jesus, but are instead a deeply personal experience with his invisible Spirit – often involving confirmation of the truth of scripture, joy in learning about God, and encouragement in obeying Jesus.

As you can imagine, such meetings with Jesus and his Spirit are deeply stirring for those who have them. Notice that in both instances, Jesus and Holy Spirit not only meet with someone in an intimate, profound way, but do so often in order to direct them to scripture. The triune God's desire to move people to scripture is seen in one of most pervasive trinitarian activities: the Spirit's work in *confirming* central truths of bible and *conforming* people to those truths.

Second, the Holy Spirit continually works within believers to confirm the core truths of Scripture. Look for instance at Paul's letter to the Romans where he tells them "you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, 'Abba! Father! The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are children of God.'" (8:15-16)

¹ There is a growing body of sources detailing the Holy Spirit's work among Muslims. A good entry is the short documentary video *More Than Dreams*, which can be found on Youtube. A fuller study available on book and audio-book is David Garrison's *A Wind in the House of Islam: How God Is Drawing Muslims Around the World to Faith in Jesus Christ*.

The Spirit witnesses to bring a deep conviction that the Father has forgiven and adopted us through Jesus' work. This is partly why Jesus told his disciples "it is to your advantage that I go away." For "If I go," Jesus tells them, "I will send him to you... when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own initiative, but whatever he hears, he will speak; and he will disclose to you what is to come. He will glorify me, for He will take of mine and will disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are mine; therefore I said that he takes of mine and will disclose it to you." (John 16:7,14-16)

The Holy Spirit does not stop when we believe the truth, but works with us so that we may live in conformity to the truth. For example, the Spirit helps us to depend on his power, provides gifts so that we may minister to one another, and fills us so we can walk with him and produce spiritual fruit.² Ministry to our brothers and sisters is a third way we encounter the Trinity -- one so important that we must explore it in detail in the next section.

Beholding Christ's Body: The Beauty of the Church

The Spirit's work is not merely to make you holy as an individual – a beautiful island paradise separated from the rest of the world. Instead, God ministers to us so that we may love and serve others in deeper community. As a family of Christ-led, Spirit-empowered believers, the living church itself is a powerful source of belief in the Trinity. Let us look at two ways this is so.

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First, the church proclaims that Jesus is Lord, and people know that this message is true because of the church's actions. John makes this clear in his third epistle where he commends the church for "walking in the truth" so that a visiting brother "received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself." In other words, John advocates a dual testimony of word and deed, so that by doing good "you know that our testimony is true." In teaching this John only imitates his master who, years before, commanded his followers, "Let your light shine before men in such a way that may see your works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven."

Second, believers demonstrate God's trinitarian nature to one another by loving one another. Throughout his writings Paul uses imagery of the church as Christ's body. In fact,

² For more on these roles of the Holy Spirit, see Galatians 5, 1 Corinthians 12, and Ephesians 5.

'the body of Christ' is just another way of speaking about Christians. We are feet for going, hands for doing, mouths for speaking. But this raises the question: Going where? Doing and saying what? Every time that Paul speaks this way, it is in the context of ministering to our brothers and sisters, empowered by Spirit, in service to Christ our head. Thus as a whole we are more than just representatives of Jesus, but are images of Jesus to one another. When we serve our sister in Christ, she is ministered by us *and* Christ's Spirit in a real and direct way.

Meditating on the Triune Truth: Faith Seeking Understanding

The last source for belief in the trinity draws from a long tradition of meditation upon the truths of scripture. Thinkers in this tradition were convinced of the presence and beauty of the triune God. They reasoned that since God created the world and is active in it, and since God is tri-personal, then we will find traces of the Trinity throughout the world. Like scripture, the world is a book in which we see the Trinity speaking about itself and so deserves careful study.

St. Augustine read Genesis where man and woman are said to be images of God. To see a reflection of the Trinity, Augustine invites us to look inward, into the area of our greatest

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expertise: ourselves. There we each discover that we are both one and three. You are one individual, and at the same time you are also distinctly three in memory, understanding, and will. In your deepest place – that which most makes you *you* – is a deeply unified triad. You contain a threefold connection so interwoven that each element depends upon the other, yet is wonderfully distinct. And together you are a unified whole. A dim reflection perhaps, but this image helps us to understand what

we already hold in faith from scripture and creed.

Where Augustine turned inward, others have looked outward to notice traces of the Trinity. The 12th century monk Richard of St. Victor saw the Trinity reflected in love, man's most intense experience. Meditating on the utter goodness of God, Richard reasoned that a perfect God would be perfectly loving. Loving another is better than mere self-love, so God loves another. Further, lovers naturally want to turn their love outward, and something is going wrong when two lovers hoard their love only for each other. Therefore there must be at least three loving persons. Only divine persons could receive the totality of perfect

love, and perfectly requite that love. Therefore God must be three divine persons. Finally, we know from our experiences that love is either initiated or required. Therefore there is a divine lover who only initiates love (the Father), a lover (the Son) who returns that love and initiates it with a third, and the third lover (the Holy Spirit) who requites the love of the Father and Son. Since there are no other ways to love, it is impossible for there to be four or more persons.

These avenues of thought should not be taken as self-sufficient arguments for the existence of the Trinity, somehow independent of scripture. Their proponents sought to contemplate the triune God whom they adored and knew from divine revelation. They wanted to understand God's nature as three persons intimately unified in love. Today, we sometimes call these reflections 'fingerprints of the Trinity'. But it is telling that thinkers have traditionally called these trinitarian traces 'shadows' and 'footsteps'. For these thinkers, fingerprints may be too strong a description when compared to scripture. In the bible we hear God's very voice. In the world we hear trinitarian echoes.

We do not depend on the echoes as our primary source of belief, but they are excellent aids: "servants to queen theology", as the medieval thinkers liked to say. Stated another way, while traces of the Trinity are not our guide, they are wonderful companions as we journey to know and love our triune God.

Conclusion

The guiding question of this booklet is somewhat vague. This is purposefully so. *Why do Christians believe in the Trinity* may be asking ‘Why believe that the doctrine is true’. This is the question we’ve explored so far. But at the same time it may be asking ‘Why have faith in the Trinity’. The difference is between propositional knowledge (knowing that the doctrine is true), and personal knowledge (knowing the living Persons themselves). It’s one thing to believe that God is tri-personal, and quite another thing to trust those persons as they invite you into deeper relationship, holiness, and – yes – sacrificial love. Faith goes beyond mere mental assent. It requires relationship, trust. Ultimately the Trinity wants you to love them with everything you’ve got: heart, mind, soul, and strength.

It appears that in asking about the doctrine, we encounter a couple deeper questions. As we have seen, the doctrine of the Trinity holds that there is one God who is three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit. But in reflecting on this question, another reveals itself. If, from eternity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have perfectly loved one another and enjoyed supreme happiness, the question is this: *Why would the Trinity ever turn that love outward to you or me?* The only answer can be that this God is so loving, generous, and gracious that they delight in welcoming us into their arms. Thus the last question is perhaps the most difficult to answer, but also the most important: *Will you trust these Three with your life (loved-ones, future...and everything else)?* In other words, are you willing to take your faith beyond believing that the Trinity is real? Will you taste and see the goodness of the tri-une God? Bear in mind, doing so is not accomplished in a single step of faith. Rather we answer this question every day. It is an adventure of learning and growing in the delight of our God, three-in-one.

Further Reading

1. *Delighting in the Trinity: An Introduction to the Christian Faith* by Michael Reeves (IVP, 2012).
2. *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* by Fred Sanders (Crossway, 2010).
3. *Traces of the Trinity: Signs Of God In Creation And Human Experience* by Peter J. Leithart (Brazos, 2015).

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