

delighting in
the trinity



Why Father, Son and Spirit are good news

Tim Chester

Delighting in the Trinity:

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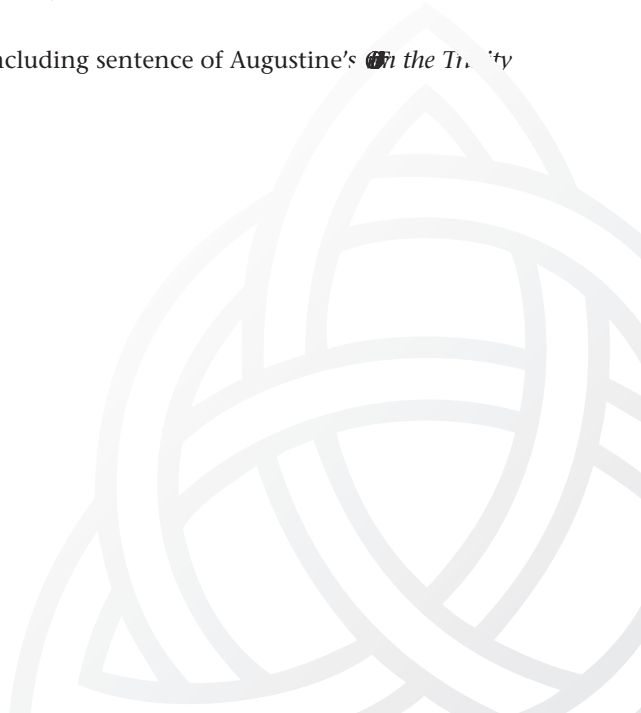
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To my wife, Helen.

*Living in relationship with you has
brought me freedom and joy,
and enriched my humanity.*

*O Lord, one God, God the Trinity,
whatsoever I have said in these books
that comes of thy prompting,
may thy people acknowledge it:
for what I have said that comes only of myself,
I ask of thee and of thy people pardon.*

The concluding sentence of Augustine's *On the Trinity*



Introduction: Believing in the triune God

Many of us find the doctrine of the Trinity—that God is three persons sharing one nature—difficult to get our heads round and frankly a bit embarrassing. What is more, we seem to get by without it. But in reality the Trinity is at the heart of all we believe. The Trinity gives shape to Christian truth.

Many people claim to believe in God, but have no time for Him. That is because their “god” is remote and uninvolved. The triune God sent His Son into human history so that we could know Him as our Father, and He sends His Spirit to accompany us in the struggles of life. To find out more about this God is a wonderful adventure.

Let me begin by explaining how this book came to be written. I was reading the Bible with two friends who are Muslims. Each week they faithfully came to my home and we discussed a passage of Scripture over a cup of tea. Many of their questions were about the Trinity: How can God have a son? How can there be three Gods and one

God? The first time these questions came up I thought to myself: “Oh no, they’ve asked a question about the Trinity. What am I going to say? How can I move the conversation on to different ground.”

An embarrassing doctrine?

I was embarrassed by the doctrine of the Trinity. The more I thought about it, the more my attitude struck me as crazy. The living God is triune. It is madness to be embarrassed about the Trinity because that means being embarrassed about God! The triune God revealed in the Bible is good news and so the Trinity must be good news. And so I thought on. How is the doctrine of the Trinity good news? This book is my answer to that question.

I have written a number of books. But this book is the one I have enjoyed writing the most. I have always found the doctrine of the Trinity exciting. Thinking it through takes us deeper into the triune God who is the foundation of all reality. This is the God who made us to know Him, and who gives meaning and joy to our lives. To explore Him is a wonderful adventure. To delight in Him is our chief end.

The study of the doctrine of the Trinity readily tips over into worship. We are left with a profound sense of awe as we gaze upon our great God. And such worship leads on to godly living. The root of sin is always idolatry. We turn from the true God to find satisfaction in other things and other ways of life. And so to have our worship of God reignited cuts away at the idolatry in our hearts. “Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?” says Isaiah. “Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare” (Isaiah 55 v 2). The triune God is rich fare.

So we should not be embarrassed by the doctrine of the Trinity. We should—and can—love studying it and relish telling others about it. I hope to show that being asked a question about the Trinity is a lovely opportunity to share the heart of our faith.

An irrelevant doctrine?

Robin Parry says: “For many Christians the Trinity has become something akin to their appendix: it’s there, but they’re not sure what its function is, they get by in life without it doing very much, and if they had to have it removed they wouldn’t be too distressed”.¹ Is the doctrine of the Trinity irrelevant? Looking round the church one might think so. In my local Christian bookshop I could not find a single book on the doctrine of the Trinity. So congratulations on finding this one!

Alister McGrath writes: “Most evangelicals do not talk about the Trinity at all”. He continues: “The real heartbeat of evangelicalism is in a church Bible-study group. If you go there and listen, there will be a lot about Jesus and Jesus’ impact on us. But the Trinity is not seen as centrally important; it is seen as difficult.”² Peter Toon says that while all major denominations affirm the doctrine of the Trinity “few of their preachers and teachers actually proclaim this belief in sermons ... there is a general feeling that the Trinity is both difficult and unimportant.”³

I recently sorted through about 50 of my theological

1 **Robin Parry**, *Worshipping Trinity: Coming Back to the Heart of Worship* (Paternoster, 2005).

2 **Alister McGrath**, “Trinitarian Theology” in **Mark A. Noll and Ronald F. Thiemann (eds.)**, *Where Shall My Wond’ring Soul Begin: The Landscape of Evangelical Piety and Thought* (Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 53.

3 **Peter Toon and James D. Spiceland (eds.)**, *One God in Trinity* (Samuel Bagster, 1980), p. xi.

journals—all self-consciously evangelical. I was looking through the articles, deciding which to keep, when it suddenly occurred to me that none was on the Trinity. I started looking, but found only one article out of over 400. One reason for this neglect is that evangelicals are people of “the Book” by conviction and activists by nature.⁴ They are Bible people with little interest for what might be perceived as extra-biblical speculation that has little relevance to the day-to-day realities of the Christian life.

A practical doctrine?

In reality, however, the Trinity is **anything but irrelevant**. The doctrine of the Trinity is central to how we know God, how we can be rescued from sin, how we understand the life and mission of the church, and even what it means to be human. Michael Jensen says: “The doctrine of the Trinity underpins our very existence as Christians—it gives a unique shape to the Christian life”.⁵ There is a trinitarian structure to every part of Christian truth and Christian living. Walter Kasper calls it “the grammar” of salvation.⁶ Consider God’s work of creation:

- The Father **creates** through the Son (Colossians 1 v 15-17; Hebrews 1 v 2).
- God **spoke the world into being** and the Word He spoke was His Son (John 1 v 1-3).
- The Son continues to be involved in creation, sustaining all things by His powerful word (Hebrews 1 v 3).

4 D. W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* (Unwin Hyman, 1989), pp. 10–14 and Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism* (Apollos, 2004), pp. 16–18.

5 Michael Jensen, “The Very Practical Doctrine of the Trinity,” *The Briefing* 249 (March 2001), p. 11.

6 Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ* (SCM, 1984), p. 311.

- God **gave life** to the first man by breathing “the breath of life” into his nostrils (Genesis 2 v 7). The word “breath” is the same word as the “Spirit” or “wind” hovering over the waters (Genesis 1 v 2).
- The creative Word of God comes on the breath of God. “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made, their starry host by the breath of his mouth” (Psalm 33 v 6).

In a similar way, the work of salvation reflects the trinitarian activity of God:

- Throughout the Old Testament God appears to His people in human form (Joshua 5 v 13-15; Ezekiel 1 v 25-28), and His Spirit mediates His presence among His people (Nehemiah 9 v 20, 30; Isaiah 63 v 10-14).
- When Jesus comes, He is sent by the Father (John 6 v 38-40; 17 v 20-21).
- He is born of a virgin by the Holy Spirit (Luke 1 v 34-35).
- At His baptism the Father speaks from heaven, commending His Son, and the Spirit descends in the form of a dove (Mark 1 v 9-11).
- Jesus conducts His ministry in the power of the Spirit (Matthew 12 v 28; Luke 4 v 14; John 3 v 34)—just as Isaiah had promised (Luke 4 v 18-19).
- On the cross the Father gives His Son to save us (John 3 v 16).
- The Son lays down His life for His people in obedience to the Father, but freely of His own accord (John 10 v 17-18).
- So we are reconciled to the Father through the death of the Son on our behalf (2 Corinthians 5 v 19).

- The Father raises the Son through the Spirit (Acts 2 v 24; Romans 1 v 4).
- The Son is now the mediator between God and humanity (1 Timothy 2 v 5).
- The Father sends the Spirit in the name of Jesus (John 14 v 16-17, 26).
- And Jesus sends the Spirit from the Father (John 15 v 26).
- The Spirit applies the work of the Son to our lives. He brings conviction of sin, righteousness and judgment (John 16 v 7-11). He opens our eyes to recognise Jesus as Lord (1 Corinthians 12 v 3).
- Through the Spirit we are born again (John 3 v 5-8) and through the Spirit the Father gives us the new life of Christ (Romans 8 v 11).
- We are saved because of the Father's kindness through rebirth by the Spirit, whom He poured out on us through the Son (Titus 3 v 4-7).

Some people look for security in a subjective experience of the Spirit; others in the objective work of Christ. But Christian assurance encompasses both for it has a threefold basis in trinitarian grace. It is rooted in the **electing love** of the Father, the **finished work** of the Son and the **present witness** of the Spirit. James Torrance says three answers can be given to the question of when I became a Christian:

Firstly, I have been a child of God from all eternity in the heart of the Father. Secondly, I became a child of God when Christ the Son lived, died and rose again for me long ago. Thirdly, I become a child of God when the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of adoption—sealed in my faith and experience what had been planned from all eternity in the heart of the Father and what

was completed once and for all in Jesus Christ. There are three moments but only one act of salvation, just as we believe there are three persons in the Trinity, but only one God.⁷

The structure of prayer mirrors the trinitarian structure of salvation:

- Although prayer can be offered to the Son and the Spirit, the norm in the New Testament is for prayer to be directed to our Father (Luke 11 v 1-13).
- The Son is *always* the mediator of prayer. We pray in Christ's name for through His death we can draw near to God with confidence (Hebrews 4 v 14-16; 10 v 19-22).
- The Spirit helps us in the act of praying, enabling us to call on God as our Father and interceding for us in our weakness (Romans 8 v 14-16, 26-27).⁸

Likewise, worship is "our participation through the Spirit in the Son's communion with the Father, in his vicarious life of worship and intercession."⁹ Worship is not primarily what we offer to the one God, but the gift of participating in the trinitarian life. Christians offer a priestly "sacrifice of praise" (Hebrews 13 v 15-16) through Christ's priesthood (Hebrews 2 v 17; 8 v 1-2). Calvin says "Christ is the great choirmaster who tunes our hearts to sing God's praises."¹⁰

The trinitarian gospel also leaves its imprint on the

7 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace (Patnoster/IVP, 1996)*, p. 76.

8 On the trinitarian structure of prayer see Tim Chester, *The Message of Prayer (IVP, 2003)*, chapters 1-4.

9 James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, p. 15. See also T. F. Torrance, *Theology in Reconstruction (SCM, 1965)*, pp. 248-251.

10 Cited in James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace*, p. 10.

community which the gospel brings into being:

- The church is the people of God (1 Peter 2 v 9-10).
- It is the body of Christ and the bride for which He gave His life (1 Corinthians 12; Ephesians 5 v 25-27; Revelation 21 v 2).
- It is the community of the Holy Spirit (2 Corinthians 13 v 14).
- We are baptised into the church “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matthew 28 v 19).
- The church is the place where God lives by His Spirit (Ephesians 2 v 22).
- Christ gives gifts to His people through the Spirit (Ephesians 4 v 7-13).
- God works in us through His Spirit that we might serve the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 12 v 4-6).

Paul says: “Through [Christ] we both have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Ephesians 2 v 18). Everywhere we look, we find this trinitarian structure to Christian truth and Christian living. “We live, move and have our being,” says Robert Letham, “in a pervasively trinitarian atmosphere.”¹¹ The Son works for us and the Spirit works in us in fulfilment of the Father’s will. “[We] have been chosen,” says Peter, “according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood” (1 Peter 1 v 2).

If we say the Trinity is too difficult to bother with, then we are saying that God is too difficult to bother with, for “Trinity is the Christian name for God”.¹²

11 Robert Letham, “The Trinity—Yesterday, Today and the Future”, *Themelios* 28:1 (Autumn 2002), p. 32.

12 Karl Barth, cited in Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT

If you really want to understand a culture, it is often said, then you have to understand the language. It is no good just visiting a country, looking at its historic sites, reading translations of its literature, finding out its history. If you want to begin to get a view of the culture, then you need to learn the language. That is why maintaining indigenous languages is so important for preserving cultural identity.

The same is true of the Christian faith. To fully understand it you must learn its language, and its language is the Trinity. The Trinity is the language in which Christian truth is spoken. It gives shape to the truth. The Trinity is not peripheral, let alone optional. It is the marvellous, wonderful heart of our faith.

An unbelievable doctrine?

I love mathematical puzzles and patterns. You know the sort of thing. A man is three-quarters of the way across a bridge when he sees a train coming towards him. Whether he continues across the bridge or walks back, he will reach the end of the bridge at the same time as the train does. How fast is the train travelling? (The answer is twice as fast as the man. I think!) Or do you know what you get if you key 1.2345678 into a calculator and hit the square root button? (You will have to try it if you want to find out.) For many people the Trinity seems like a mathematical trick—a rather improbable attempt to make $1 + 1 + 1 = 1$.

It is certainly true that the triune nature of God pushes our knowledge and imagination to the limits and beyond. But then, as Augustine said, “If you can understand it, it’s not God”.¹³

(Eerdmans, 1987), p. 586.

13 Cited in Alister McGrath, *Understanding the Trinity* (Kingsway, 1987), p. 9.

Roger Nicole, however, says:

It is important to recognise that the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery. It is not, however, an absurdity, as some people have viewed it. Specifically, it is not asserted that God is one in the same respect in which he is three. We are not making three equal one. We are saying that three divine persons share one divine nature. God's oneness "is not a mathematical oneness ... but a oneness consisting in the inseparable relation of Father, Son and Spirit, the [persons]. The doctrine of the Trinity has ... nothing to do with attempting a mathematical innovation, apparently contradictory."¹⁴

We need not fear the doctrine of the Trinity.

Grappling with the Trinity?

Many of the words we use for "knowing" are aggressive terms. We *grasp* ideas or *get hold of* them. We *seize* them and *grapple* with them. We try to *get a handle on* them and *come to terms* with them. We *catch*, *capture* and *apprehend* an idea. They are all words that imply control. After all, knowledge is power. But God cannot be known in this way. We cannot seize or grasp God. He is beyond our control. Our problem is not simply lack of information.

Our problem is that the "subject" of our investigation is far beyond our comprehension and control. So we cannot expect to understand the triune God. We cannot grasp God or get hold of Him any more than we can grasp a fistful of water.

But, though we cannot know God fully, we can know Him truly. If we read a biography of a person, our knowledge of them will be limited. Even with the current

14 Roger Nicole, "The Meaning of the Trinity" in Peter Toon and James D. Spiceland (eds.), *One God in Trinity* (Samuel Bagster, 1980), p. 4.

fashion for psychological analysis in biographies, we will not comprehend the inner life of the person. But we can still know something true about that person. We may know many of the facts of their life and gain an accurate, albeit incomplete, sense of their character. We might even be able to predict how they would react in certain situations. In the same way, we cannot fully comprehend the inner life of God, but we can know something true about His actions and character. And there is an importance difference between the biography and our knowledge of God. We not only read about God in the Bible. We can also know Him personally. We experience Him dwelling within us. We can have a relationship with Him. Colin Gunton concludes: "Because we are established in our being in the Trinity, we are enabled to think *from*, and, with careful qualification, *about* the triune being of God."¹⁵ In other words, when we consider the Trinity we are not reflecting on something wholly alien to us, but something that is reflected in our experience.

Less than ten per cent of the UK population go to church regularly, yet according to a 2003 poll, two-thirds believe in "God". Some people find this surprising. Others see it as an optimistic sign. But the reality is that these people do not believe in God—not the true God. They believe perhaps in a god who made the world and now leaves it to its own devices, or an all-pervading reality like "the force" in the *Star Wars* movies. But they do not believe in "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 15 v 6). We cannot talk about belief in God without asking which "God" we believe in. So many of the people who claim to believe in "God" do not believe in God—not the God who truly exists

15 Colin Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (T&T Clark, 1991), p. 6.

and has truly revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

This also means that the “God” many people have rejected is not the true God. They have rejected another god—an idol of human making. Tom Wright says: “The ‘God’ the great majority of people believe in is, pretty certainly, the Deist god ... distant, remote, and uncaring ... It’s not surprising that people who believe in the existence of that sort of god don’t go to church except now and then. It’s hardly worth getting out of bed for a god like that.”

They are not involved with God because their god is not involved with them. But the Christian message is the good news that God is involved. The Father sent His Son into the pain and confusion of human history to reconcile us to Himself and now He gives His Spirit to accompany us in the struggles of life. By telling the story of the triune God, we invite people to know the God who both rules the world and has come close to us, welcoming us into His family. And that *is* a God worth getting out of bed for!

A member of my church was looking at the Trinity with me, working through much of the material in this book. At the end he wrote to me:

Before I looked at the Trinity I was a little bit embarrassed about God. Without the Trinity God is incomprehensible. I had bits about God; now I have a whole. It’s beautiful, stunning. Before I had a far-off God. Now I want to draw near to Him. He’s more appealing to me. I feel I’ve got a story to tell about God which is convincing. I have a story in the Trinity that connects with the world.

