

# FURIOUS PARADOXES

## EXPLORING THE GREAT MYSTERIES OF THE CHRISTIAN FAITH

All Saints Austin  
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### One God in Three Persons: The Mystery of the Holy Trinity

*The whole round world is not enough to fill  
The heart's three corners, but it craveth still:  
None but the Trinity, who made it, can  
Suffice the vast triangulated heart of man.*

— Christopher Harvey  
*Schola Cordis*

<sup>16</sup>*Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age."*

— Matthew 28:16-20 [NRSV]

### God's Mysterious Story

- At the heart of the biblical story is the revelation of God—the self-revelation of a *particular* God, the true & living God, the God who is *there* (in the words of Francis Schaeffer).
- At the heart of this revelation is *monotheism*—there is one, and only one, God.
  - The *Shema*: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one" (Dt 6:4, NIV). This is the most foundational text about God in the Old Testament, still recited daily by faithful Jews around the world. (By the way, do you know why the word LORD is printed in small caps?)
  - The next verse says, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

- The New Testament resoundingly affirms this Old Testament teaching.
  - St. Paul quotes with approval what some of the Corinthian Christians were saying (even if they were applying the truth wrongly): “We know that ‘An idol is nothing at all in the world’ and that ‘There is no God but one’” (1 Cor 8:4b, NIV).
- Yet the early Christians had to wrestle with the story of Jesus—the actual narrative of his life, death, resurrection, ascension, and sending of the Spirit.
  - Jesus makes shockingly divine claims. Read John 8:56-58; 17:4-5
  - So the early Christians affirmed the deity of Jesus. Read John 1:1-3; Col 2.9; Heb 1:1-4.
  - Likewise, the story speaks of Jesus’ sending of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, God’s empowering, personal presence. See Acts 5:3-4, where lying to the Holy Spirit is equated with lying to God, and 1 Cor 3:16 where St. Paul describes the church as God’s temple because of the indwelling of the Spirit.
- SUMMARY: While the word “Trinity” is not found in the New Testament, the teaching of the Trinity is found throughout the New Testament. And it did not arise out of abstract theologizing, but out of simply listening to the story of Jesus.
  - The New Testament clearly affirms (to use the words of the later Athanasian Creed) the following: “The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; yet they are not three gods, but One God.”
  - What is God’s *Name*? YHWH, yes; but in the New Testament we learn more. God’s proper Name is *the Father, the Son, & the Holy Spirit*.

### Avoiding the Ditches

- With all of these profound mysteries, there are dangers on either side. Our job as followers of Jesus is to stay in the center of the road and avoid going into a ditch on either side.
- On one side is the ditch of *polytheism*—of *tritheism*.
  - After all, it is not terribly mysterious to affirm that there are three gods. Polytheism is very old in human history.
  - Yet this has not been the classic temptation in the history of Christianity. The *Shema* has done its job.
- The greater danger has been the ditch on the other side—stressing the *oneness* of God at the expense of the *threeness* of God.
  - The classic error here has been what is called *modalism* or *Sabellianism*. This is the belief that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not unique Persons but different “modes” in which God reveals himself—three different “roles” that God plays.
  - But just think about it for a minute: When Jesus prayed, to whom was he speaking? For modalists, ultimately Jesus was talking to himself.

- While in its most extreme form this is only held by adherents of a few sects (the so-called “Jesus Only” groups, such as the United Pentecostal Church, who do not baptize in the name of the Trinity), it has been, in milder forms, a real danger, especially in the Western church. Just listen to how easily—but with very little specific content—we speak of God!

## Some Terms to Keep Us Out of the Ditch

- Throughout history, the church has developed some technical terms to help us better grasp the mystery of the Holy Trinity.
  - *Ousia* is the Greek word often translated as “substance” or (better) “being.” The church affirms that there is one and only one divine *ousia*, that all three Persons share this divine being or “space.”
    - The huge debate in the early church was between the Arians who taught that Jesus was *homoiousion* and the orthodox who taught that Jesus was *homoousion* with the Father. What a big difference is made by that one iota, the smallest letter of the Greek alphabet! The Arians said that Jesus is “of a similar being” to the Father, and the orthodox that Jesus is “of *one* being with the Father.” This word is in the Nicene Creed, and is the background to the *Gloria Patri*.
    - *Hypostasis* is the Greek word that we translate as “Person”; it means “something with a concrete existence.” It refers “to that which is distinct within in God, the way he is three, while *ousia* [is] reserved for the one being of God” (Robert Letham).
      - In the very earliest church, these terms were used interchangeably, but after the Council of Nicea the terminology settled into “three *hypostases* in one *ousia*,” or three Persons in one Being.
    - *Perichoresis* is a Greek term—perhaps rooted in the terms for “round” and “dance”—that speak of how the three Persons mutually indwell one another, are forever giving themselves to one another in love.
 

*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 [RSV]
- A warning about analogies for the Trinity!
  - Most of these create far more problems than they’re worth. The shamrock, the three states of water, etc.—they teach modalism!
  - Maybe a better way forward is found in music.

## Why the Trinity Matters

- The doctrine of the Trinity tells us *who God is*.
  - The question is not, “Do you believe in God?” but “In what God do you believe?”

- This is why the old line, “Well, I love God, but I don’t care much for theology,” is so shallow. Theology is *knowing God*—a discipline to help us reflect on the drama of Scripture so that we can know God more deeply. What kind of husband would say, “Well, I love my wife, but I don’t want to get to know her anymore”?
- The doctrine of the Trinity tells us *what God is like*.
  - And God is more wonderful than we could have dreamed!
  - God is profoundly relational—a communion of love.
  - Love is older than the universe; it is the underlying theme at the heart of reality!
- The doctrine of the Trinity tells us *who we are*.
  - We are made in the image of the Triune God, so we are also profoundly relational. We are, like God, “beings in communion.”
  - Our relationships define who we are—and none more so than our relationship with the Holy Trinity.

*Lord of the starfields  
 Ancient of Days  
 Universe Maker  
 Here’s a song in your praise  
 Wings of the storm clouds  
 Beginning and end  
 You make my heart leap  
 Like a banner in the wind*

*O Love that fires the sun  
 Keep me burning!*  
 — Bruce Cockburn