
The Importance of the Trinity in Building Healthy Cultures

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One of the many reasons I believe Christianity is true is because it is so counterintuitive. Unlike the other religions of the world, the God portrayed in the Bible cannot be bribed and is not impressed with outward signs of religiosity. He is concerned not just with the rich and powerful, but with the poor and weak. He wants not our money nor our religious performances, but our hearts. This God is holy, and He hates sin. Scripture says, in fact, that all people are spiritually dead and under God's judgment. Yet Christianity teaches that this same God has provided a way of escape by coming to Earth in the form of a man, dying on the cross for our sins, and offering forgiveness and eternal life to all who believe.

One of the most astoundingly counterintuitive claims of Christianity is that this God is a Trinity, three-in-one. Before the beginning of the universe, there was individuality *within* community. This one God exists as three eternally divine persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In His own perfect being, this God encompasses both diversity and unity. Each person is fully God, yet there are not three Gods, but one. No one could (or would) make this up. The paradox is too great. That's one reason I believe Christianity is true.

Figure 1b: Trinity



Another reason is because doctrines such as this are not esoteric religious knowledge with no application in the real world. The Trinity not only helps us make sense of our salvation in Christ, it also provides the intellectual and moral foundation for the equal dignity of men and women. The Trinity leads us to the glorious revelation of the individual within community.

An Ancient Question

For thousands of years, philosophers have struggled to make sense of the unity and diversity that are present in the universe. When we look at creation, we see both incredible diversity (plants, animals, peoples, cultures, languages, etc.), yet also incredible unity or similarity. There are many different breeds of dogs, for example, yet all share a common “doggy-ness.” The same is true of other types of animals, and it is also true of people. All peoples share a core of similarity, both in physical characteristics and psychological makeup. These simple observations create the two poles of unity and diversity. Most meta-narratives emphasize one and deemphasize the other. Only the biblical worldview holds both in balance, and the balance is rooted within the Trinity.

Is reality defined by unity or diversity? How do we resolve the age-old question of the one or the many? The Fall of humankind left philosophers polarized and, to borrow a metaphor from Paul, “looking through a glass darkly” (1 Corinthians 13:12, King James version). Beginning with human wisdom, they developed two different understandings.

The ancient Greeks helped to frame the debate on the issue. Parmenides of Elea (ca. 475 B.C.) emphasized unity over diversity. According to Parmenides, all is one, and all is unchanging.

Following in the footsteps of Parmenides, the Greek philosopher Plato (ca. 428–348 B.C.) opted for unity over diversity, metaphysical meaning over scientific fact, and the ideal over common sense. Plato said that things move from this world (the physical) to the eternal (spiritual), from lower to higher, from appearances to reality, from becoming to being.

Some scholars believe that these ideas were imported from Greece to India by means of Alexander the Great and his eastern conquests of present-day Iran and India. Today, we see a similar idea at the core of Hinduism—ultimate reality is *one*. This approach holds that only the spiritual is really *real*.

However, Plato and Parmenides did not have the philosophical playing field to themselves. Heraclitus of Ephesus (540–480 B.C.) went the other way, postulating diversity over unity. According to Heraclitus, all is many, and all the particulars are in flux. In this system, the tangible is what is really *real*.

Plato's pupil, Aristotle (ca. 384-322 B.C.) broke with his master, sided with Heraclitus emphasizing diversity over unity, the temporal over the eternal, scientific fact over metaphysical meaning, and common sense over the ideal. Like modern secularists, Aristotle held that only the tangible was real.

Despite the this-worldly appeal of Aristotle's approach, Aristotle and his followers lost the debate to the Platonists, and history would never be the same. Notwithstanding the Bible's appreciation of God's creation, Platonic philosophy came into the Church via Gnosticism, elevating the spiritual over the physical. Thus, people concluded that the physical world, including the human body, is bad, and that sex, by its very nature, is profane. Plato's approach dominated the Western world until the Reformation.

One vs. Many in Religious Thought

The matter of unity and diversity has also profoundly shaped religious thought down through the ages. The great monotheistic religions of Judaism, following the Jewish rabbi Moses Maimonides (1135-1204), and Islam emphasize the unity of God, viewing Him as absolutely *one* in both essence and person. Both emphasize:

- ◆ God as transcendent over immanent;
- ◆ God as infinite over personal;
- ◆ God as Creator over Lord and Savior;
- ◆ God as powerful over compassionate or loving.

At the other end of the spectrum are a host of ancient polytheistic religions that worship distinct, separate and often local deities. In the ancient world, the Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Greeks, Romans, and Norse were polytheists. Today, polytheism continues to define animistic or folk religions throughout the world and particularly in Africa and Asia.

Over and against both monotheism and polytheism, Christianity holds to the radical middle – Trinitarianism. Rather than going to either pole, classic Christian theology affirms both unity and diversity in the Godhead —God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and in His creation.

Resolving the Question

In the middle, of course, the Scriptures advocate two things at the same time, both the unityⁱ and diversityⁱⁱ of the Godhead. Before we get too deep into the theology, we can easily see this combination manifest in creation.

In human creation, we see individuals within communities. Family units are generally made up of mothers, fathers, and children. In nonhuman creation, we see a marvelous amount of diversity in plants, animals, and minerals. Within the species, we seek great

specialization. For example, while all dogs are related, their differences are stark (and often amusing).

In contrast to unitarianism on the one side and tritheism on the other, the early Church fathers struggled to articulate a biblically balanced trinitarianism. Studying the scriptures that hint at or imply the Trinity,ⁱⁱⁱ they articulated the mysterious doctrine that all orthodox Christians believe.

- Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. A.D. 125–c.202) “developed an understanding of God as one and many, of creation as reflecting this one-ness and many-ness of God, and of the work of the Son and the Spirit as bringing the whole of creation to its intended conclusion.”^{iv}
- Athanasius (ca. A.D. 296-373): spoke of the “coequality of three persons.” He was the first to articulate that the members of the Trinity were *identical* in essence (*homoousion*) rather than *similar* in essence (*homoiousion*).
- At the pivotal Council of Nicea (ca. A.D. 325), church leaders agreed upon the Nicene Creed, which handled this topic with great care:

We believe in one God,
the Father, the Almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made,
of one Being with the Father.
Through Him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
He came down from heaven:
by the power of the Holy Spirit
He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,
and was made man.
For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered death and was buried.
On the third day He rose again
in accordance with the Scriptures;
He ascended into heaven

and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead,
and His kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father.
With the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified.
He has spoken through the Prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come. Amen.

- Gregory of Narianzen (ca. A.D. 329-389) stated, “I cannot think of the One, but I am immediately surrounded by the glory of the Three; nor can I clearly discover the Three, but I am suddenly carried back to the One.”
- Augustine (ca. A.D. 354-430) gave us the classic formulation of God being “three persons [who] are coequal and coeternal.”

The Athanasian Creed, written in the 4th or 5th century, affirms: “And the catholic faith is this, that we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity. Neither confounding the Persons nor dividing the Substance.”^v

Different Roles

Trinitarian faith affirms two things, both the oneness and the many-ness of God, both His unity and diversity. Each person of the Trinity possesses the fullness of the divine essence (is coequally God). Yet each person of the Trinity may be distinguished by His individuality. Each member of the Trinity also has a different role, function, or mission in carrying out the divine plan.

In salvation, the Father is the author of the plan,^{vi} the Son executes the plan through His life, death, and resurrection;^{vii} and the Holy Spirit actuates the plan in the life of the believer through His works of regenerating, sanctifying, sealing, and indwelling.^{viii}

Though the members of the Trinity are equal in divine being, there is a *subordination of function*. According to the teaching of Scripture, the Father has authority over the Son,^{ix} while both Father and Son have authority over the Holy Spirit.^x The Father is Father in His paternity and in sending His Son; the Son is Son in His being begotten of the Father and in His loving obedience to His Father’s will; and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of God in that He glorifies the Father and the Son. The Son deflects glory from Himself and glorifies the Father^{xi}; the Holy Spirit deflects glory from Himself and glorifies the Son.^{xii}

Theologian Stephen D. Kovach summarized the biblical framework well when he said:

“Take away equality of being and you no longer have the Son and Spirit as fully divine. Take away differences in role and you no longer have three distinct persons; there is nothing that makes the Son to be the Son rather than the Father, or the Spirit to be the Spirit rather than the Father or the Son. If we abandon eternal differences in role, then we also abandon the Trinity.”^{xiii}

God's Self-Revelation

The Creator, just like a human artist, reveals something of Himself through the things He has made. God has left His fingerprints on His work. The creation is a reflection of the Creator. This includes males and females created in His image. As Romans 1:19-20 affirms:

“¹⁹ . . . because that which is known of God is manifest in them; for God manifested it unto them. ²⁰For the invisible things of him since the creation of the world are clearly seen, being perceived through the things that are made, *even* his everlasting power and divinity; that they may be without excuse.”^{xiv}

When people or cultures deny God, they end up worshiping either man or nature. The Apostle Paul describes this in Romans 1: 21-23:

“²¹ For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. ²² Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools ²³ and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images made to look like mortal man and birds and animals and reptiles.”

And yet humble humanists, Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and animists, because they are made in the image of God, have the ability to see God's fingerprints throughout creation. These fingerprints point to God's unity and diversity—and to our own.

The Mystery of Trinity

Now we must admit that the nature of the infinite, personal God transcends human reason. But we must also acknowledge this truth because God has revealed Himself this way, as both one and many, in His Word and in His creation. In God, we find unity without uniformity and diversity without superiority. God is the archetype for the unity and diversity we find in creation.

Let me be clear that God’s transcendent attributes—His omnipotence and omnipresence, for example—separate Him from creation. However, His personal attributes provide the pattern for all that is human—the image of God—both male and female. As such, we would expect to see this pattern repeated in creation—and we do.

We can find a surprising number of analogies, or pictures, of the Trinity, in creation:

- In *nature*, we see analogies to the Trinity in water (liquid–gas–solid), in the atom (neutron–electron–proton), in time (past–present–future), in space (length–width–height), the primary colors (red–blue–yellow), and music (pitch–harmony–rhythm).
- In man, we see threefold pictures of the Trinity in our inner makeup (spirit–soul–body), our familial relationships (mother–father–child), and so on.

Figure 10a: Analogy: Trinity in Water

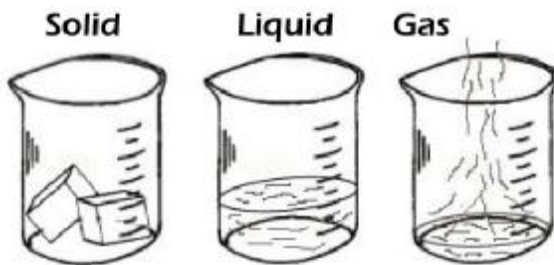
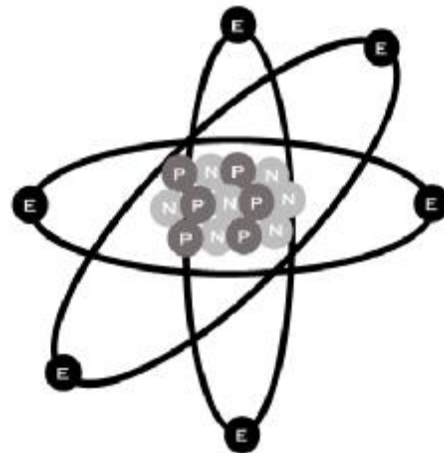


Figure 10b: Analogies: Trinity in the Atom



God’s threefold nature, to which these aspects of creation point, is anything but static. Clark Pinnock writes: “Early theologians spoke of the divine nature as a dance, a circling round of threefold life, as a coming and going among the Persons and graciously in relation to creation.”^{xv}

Other Christians agree:

“We call the Inner Life of the Trinity the *Perichoresis*, or The Great Dance, circling about. It is an image of profound peace in dynamic flow, of eternal give and take. The Persons of the Trinity are equal but different, each deferring to the other in the Love of the Great Dance.”^{xvi}

Educator and theologian Greg Uttinger captures the essence of the Great Dance when he writes:

“The metaphor [of the Great Dance] is apt. In a ballroom dance or a folk dance, each participant is responsible for his own role. He cannot see the whole, let alone shape the whole. But as he dances his part well, as he submits himself to the rules of the dance, he helps to create a thing of wondrous complexity and great beauty. Such is the universe, and such is the church. But the root of this all lies in the inner life of the Triune God.”

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When one comes to Christ for salvation, one is invited to: “Come, join the dance!”

Effects on Society

So what difference does belief in the Trinity make in the building of healthy societies and cultures? For one, it solves the age-old question about the relation of unity and diversity. And this is not just an academic question. How we answer it will determine the order of a society.

If we value diversity over unity, we will face evils such as tribalism, racism, Nazism, or radical multiculturalism. If we choose unity over diversity, we will slip into egalitarianism or communism.

In the realm of relations between the sexes, diversity accentuates the differences between males and females. One of the most obvious differences is the general greater physical strength and muscle mass of males when compared to females. This leads many people to believe that males are superior to females. This is sexism, pure and simple, and it leads to the crushing of females.

However, valuing unity rather than diversity leads to another evil: radical feminism. This philosophy holds that male and female are *equal*. But it often goes beyond that to say that they are the *same*. This approach promotes not equality so much as *androgyny*, which leads to the supposed interchangeability of the sexes. In this well meaning but misguided scenario, *female* disappears.

Community in the Godhead

Plato and Aristotle each affirmed half of the truth and thus lost the whole. Only trinitarianism resolves the age-old question of the one and the many. On a practical level, trinitarianism affirms both the unity and diversity of the human social order.

The idea that God is community is fundamental to human society. An overemphasis on individualism leads to loneliness, tribalism and sexism. An overemphasis on diversity, on the other hand, leads to full integration with one’s community. On a familial level, it leads to the misguided concept of interchangeability.

To fail to acknowledge the reality of the Trinity not only undermines the Christian faith, it denies God’s design for relationships in society. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct Persons in community. They exist in relationship. They cannot and do not exist independently of one another. There are no role confusions of egalitarianism or sexist power plays in the Trinity, only perfect harmony. Following His pattern, we are hardwired for community.

What we need is not a male world, but a human world, a world where the *imago Dei* is appreciated. No other religion gets us there. Neither Aristotle’s atomism (which exalts diversity) nor Platonic monism (which accentuates unity) have the intellectual capital to bring us this truly human world, a place that properly honors both men and women. The following chart delineates the differences.

Figure II: Conflicting Views of Valuing Men and Women

Monism (Unity)	Trinitarianism (Unity - Diversity)	Atomism (Diversity)
Feminism	<i>imago Dei</i>	Machismo
Egalitarianism	Complementarianism	Male Domination
Equal = Identical	Equal & Different	Different = Unequal
Maleness Valued	Femaleness & Maleness Valued	Maleness Valued

Only trinitarianism encourages us to honor and value one another while celebrating our distinctiveness.

Thus reflecting God’s divine nature, we are free to revel in our equality in being, our diversity in role and function. The unity and diversity of the Trinity, so counterintuitive to our finite minds, provide the pattern for the unity and diversity between men and women. They also provide the pattern for healthy, God-honoring relationships.

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NOTES:

- ⁱ Many scriptures teach that God is one, including Deuteronomy 6:4 and Isaiah 44:6, 8.
- ⁱⁱ Many scriptures teach or imply that God is more than a simple unity, including Genesis 1:26-27 and 3:22, and Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:9-11, Luke 3:21-22, John 14:16-17, and Ephesians 3:16-17.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Genesis 1:26-27; 3:22; 11:7; Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3:21-22; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:4-6.
- ^{iv} *Gunton on Creation* www.cafegrace.or.au/Articles/PictureOfCreation/GuntonOnCreation.cfm, (2 December, 2003).
- ^v *The Athanasian Creed*, Catholic Encyclopedia, www.newadvent.org/cathen/02033b.html, (2 December, 2003).
- ^{vi} Luke 22:42; John 3:16; 4:34; 17:4
- ^{vii} John 3:14-15; Romans 4:25; 1 Corinthians 15:3; Ephesians 2:13-18.
- ^{viii} John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7-15; Ephesians 1:13-14.
- ^{ix} Luke 22:42; John 4:34; 17:4; 1 Corinthians 11:3.
- ^x John 14:26; 16:7, 13-14.
- ^{xi} John 17:4.
- ^{xii} John 16:13-14.
- ^{xiii} Stephen D. Kovach, "Egalitarians Revamp Doctrine of the Trinity," *CBMW News*, December 1996, Vol. 2, No. 1, 4.
- ^{xiv} *1901 American Standard Version*
- ^{xv} Clark H. Pinnock, *Flame of Love* (Downers Grove, Ill: Intervarsity Press, 1996), 22.
- ^{xvi} *Byzantine Wisdom: Trinity*, <http://members.aol.com/theoego/byzantine/page3.html>, (2 December 2003).
- ^{xvii} Greg Uttinger, "The Theology of the Ancient Creeds Part 4: The Athanasian Creed," August 27, 2002 www.chalcedon.edu/articles/0208/020827uttinger.php, (2 December, 2003).