

On the Doctrine of the Trinity

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The doctrine of the Trinity is fundamental to orthodox Christianity. Although this doctrine has been attacked as being insufficiently monotheistic, orthodox Christians have always denied this accusation. The doctrine developed in the early church because it was the only way to account for the New Testament witness to Jesus and to the Holy Spirit.¹ The doctrine of the Trinity has been accused of being a covert invasion by pagan philosophical and religious influences.² Nonetheless, the doctrine has survived over the centuries as a central precept in mainstream Christianity.

My main purpose here is to discuss one common misconception about the doctrine of the Trinity, often used by false cults in attacking orthodox Christianity. I will argue that this misconception stems from an error of representation. In particular, this misrepresentation plays on words and ideas expressed in common statements of the doctrine.

Before we consider this misconception of the Trinity, it should be said that the Trinity is not a straightforward idea. As Christians, we refer to God as a person (e.g., “He”) in one breath, but insist that God is three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in the next. Are we speaking out of both sides of our mouths? Perhaps many Christians themselves are confused about what the doctrine actually entails. After all, the Bible does not use the word “Trinity,” nor is there an *obvious* statement of the doctrine anywhere to be found in the New Testament, much less the Old Testament.

An appropriate (and typical) articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity states that:³

God is a trinity of persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Father is not the same person as the Son; the Son is not the same person as the Holy Spirit; and the Holy Spirit is not the same person as Father. They are distinct persons; yet, they are all the one God. They are in absolute perfect harmony consisting of one substance. They

¹See *New Dictionary of Theology*, S. B. Ferguson, D. F. Wright, and J. I. Packer, Eds. Intervarsity Press, 1988, p. 691.

²This accusation persists even in contemporary writings. See, for example, the materials propagated by *Heaven Net*, a web site “dedicated to encouraging Believers in Christ to rise up and fight the good fight of faith,” <http://www.heaven.net.nz/answers/answer08.htm>.

³This quote is from an article on the Trinity by the *Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry*, available at <http://www.carm.org/doctrine/trinity.htm>.

are coeternal, coequal, and copowerful. If any one of the three were removed, there would be no God.

Many scriptural passages support this view.⁴ Most Christians would agree with the representative statement above.

The misconception I wish to expose here is epitomized by writings of the *Watchtower* movement, founded in the late nineteenth century by Charles Taze Russell, better known today as the *Jehovah's Witnesses*. These writings characterize the Trinity as a false doctrine.⁵ But, as we shall see, their attacks stem precisely from misrepresentations of the articulations of the doctrine over the years, preying on the subtlety in the meaning of the doctrine.

First, let us list three instances of articulations of the Trinity doctrine, all quoted from the Watchtower article *Should You Believe in the Trinity?*:⁶

AC: “The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God, and yet there are not three Gods but one God.” (From the *Athanasian Creed*.)

OOCF: “God is triune. ... The Father is totally God. The Son is totally God. The Holy Spirit is totally God.” (In *Our Orthodox Christian Faith*.)

MEC: “God is one, and God is three. Since there is nothing like this in creation, we cannot understand it, but only accept it.” (Attributed to Monsignor Eugene Clark.)

Are any of these articulations unreasonable? I think not. They are quite typical expressions of the Trinity. Indeed, the difficulty in a simple understanding of the doctrine is clear in these articulations of it.

In the Watchtower article *Should You Believe in the Trinity?*, the author capitalizes on the difficulty of the doctrine in questioning its validity:

Is such reasoning hard to follow? Many sincere believers have found it to be confusing, contrary to normal reason, unlike anything in their experience. How, they ask, could the Father be God, Jesus be God, and the holy spirit be God, yet there be not three Gods but only one God?

This confusion is widespread. The *Encyclopedia Americana* notes that the doctrine of the Trinity is considered to be ‘beyond the grasp of human reason.’

Indeed, the author of the article consistently questions why a “confusing” doctrine should be true. The author supports this notion by quoting from the Bible: “God is not a God of confusion” (1 Corinthians 14:33). Is the Trinity indeed a false doctrine?

⁴Too much has been written on this to do justice to it by listing just *some* of the Biblical support for the Trinity. I will leave this task to other sources listed in the references here.

⁵See, for example, *Should You Believe in the Trinity?* Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1989.

⁶See *Should You Believe in the Trinity?*, <http://www.watchtower.org/library/ti/>.

The line of attack above is characterized by a *misconception*. The root of this misconception is an argument that goes something like this:

1. The doctrine of the Trinity entails that God is three and God is one.
2. God cannot both be three and be one.
3. Therefore, the doctrine of the Trinity is false.

Let us examine this syllogism in detail. Statement 1 appears *prima facie* true; it merely summarizes the articulations before (e.g., AC, OOCF, and MEC). The second statement is simply the assertion that being three and being one are mutually exclusive. God (or anyone or anything, for that matter) cannot possibly be one and three in the *same sense*. Therefore, statement 2 is true. Statement 3 follows deductively and inevitably from statements 1 and 2. So, what is wrong here?

I argue that statement 1 is in fact *false*, for God is *not* one and three in the *same sense*, as tempting as it may seem to conclude this from articulations like AC, OOCF, and MEC. Indeed, it is the orthodox (and sensible) understanding of the Trinity that God is one *in one sense* and three *in another*. God is one in the sense that there is only one *being*, one *substance*, one *essence*. In contrast, God is three in the sense of comprising three *persons*. Therefore, as J. W. Rosser observes,⁷ the Trinity does not entail “three Gods in one God,” nor does it entail “three persons in one person.” Perhaps the closest correct articulation to these would be “three persons in one God.” In the words of apologist Norman Geisler,⁸

By saying God has one essence and three persons it is meant that he has one ‘What’ and three ‘Whos.’ The three Whos (persons) each share the same What (essence). God is a unity of essence with a plurality of persons. Each person is different, yet they share a common nature.

One might argue instead that it is statement 2 that should be declared false, preserving the idea that statement 1 correctly represents the standard articulations of the doctrine. Along these lines, statement 2 would be false because God *can* both be three and be one, only not in the same sense. I would not espouse this line of reasoning, because the assertion that statement 2 is false involves an *equivocation* on the word “be.” Two different senses of the word would be required within the same statement. Similarly, asserting that statement 1 is true involves an equivocation on the word “is.” God “is” three in one sense and “is” one in another.⁹

⁷J. W. Rosser, “The Watchtower and the Trinity: A Biblical Response,” available at http://www.john-lee-ministries.org/Cults/The_Watchtower_and_the_Trinity/the_watchtower_and_the_trinity.html.

⁸N. L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*. Baker Books, 1999, p. 732.

⁹This line of reasoning assumes the *law of non-contradiction*, which requires that a statement and its negation cannot both be true. Some have begun to explore the possibility of dispensing with this law, leading to what are called *true contradictions*. A true contradiction might then be used to characterize statement 1 as true or statement 2 as false. However, this move is questionable; see the paper by Randal Rauser, “Is the Trinity a True Contradiction?” *Quodlibet Journal*: Volume 4 Number 4, November 2002, <http://www.quodlibet.net/rauser-trinity.shtml>.

In conclusion, I submit that it is a simple matter of misrepresentation that underlies the Watchtower's objections to the doctrine of the Trinity.¹⁰ Such objections exploit the subtlety of the doctrine and the expressions of this doctrine in the literature. The doctrine is admittedly not obvious. But it is also not so obscure as to imply that God is a "confusing God," contradicting 1 Corinthians 14:33.¹¹ Indeed, the doctrine of the Trinity is the only way to harmonize the Scriptures in its witness to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

¹⁰It should be noted that other detractors of Christianity also use similar arguments. See, for example, the article "Christianity — A Journey from Facts to Fiction," by Hazrat Mirza Tahir Ahmad, Supreme Head of the Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam, first Published in UK in 1994 by Islam International Publications Limited, available at <http://www.alislam.org/books/fact/>.

¹¹Much of the problem here stems from Christians who, themselves confused, defend the doctrine by saying that because it is a "mystery," no rationale can be brought to bear on the issue. The MEC articulation borders on this; in fact, MEC involves an equivocation on the word "is."