

1 Don't be Afraid to Think about God

How does one separate enemy from friend? One way is shown in this ancient incident recorded in Judges 12:

...Jephthah gathered all the men of Gilead and attacked the men of Ephraim and defeated them.

Jephthah captured the shallow crossings of the Jordan River, and whenever a fugitive from Ephraim tried to go back across, the men of Gilead would challenge him. "Are you a member of the tribe of Ephraim?" they would ask. If the man said, "No, I'm not," they would tell him to say "Shibboleth." If he was from Ephraim, he would say "Sibboleth," because people from Ephraim cannot pronounce the word correctly. Then they would take him and kill him at the shallow crossings of the Jordan. In all, 42,000 Ephraimites were killed at that time.⁴

Based on this passage, the English word "shibboleth" now means some word, saying, belief, or practice which is regarded as distinctive of some social group. To say that a word or sentence is a "shibboleth" suggests (but doesn't require) that its users don't know what it means, so that the shibboleth is *only* a marker of group membership. Thus, in the realm of American politics a Democrat may gripe that "small government" is a shibboleth for Republicans, while Republicans may complain that "inclusiveness" is a shibboleth for Democrats.

⁴ Judges 12:4b-6, New Living Translation.

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For many, phrases like “the Trinity,” “God is triune,” “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” or “the doctrine of the Trinity” serve as markers of Christian identity. Those who approvingly use such phrases are considered in the group, while those who don’t, or who use them without approval are seen as outsiders, as non-Christians.

Trinitarian theological formulations are generally understood as more than mere shibboleths; they are supposed to be believed, not merely said. In other words, trinitarian truths are to be knowingly and sincerely confessed, not merely recited. If you teach your talented pet parrot to say, “Government should be small,” you don’t thereby make him a Republican. Just so, standing up in church and reciting the Nicene Creed does not make one a trinitarian. Clearly, a faithful Christian is supposed to be more than a parrot. But how does one advance beyond the ability to pronounce the words?

The answer is simple: one *tries* to understand what they’re supposed to mean, what they’re supposed to express. This isn’t just any old subject-matter, but concerns the one God. According to Jesus, God’s most important commandment is:

Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.⁵

Notice the last two elements with which we are to love God: mind and strength.

⁵Mark 12:29-30, New Revised Standard Version.

When was the last time you exerted some serious effort towards understanding the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? When was the last time you read a challenging, serious book on the subject, or compared scripture with scripture, or really wondered about why this isn't a teaching of three gods, if indeed it isn't? When was the last time you listened to someone's story who converted from Christianity to Islam in part because the Trinity made no sense to him or her? Did you write down their objections, separate the serious from the superficial, and dig into scripture and tradition to find out how they should be answered? Have you looked deeply into past or present disputes between serious, informed, believing Christians about the meaning, truth, and biblical or creedal bases for belief in a tripersonal God?

If you're like most Christians, you'll say "No" to all of the above. The merely cultural Christian thinks little about any theological subject. But what is more startling is that serious, mature, thoughtful Christians often devote little thought to the Trinity. I have even known life-long Christian intellectuals who haven't. Why?

One reason is fear. There's an irrational dread that hangs over this topic, expressed in this little chestnut of "wisdom:"

The Trinity: Try to Understand It and You'll Lose Your Mind. Try to Deny It and You'll LOSE YOUR SOUL!

Basically, you can't understand it, and if you look into it, you risk coming to think it is false, in which case, you'll go straight to Hell.

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Really? This is a remarkable claim. Or is it a threat? Is one's *sanity* ("Lose Your Mind") really at stake in this? As to the threat of Hell, this is famously asserted by the baffling "Athanasian creed," which starts with such a threat, gives a famously unclear summary of what "the Trinity" is all about, and then reiterates the threat:

He therefore that will be saved must thus think of the Trinity.⁶

Think how? The creed announces that

...we worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, without either confusing the persons or dividing the [divine] substance...

Each of the three is said to be uncreated, infinite, eternal, and almighty, and so,

...the Father is God, the Son God, the Holy Spirit God; and yet there are not three Gods, but there is one God.⁷

Evidently, the three of them just are one and the same god. But then we're told that the three of them differ from one another.

⁶ J.N.D. Kelly, *The Athanasian Creed* (London: A&C Black, 1964), 19. See this same book for an account of the creed's probable fifth century origin. It can't be by Athanasius, who died in 373. The creed and what is known about it is summarized in my "podcast 2 – the 'Athanasian Creed'," <http://trinities.org/blog/podcast-2-the-athanasian-creed/>.

⁷ Kelly, *Athanasian*, 18.

The Father is from none... The Son is from the Father... The Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son...⁸

We gather that eternally, the first is without any origin or source, while the second has one origin, and the third has two origins. It seems to follow that that they can't be the same anything, much less the same god. One god couldn't eternally lack and also eternally have an origin. Is the teaching then that there are *three* gods which "are coeternal with each other and coequal"?⁹ No. The creed explains,

... just as we are obliged by Christian truth to acknowledge each person separately both God and Lord, so we are forbidden by the Catholic religion to speak of three Gods or Lords.¹⁰

This explanation falls short, though. It seems that the subject has been changed from how we are to think to how we are to speak. Each of the three must be called "God" and "Lord," and the Christian is not to say "three Gods" or "three Lords." But why these rules, if indeed each of the three "is God" and they truly are three? This famous creed leaves us wondering.

Imagine meeting a new neighbor who introduces you to the two women at his side.

"Hi neighbor! This is my wife Alice. We've been married for exactly five years."

"Pleased to meet you."

⁸ Kelly, *Athanasian*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Kelly, *Athanasian*, 18.

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“And this is my wife Betty,” he says, pointing to the other woman. “We’ve been married exactly three years.”

“I’m pleased to meet you and your two wives,” you reply. “I’ve never met anyone who was married to two women.”

“Oh no, neighbor, we don’t say ‘two wives’ or ‘two women.’ In truth, I’m married to just one woman; I have just one wife. True, Alice is one person, and Betty is another; but we neither confuse the persons nor divide the *wifehood*.”

This exchange would leave you confused (not to mention uncomfortable). You can *see* that Alice and Betty are two different beings, and their husband has told you of their different wedding dates. But you’ve been told that they’re a single wife, even though each alone is a wife, and you’ve been told not to say “two wives” or “two women” about them. You might wonder if this man has some idiosyncratic way of counting wives!¹¹

If the Trinity simply can’t be understood, and if disbelieving it results in loss of salvation, then people conclude that we should just unquestioningly believe it - whatever “it” is! It’s not clear, though, that this is real belief: mouth-ing some trinitarian sentences and thinking that one believes *whatever it is* that those sentences mean.

Many Christian instinctively reject the damnatory clauses of the “Athanasian Creed.” The confusing state-

¹¹ For some recent interpretations of the Trinity which are analogous to this fiction about the bigamist, see Dale Tuggy, “Trinity,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 edition), edited by Edward N. Zalta, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>, Section 2.1.

ments of this creed seem incapable of expressing some beliefs which are required for salvation. People are often baptized without any quiz on the contents of this creed. And sometimes children, the mentally handicapped, or the illiterate are saved, and it is not at all clear that they have signed onto its paradoxical language or its odd language rules.

Unfortunately, some turn these insights into an excuse not to think about these matters. "If it's not necessary for salvation," they reason, "it's not important for me to think about." But this is poor reasoning. Many things are important to think about, for various reasons, which are not required beliefs for salvation.

Simple human laziness also plays a role, as does poorly done theology, often incorporating or inspired by poorly done philosophy. A good theorist entices the student further into the subject, making the confusing less confusing, and encouraging the enquirer to move farther along. A bad theorist piles confusion atop confusion in tottering heaps, and generously frosts the whole production in a thick layer of learned, abstract terminology. This thick word-frosting bedazzles the listener, making her think that the speaker is uttering profundities for which human language is inadequate. If you've read some of this literature, this may be why you have little to no interest in thinking hard about the Trinity.

Is the subject impenetrable? Maybe.¹² But maybe you've mostly heard from people who have no interest in

¹² In chapter 8 we'll consider claims that the Trinity is simply a mystery which we'll never solve in this life.

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penetrating it, as their image is better burnished by their repeating, riffing on, and reveling in confusions. Flee any theologian who is more interested in endlessly posing as the most humble, reverent, learned dealer in divine mysteries, than he is in helping you to clearly understand this subject. A reliable sign of such a bad theorist is gassing endlessly about how unique and important and wonderful and earth-changing this doctrine of the Trinity is, without clearly telling you just what that doctrine is and is not, and without giving you solid reasons for thinking it is true.

It turns out that the “Athanasian Creed” isn’t, or long wasn’t, an official expression of trinitarian theology for most Christians. It is rather, an attempt to express “the” doctrine based on the writings of the ancient catholic bishop Augustine (354-430).¹³ Yet part of the creed (“without either confusing the persons or dividing the [divine] substance”) points us towards what has long been the official statement, at least for creed-focused Christian groups. This is the creed from the council of Constantinople in 381. In chapter 3, we’ll look at its precursor, the creed composed at Nicea in 325. In chapter 5 we’ll learn how these creeds came about, and in chapters 6 and 7 we’ll sort through competing interpretations of them.

In my experience, most Christians are confused about this subject, so that they must mentally jump back and forth between different and incompatible ways of thinking about the Trinity. For example, one may say that the

¹³ Kelly, *Athanasian*, 27-9, 109-24. This is why the creed can’t actually be by Athanasius of Alexandria, who died in 373, before Augustine’s conversion in 387.

Trinity are three parts of God, three personalities of God, three appearances of God, three successive or eternal roles God plays, three aspects of God, or three gods. Some know that they're confused on this subject, but unfortunately, many do not. Sometimes a confusion is more apparent to outsiders than it is to insiders. In this case, apologists for Islam or Judaism are all too happy to point out the confusions.

But why should a Christian settle for confusion? Hasn't God has self-revealed in the lives of Christians, singly and in groups, in dreams and visions, prophecies and inspired writings, instructing us on how to think about him? Our God is not a mumbling trickster or a heartless inquisitor, eager to leave you baffled or to catch you out in a mistaken judgment. Nor is a he a bully who demands that you confess to believe what in fact you do not.

The followers of Christ "are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people",¹⁴ destined to rule the earth under Christ.¹⁵ If you are one of these, then Jesus has hidden none of the riches of his wisdom from you; "I have made known to you *everything* that I have heard from my Father."¹⁶ Do you think *Jesus* was confused about the Trinity? If he was not, and he's left all his wisdom to his followers, why should we be mired in permanent confusion about the Trinity?

Maybe the subject is impenetrable, but maybe God allows us to construct traditions which needlessly confuse

¹⁴ 1 Peter 2:9, NRSV.

¹⁵ Revelation 2:26-7; 1 Corinthians 6:2-3.

¹⁶ John 15:15, emphasis added.

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and obscure, even while sufficient truth is available. As the wise king Solomon said,

It is the glory of God to conceal things, but the glory of kings is to search things out."¹⁷

You, Christian, are a brother or sister, and even a friend of "the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth."¹⁸ It is not for you to be afraid of thinking hard about the God who is love, and who delights in self-revealing to those who seek him. It is for you to spend your mental strength gladly and expectantly. Don't stand shivering on the shore with the timid; jump in with both feet. The water is deep, but you can swim.

¹⁷ Proverbs 25:2, NRSV.

¹⁸ Revelation 1:5, NRSV.