

The Trinity

Just a Doctrine?

By Mike Feazell

Ask ten average Christians in ten average churches to explain the doctrine of the Trinity, and you'll probably get ten different explanations. Most Christians "accept" the Trinity as orthodox Christian doctrine. But they would be at a loss to explain why the doctrine matters, or how it affects their Christian lives.

As Catherine Mowry LaCugna explains in her introduction to *God For Us*, the Trinity is a doctrine that most people "consent to in theory but have little need for in the practice of Christian faith."¹

LaCugna continues, "On the one hand, the doctrine of the Trinity is supposed to be the center of faith. On the other hand, as Karl Rahner [one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century] once remarked, one could dispense with the doctrine of the Trinity as false and the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged."²

Does it make any difference?

And no wonder. The doctrine is hard to understand, and most discussions about it are...well... boring. For the average Christian, the kind of people who have families to feed, jobs to get to, and lives to live, what difference does an ancient doctrine make anyway? God is God, isn't he? Isn't that enough? If he happens to be Father, Son and Spirit instead of just Father, well, fine, but that doesn't really change anything from our end, does it?

Actually, it does matter. It matters a lot, in

fact—which is exactly what you'd expect us to say since, after all, why else would we be writing an article about an ancient, boring doctrine?

First, let's dispense with going through all the biblical proof that the doctrine is correct. You can find that elsewhere, including on the Worldwide Church of God website. [Just visit www.wcg.org, click on "Search our site," and type in "Trinity."] Instead, let's spend some time talking about why the doctrine of the Trinity matters, and especially, why it matters to you.

Let's start by taking a look at the common idea that God is a single, solitary being "out there" somewhere, looking down on Earth, watching us, judging

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us. Bette Midler put it to music in the chorus to her tune "From a Distance" with the lyrics, "And God is watching us, God is watching us, God is watching us from a distance."

This God comes in three main flavors: first, vanilla, the one who just kind of wound up the universe and then stretched out in the heavenly gazebo for a few-billion-year nap. (Who knows, maybe he wakes up once in a while and does something nice, kind of like the kind of God George Burns portrayed in the film *Oh God*.) Second, red hot cinnamon, the one who keeps careful tabs on everything everybody does, and since everybody blows it now and then, he gets madder and madder. His worshippers

say he takes joy in watching people who offend him slowly roast but never quite get done. Third is apricot, the one who might or might not like you, depending on many things, none of which are all that clear to anybody. He's the one that Oakland Raiders fans pray to for touchdowns.

Sometimes this God comes in an alternate flavor, water balloon. You might think water balloon isn't a flavor, but it is. It's chewy, and the variety of colors is endless, but it always tastes watery. This God is more of an abstract principle than a supreme being, kind of a "spirit of everything" that you can try to get in touch with if you empty your head of all thoughts and sit still long enough without going to sleep. (I think that's where Burger King commercials come from.)

A God who wants to share

The God of the Bible is not like that. The God of the Bible is Father, Son and Holy Spirit. These three divine Persons³ share perfect love, joy, unity, peace, and fellowship. And the reason that's important to know is that when the Bible talks about us being "in Christ" it means that we get to take part in that divine kind of life. Just like Christ is the beloved of the Father, so we too, because we are "in him," are also the beloved of the Father.

That means that you are included in the household of God. It means you're not an outsider or a stranger. You're

does love us and we really are on the ins with him. And again, how do we know? Because Jesus, you know, "God with us," "God in the flesh," the one the Father sent not to condemn the world but to save it (John 3:17), is the Father's Son, and that means that the Son of God is now one of us. And as one of us, but still God, only God in the flesh now, he dragged the whole ragged Coxeys Army (look it up on Wikipedia if you don't have a Funk and Wagnall's) of us home to the Father right through the front door.

No, we didn't deserve it and no, we didn't earn it. We didn't even ask for it. But he did it anyway, because that's the exact reason he made us in the first place—so he could share with us the life he has shared eternally with the Father and the Spirit. That's why he tells us he made us in his image (Genesis 1:26).

Showing us the Father

Salvation isn't about a change of location, floating off to some secret set of coordinates in the Delta Quadrant called heaven, as if that would solve all our problems. And it's not about a new super government patrolled by angelic cops who never miss an infraction of the divinely decimal penal code.

Salvation is about getting adopted into God's family and learning how to live in it. And the Trinity is at the heart of it: The Father (Let's get technical—the First

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not even a respected guest. You're one of the kids, beloved of the Father, with free run of the house, the grounds, and the fridge.

The trouble is, you probably have a hard time believing that. You know you're an @#%&*, you know what you're really like deep down inside, so you think God doesn't like you. How could he, you figure. You don't even like yourself. So based on your assessment of your "goodness/badness" ratio, you determine that God is more than likely mad at you, and *far* more than likely mad at all those other @#%&* types you meet in traffic every day.

But the whole point of God letting us know through the Scriptures that he is Father, Son and Spirit, and not just "God out there somewhere," is so that we'd know he really

Person of the Godhead) loves us so much, in spite of our screw-ups, that he sent the Son (the Second Person of the Godhead) to do everything it took to bring us home (John 1:1, 14), and the Father and the Son sent the Spirit (the Third Person of the Godhead) to live in us and teach us how to live in God's family so we can enjoy it like we were created to do instead of being screw-ups forever.

In other words, the God of the Bible is not three separate Gods, where one, the temper challenged, unpredictable Father, is so furious at humans that he just has to kill somebody in order to calm down, so the sweet, loving Son, seeing Dad about to lose it, steps up and says, "Okay, if you've got to kill someone, then kill me, but spare these people." The doctrine of the Trinity is important precisely

¹ *God For Us*, Catherine Mowry LaCugna, Foreword, p. ix.

² *Ibid*, p. 6.

³ Keep in mind that the Father, Son, and Spirit are not "persons" in the same way we humans are. They are not three Gods, but one, and each "Person" of the Godhead is distinct, but not

separate from the others. For more background, see "Church History Corner" in our May 2005 issue.

⁴ You might enjoy "Was Jesus Plan B?," in our August/September issue, p. 20.

key points

1 God created all humans in his image, and he wants all people to share in the love shared by the Father, the Son and the Spirit.

2 The Son became a human to redeem all humanity through his birth, life, death and resurrection and ascension.

3 Christ has already paid for our sins, and there is no longer any debt to pay. God has already forgiven us, and eagerly desires that we turn to him.

4 We cannot enjoy the blessing of his love if we don't believe he loves us. We cannot enjoy his forgiveness unless we believe he has forgiven us.

5 When we turn to God, believe the good news, and pick up our cross and follow Jesus, the Spirit will lead us into the transformed life of the kingdom of God.

because it keeps us from seeing God in such a ridiculous way, and yet, that is how a whole lot of people *do* see God.

If you want to know what the Father is like, just look at Jesus, because Jesus is the perfect revelation of the Father. Jesus told Philip, "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). He told the crowd, "I and the Father are one." We know how the Father feels about us because we know how Jesus feels about us.

To summarize, God is not some isolated cosmic bean counter "out there" keeping tabs on us in preparation for Judgment Day, nor is he three Gods with very different ideas about how to deal with humanity. The God of the Bible is one God who is three divine Persons, in perfect unity and accord, who love each other in perfect love and dwell in indescribable joy, and who created us for the express purpose of sharing that life with them through our adoption into Christ, who is eternally the beloved of his Father.

That's why the doctrine of the Trinity matters. If we don't understand God the way he reveals himself in the Bible, then we wind up with all kinds of messed up, funky and scary ideas about who God is and what he might be cooking up to do to us some day.

Reconciliation for everyone

You're still not convinced, are you? Well, try reading this one again: "...while we were yet sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God did not wait for you to get good enough to bring you into his household. You can't get good enough, which is the reason he went after you to bring you home in the first place. When Paul says God saves sinners, he's talking about everybody, since that's what everybody is—a sinner. (By the way, if you're worried God might find out how rotten you really are and send a lightning bolt your way, take heart, he's known all along and loves you anyway.)⁴

Paul makes the point even stronger in verse 10: "For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!"

Did you notice how Paul puts that reconciliation with God in the past tense? Jesus died for our sins—*past tense*. God does not count our sins against us—*period*. They've

already been paid for. Jesus has already put us in good standing with God. All that remains for us now is to turn to God (repent), believe the good news (have faith), and follow Jesus (let the Holy Spirit teach us how to enjoy life in the new creation).

Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me." When we think of God in any other way than the way he revealed himself in the Bible—as the Father, Son, and Spirit who created us and redeemed us and have made us to share their joy though union with Jesus Christ—we're going to find these words of Jesus daunting and discouraging.

But when we know God the way he reveals himself, we can say with all assurance of joy, "Therefore, there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus..." (Romans 8:1). "For God," Paul wrote to the Colossian church, "was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him [Jesus], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross" (Colossians 1:19-20).

All humanity is included in that reconciliation, according to Paul. In the doctrine of the Trinity, God has shown himself to be the God who loves the world and who beckons every person to come to Christ and take part in the joy of life in the household of God. There is no person whom God does not want, whom God does not include, whom God does not love. And in Christ, following the Spirit's lead, we are all freed from the chains of sin to come to the Father whose arms are open wide to receive us, if only we will.

That's why the doctrine of the Trinity matters. Without it, we might as well join the Hittites wondering whether Baal will flood out the crops with storms this year or burn them out with lightning. In Jesus Christ, God has taken up our cause as his own. God has, through the atoning work of Jesus, healed us from head to toe, mind and heart, and made us the Father's Son's best friends, no, much more than that; made us adopted children of the Father, brothers and sisters of our older Brother and full members of the household of God.

With Paul, we can only say, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" ●