



How the Trinity Changes Everything

BY FRED SANDERS



The doctrine of the Trinity is no secret. Oh sure, it's about a mystery: it's a doctrine about an infinitely majestic God whose being is ineffable, whose nature is incomprehensible, whose wisdom is unfathomable, and whose ways are unsearchable. But it's no secret. The trinitarian doctrine about that triune God is both clear (the one God eternally exists in three persons) and public. Everybody knows it's what Christians believe about God, and every orthodox Christian holds it as an article of faith. It's the common property of all Christians through the centuries and around the world, across the denominational divisions and above the noise of our differences. We might even call it the birthright of all believers, or at least the birthright of the second birth. We are baptized "in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit" (Matt 28:19). Still, there seems to be a difference between Christians who never quite grasp why the Trinity matters, and those who do. This is a real divide among us, and once you notice it, it explains a lot about the varieties of Christian experience. It's not a difference between people who don't understand the doctrine on one hand, and those who do understand it on the other. Most Christians understand the basic doctrine of the Trinity, as long as we let the word "understand" mean no more than what it usually means: that they know that God is one being in three persons, and can recall some of the key passages of Scripture on which this belief is founded. We might decide to raise the bar for what counts as understanding, but if we do that we'll have to admit that nobody understands much of anything (said the human creature as his blood silently circulated and he manipulated technology to express ideas to other souls via letter sequences).

No, the difference I'm describing is between the kind of Christian who thinks of the Trinity mainly as a dark riddle perpetually in search of a solution, and the kind of Christian who instinctively recognizes, with confidence and joy, that what is at stake here is something that supports their existence and flourishing as believers.

The first kind hears the word Trinity, nods in assent, and immediately asks, “Wait, but why does this matter?” The doctrine is to them an itch, not a scratch. They are vulnerable to any cheesy explanation, application, or analogy that comes along, and gullible toward whatever far-fetched fads or fancies are offered on this week’s episode, as long as it is brought to them by the number three. The reason some Christians are so easily misled by trendy revisionist accounts of the Trinity (it’s a club, it’s a round dance, it’s an energy flow, it’s a political blueprint, it’s a family structure, it’s a group therapy meeting, it’s quantum physics) is that they have been waiting in suspense for so long to be given the answer to the riddle of the Trinity. That’s the underlying problem: the sense that the word Trinity holds open a space for an answer to be provided later; significance sold separately. When the answer comes –any answer—they take it eagerly.

But the second kind of believer hears the word Trinity and is aware, even if only out near the edge of their consciousness, almost subliminally, that they have just received a signal about the great open secret of the glory of God and the depth of salvation. For this kind of Christian, any hint of the Trinity is evocative: it strikes a chord and resonates. “Deep calls to deep at the roar of your waterfalls,” said the Psalmist (Ps 42:7), and this kind of Christian is stirred to the depths by the deep things of God.

What these Christians instinctively do, without necessarily working out all the theological details, is associate the Trinity with the gospel. That associative move is the whole trick: Trinity and gospel belong together, and anyone whose habit of mind is trained to keep them close together is constantly in touch with the deep grounding of the Christian spiritual life. If you hear the word Trinity and immediately think, “Ah yes, the Father sent the Son and the Holy Spirit to save sinners,” then you have learned the Christian habit of linking Trinity and gospel (and you are being guided by Galatians 4:4–6). If the word makes your heart respond, “Ah yes, the Son’s grace, the Father’s love, and the Spirit’s fellowship,” then you are practicing

that same habit (and you are being guided by II Corinthians 13:14). If you hear the word and think “Ah yes, through Christ hostile groups lay down their enmity and have access in one Spirit to the Father,” then you get it (and you get Ephesians 2:18). If these are the things you have learned to associate with the name of the triune God, then a sure trinitarian instinct keeps you in touch with the spiritual reality of a great salvation grounded in the great God.

Christians who are mentally and emotionally immersed in this kind of gospel trinitarianism are no longer creeping around on the surface wondering what’s beneath. They are no longer clinging to the outside of the doctrine, waiting to be told why they are there. They have made it inside, and they get it. What they get is an understanding that the God who is eternally triune in his own eternal life has shown himself to be triune for us, in the gospel of salvation. The one God was always Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but did not display that truth conspicuously until the fullness of time, when the Father sent the Son and the Spirit. The salvation and the revelation were bundled together in history, and are bundled together now in Christian experience. Theologian Gerald Bray describes knowledge of the Trinity “inside knowledge” of God’s life, and even affirms that in knowing the Father, Son, and Spirit, “Christians have been admitted to the inner life of God.” Of course he doesn’t mean that we enter the divine essence! But he does mean we become intertwined in the divine fellowship: that the eternal relations of life, light, and love which characterize the fellowship of the three persons have now been opened up for our participation. “The God who appears as One to those who view him on the outside, reveals himself as a Trinity of persons, once his inner life is opened up to our experience. The Christian doctrine that has resulted from this is nothing more nor less than a description of what that experience of God’s inner life is like.” These are big claims. But they would have to be, since they are about the nature of God and the scope of the gospel.

Whenever I describe this connection between God and the gospel, I do my best to make sure it doesn't sound like a sales job. The last thing I want is to be the next pitchman in line, hawking some kind of doctrinal or experiential panacea, straining my powers of persuasion to talk spiritual consumers into adding my product to their lives. The ever popular "add my clever idea to your spiritual life and watch the results" appeal is not only tacky; it's dangerous. It tends to denigrate the completeness of salvation and undermine the sufficiency of scripture. But by arguing for a close connection between the Trinity and the gospel, I am attempting the opposite: my point is not that you need to add something new to your Christian life, but that you already have the thing you need most. You have God revealed in the gospel.

In 2010 I wrote a book on this subject: *The Deep Things of God*. Authors don't always get to name their own books, but in this case, the publisher (Crossway) liked my suggested title. Taken from 1 Corinthians 2:10, the phrase is meant to indicate that God's very heart was made known when the Father sent the Son and the Spirit. But the editors did want to change my original sub-title, which was something so dull, clunky, and academic that even I can't remember it anymore. They recommended the sub-title "How the Trinity Changes Everything." At first, I thought it sounded too much like ad copy for my nifty new idea. It also seemed like an exaggeration: surely the Trinity doesn't change how we put on our shoes, fry an egg, or brush our teeth, so how can we say it changes =? But the more I thought about the sub-title, the more I realized that it really did evoke the tremendous explanatory power of understanding the connection between the Trinity and the gospel. That connection works in two directions simultaneously: it colors the whole doctrine of God with the tones of salvation, and it elevates soteriology to the heavenlies. There is nothing in the life of the Christian that remains unchanged by such a connection.

Consider salvation itself. It is easy enough to describe salvation briefly in ways that omit any

reference to the Father, Son, and Spirit. When the Philippian jailer asked Paul what to do to be saved, Paul responded quickly and bluntly, "believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." Similarly, Christians in many settings may find it helpful to use short formulas to describe salvation: to be forgiven, to be born again, to be converted, to become a disciple of Jesus, to be reconciled to God, and so on. Any one of these can suffice to introduce the subject. But there are three reasons that finally compel us to keep going until we make explicit reference to the Trinity when talking about salvation.

First, we are compelled to ground our salvation in the Trinity because all these ways of speaking briefly about salvation must somehow go together. What will happen when we try to account for how being adopted by God, redeemed by Christ, and born of the Spirit, are all aspects or moments of one inseparable reality? We will put the package together conceptually and end up confessing the Trinity. The only way to avoid this is to suppress all curiosity about the coherence and completeness of salvation; that is, to resist faith's inherent drive to seek understanding.

Second, we are compelled to ground our salvation in the Trinity because nearly all of the brief ways of naming salvation are shorthand. They are highly compressed versions of complex ideas that need to be unpacked, and as soon as we unpack them, we find trinitarianism inside. It's simple enough to say that God adopts us as his children, but the full, biblical scope of this expression is vast: the eternal Son of the eternal Father took on human nature to live out his sonship as a creature, overcoming human rebellion (bad sonship; unsonlikeness) and sending the Spirit of adoption into our hearts crying "Abba, Father." It's simple enough to say that God forgives us, but the New Testament elaboration of that fact is that God the Father so loved the world that he set forth his only-begotten Son as a propitiation, who offered himself to the Father through the eternal Spirit to atone for our sins. Nearly any short account of the nature of salvation

turns out to be, when examined in light of the full counsel of Scripture, an abbreviated way of referring to something that involves the personal presence and work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Third, we are compelled to ground our salvation in the Trinity because we cannot avoid the question of how the nature of salvation correlates with the nature of the God who saves. The biblical account of salvation is not just a string of events in a convoluted plot that is developing toward some uncertain end. It presents itself as a single, well-ordered sequence of purposive actions with a goal that points beyond itself to its author. Theoretically, God could have accomplished salvation in any number of ways. But the actual history of salvation is an economy, a parceling out of one great thing in a progressively unfolding series that moves toward its end. That end, expressed in the Father's sending of the Son and the Spirit, is not only an economy of salvation but an economy of revelation. God not only saves us but does so in a way that makes his eternal character and identity manifest. The God who exists in the depths of his own eternity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit saves us by being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for us and for our reconciliation. There might be a way to reflect on salvation without coming to conclusions about the God of salvation, but that is not the Christian way.

Starting from salvation and following these three lines of thought leads to the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. Though the trinitarian confession became more explicit and elaborate in the early centuries of the church, the movements of thought we have just traced are already present in the Bible itself. Though it was Paul who told the Philippian jailer simply to "believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved," it was also Paul who spoke in a wide variety of ways about that salvation (chosen, predestined, redeemed, forgiven, adopted, sealed, and so on; Ephesians 1); who analyzed some of these terms more closely (access to God is Spirit-empowered, Christ-enabled access to the Father; Ephesians 2); and who pondered all of salvation

history in light of the eternal character of God ("the mystery hidden for ages in God...so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known;" Ephesians 3). Paul habitually took these three steps from the gospel to the Trinity, following the same trinitarian instinct that has guided the church into truth and that guides readers of Scripture now.

Flowing from salvation, all the practices of the Christian life are marked by the presence of the Trinity. Prayer is speaking to God the Father on the basis of adoptive sonship by the Spirit of adoption. Encountering God in the Bible is hearing the voice of the Father in words inspired by the Spirit which testify to Christ. Evangelism may not immediately involve speaking explicitly about the doctrine of the Trinity, but it always and only works because the Father is drawing people to the Son, the Son is making the Father known to seekers, and the Holy Spirit is enabling them to confess that Jesus is Lord. This is how the Trinity changes everything. There is a profound connection between the gospel and the Trinity, and to understand it is to enter a realm of spiritual reality, insight, and power that are the birthright of all those who are born again.

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