

ESSENTIAL BELIEFS

a wesleyan primer

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Editors



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HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND THE TRINITY?

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Timothy R. Gaines

Let's say it up front: The doctrine of the Trinity is complex. Centuries of work by the church's most accomplished scholars have come to agree upon this much: *The Trinity is a mystery*. What, then, is the worth of such a doctrine for Christian life and practice? Isn't the doctrine of the Trinity a mystery beyond our comprehension, a metaphysical riddle offered up for the banter of philosophers and theologians? Does it really bear any significance for daily Christian life?

When treated primarily as a set of ideas and propositions about God, the importance of the doctrine of the Trinity for daily Christian life often becomes difficult to ascertain. If, however, the doctrine of the Trinity assumes a role of describing the ways in which we are being drawn into God's love and redemption, its importance for daily life will be difficult to contain. Because the Wesleyan tradition often tends to do theology with a keen eye toward what doctrine means for our salvation, our approach to the Trinity is one that is not as concerned with unlocking the mysterious "manner how"¹ of God's life for the sake of gaining information as much as it is to become caught up in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, that we might know God's redemption in full, complete, and comprehensive ways, ultimately leaving us "lost in wonder, love and praise."²

This is not to say that we ought to give up all attempts at describing God. Rather, we are like the one who has encountered the majesty of a mountaintop sunset but whose attempt to describe what she or he saw, vivid as it may be, fails to capture the fullness of the spectacle. We speak of the Trinity not because we can comprehensively explain God but because we do not want to be reduced to silence after encountering such goodness.

1. Wesley, "On the Trinity," in *Works*, 6:204.

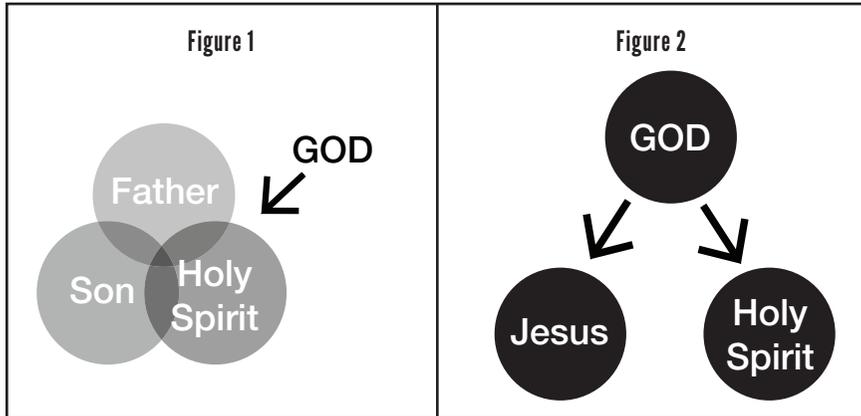
2. Charles Wesley, "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling," in *Worship in Song: Hymnal* (Kansas City: Lillenas Publishing Co., 1972), 16.

How, then, do we speak of Trinity? Generally, Trinitarian theology proceeds by giving special attention to: (1) who God *is* as Trinity and (2) what God *does* as Trinity.³

Substantially Love, In Mystical Three: Who God Is as Trinity

Historically, the questions related to who God is as Trinity have dealt with how God can be three-in-one without being different gods, how each Person (a carefully chosen word, not to be mistaken with human) of the Trinity is divine, and how each Person relates to the other two. When done well, this has been a task of describing what God has revealed to us, rather than prescribing how we think God ought to be. God's self-revelation in the sending of the Son and the Holy Spirit are the starting places from which the church attempts to describe the redemptive reality of God-with-us.

After centuries of Spirit-led deliberation, the description upon which the church has largely agreed is that God *is* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; these three subsist in inseparable unity; each is fully the divine being; this is the one God.⁴ This terminology, represented by Figure 1, stands opposed to a common (mis)interpretation of the Trinity, represented in Figure 2:



The approach illustrated in Figure 2 often conflates God into Father, leading to a fair amount of theological confusion over what we are to do with the Son and the Holy Spirit. While Figure 2 starts by easily maintaining the unity of God, problems immediately arise when we attempt to make sense of who Jesus

3. Theologians often use the term *essential Trinity* to denote questions about who God *is* as Trinity and the term *economic Trinity* to refer to what God *does* as Trinity.

4. See Samuel M. Powell, *Discovering Our Christian Faith: An Introduction to Christian Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 2008).

and the Holy Spirit are in relation to God. If the Son and the Spirit are not essentially God, don't we have three gods? And if the Son and the Spirit are essentially God, how is God one (Deut. 6:4)?

Figure 1, on the other hand, reflects the confession that the one God is a relational communion of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and that these three together are one God. While there is inseparable unity among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (John 17:21), there is also relationality; each Person of the Trinity relates to the others in the inseparable unity of perfect love.

If we would say anything about who God is as Trinity, it is this: God *is* love (1 John 4:8). There is no relation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit that is not characterized as love. In the essence of who God is as a communion of holy love, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit do not disappear into one another, conflating into a single, relationless totality. Rather, the unity of who God is as love comes precisely as the Father, Son, and Spirit are inseparably united in their love for one another. This is how, as Charles Wesley has so wonderfully hymned, God is “substantially love, in mystical three,”⁵ “pure essential love” as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁶

Understanding God as a single communion of three divine persons stretches our theological imaginations and reminds us that, though we are made in God's image, God is not made in ours. As a triune being, God's life, to say it simply, is *different* from ours. Categories like gender are difficult—impossible, even—to apply to God. The question, *Is God male or female?* is best answered, *God is triune*. While the Word became flesh as a male, we would be hard-pressed to ascribe maleness back onto the fullness of God's triune being. Scripture obviously uses the masculine descriptors of Father and Son; these are used in this chapter. But the relationship between the Father and Son is characterized by self-giving, rather than any stereotypically masculine images of power and domination. God's life as Trinity is the image in which humans have been created, and that image is essentially self-giving love.

Lead Our Hearts into His Love: What God Does as Trinity

If love is the essence of who God is, what might that mean for what God does as Trinity? The doctrine of the Trinity is our good-faith attempt to describe what God has revealed to us. We must keep in mind, however, that the way God has revealed God's self to us is by giving God's self to us and for us, exemplified most fully by the Son on the cross (Phil. 2:7). Saying, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” then, is not only descriptive of who God *is*, but it is simultaneously

5. Charles Wesley, “Hymn XXIII,” in *Trinity Hymns* (1767), ed. Randy Maddox (Durham: Duke Center for Studies in the Wesleyan Tradition, 2008), 106.

6. Charles Wesley, “Hymn XIV,” in *ibid.*, 98.

descriptive of what God *does*—a telling of the narrative of God’s salvation in a truncated way.⁷ How has God acted to save us? Through the Father sending the Son in the power of the Spirit.

The very self-giving of God that allows us to glimpse who God *is* as Trinity is the sending of the Son and the Spirit for our salvation—or, what God *does* as Trinity. Every bit of God’s self-giving is also God’s self-revelation; God has not acted to redeem as an idea or proposition but as being personally present with creation, enfolding it within the perfect love of the Trinity. “Thy love, thyself” is how Charles Wesley sang of this union, so that where God’s love is, there is God.⁸ Therefore, the sending of the Son and the Spirit are far more than a divine deposit into creation; they are the gracious acts of God’s very life being opened to us and a simultaneous invitation to live *within* the redemptive love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

John’s gospel gives us a poignantly vivid depiction of the reality of the Trinity. After his resurrection, Jesus appears to his disciples, his body still marked by the wounds of his crucifixion. “Put your finger here,” Jesus says to Thomas. “Reach out your hand and put it into my side” (John 20:27). Jesus’s side, and the wound he is inviting Thomas to enter, is the very place from which the fluids of life drained from Jesus’s body, where his life was literally broken open (John 19:34). We might say that in the sending of the Son, the life of God as Trinity is broken open to us, and the place where God’s life is broken open is now the point of entry, complete with an invitation to enter into perfect love and be redeemed by that love.

The doctrine of the Trinity tells us that our God is the one who has chosen to be broken open for our sake, not only to give us love but also to give us a place in the love that constitutes the relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rather than being a clever solution to an unsolvable idea, then, the doctrine of the Trinity is the description of the way God has acted so that we can be caught up in the redemptive flow of love divine.

The love that flows out from God in the sending of the Son and the Spirit is the love that also draws us into the flow of God’s love, that we might be *renewed*. One of the distinctly Wesleyan views of what takes place in God’s redemption is that we humans are “renewed in love,”⁹ a love “excluding sin, filling the heart, taking up the whole capacity of the soul.”¹⁰ For Wesley, this love was a gift given only by God. As we are drawn into the redemptive love of God, Wesley taught,

7. See Robert Jenson, *Systematic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 1:46.

8. Charles Wesley, “Hymn XXX,” in *Trinity Hymns*, 114.

9. John Wesley, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1966), 91 ff.

10. John Wesley, “The Scripture Way of Salvation,” in *John Wesley’s Sermons: An Anthology*, ed. Albert C. Outler and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991), 374.

we are renewed by love in God's image, that we might live into God's original intent for humanity, that humans be "what God is, Love"¹¹ (see chapter 8). This is not to say that humans become divine in the way that God is divine, but it is to say that as we plunge deeply into the love that *is* God, that love *does* something: It renews us, that we might embody the image of God. Of course, all of this is a work done by God; God not only self-gives and self-reveals, but that same self-giving is precisely what makes participating in God's love possible. We are gathered into the life of God's love to the glory of the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit. "Come, Holy Ghost," was Charles Wesley's lyrical prayer, "and lead our hearts *into* his love."¹²

Thy Love, Thyself, And Lo! I Live

"The knowledge of the Three-One God," John Wesley writes, "is interwoven with all true Christian faith; with all vital religion."¹³ That knowledge, however, is not knowledge that comes propositionally. It is the knowledge that can only come from being in the love that is God's three-one life. The doctrine of the Trinity is essential for Christian life and practice precisely because being in the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the way in which we are redeemed, restored, and renewed in God's image. The doctrine of the Trinity is not only helpful for Christian life and practice; it is the very content of our salvation! Having been so graced, we do well to join in Charles Wesley's hymnic prayer:

O wouldst thou stamp it now on mine [heart]

The name and character divine

The holy One in Three!

Come, Father, Son and Spirit, give

Thy love, —thyself: and lo! I live

*Imparadis'd in thee.*¹⁴

Discussion Questions

1. How do you think our ideas about the Trinity change when we focus more on the Trinity as the way in which God acts to save us, rather than as a set of ideas about God?
2. What do you think the doctrine of the Trinity suggests to us about the relationship between who God is and what God does?

11. Wesley, "The Image of God," in *ibid.*, 15.

12. Charles Wesley, "Hymn CVI," in *Trinity Hymns*, 68. Emphasis added.

13. John Wesley, "On the Trinity," *Works* 6:205.

14. Charles Wesley, "Hymn XXX," 114.

3. What implications do you see in making the distinction between God giving us love and God giving us a place *in* the love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit?
4. If the doctrine of the Trinity tells us, in part, about how God is broken open to us, what do you think that says about the nature of God?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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