## Contents

**Acknowledgments** 7  
1. The Doctrinal Importance of the Trinity 9

**Part I: The Trinity in the Economy of Salvation** 17  
2. Beginning with Salvation 19  
3. The Trinity and Divine Revelation 22  
4. The Trinity and Creation 34  
5. The Trinity and Salvation 43  
6. The Trinity and the Church 61  
7. The Trinity and Worship 70  
8. The Trinity and the Church’s Holiness 79  
9. The Trinity and the Spiritual Gifts 88  
10. The Trinity and the Church’s Mission 98  

**Part II: The Historical Development of the Doctrine of the Trinity** 117  
12. Trinitarian Theology before the Council of Nicea 119  
13. The Council of Nicea 131  
14. Post-Nicene Developments in Christology 140  
15. Post-Nicene Developments in the Trinity and Pneumatology 148  
16. Wesleyan Trinitarian Theology 156

**Part III: Thinking about the Trinity Today** 159  
17. Continuing Trinitarian Controversies 161  
18. Some Continuing Perplexities about the Trinity 173  
19. Knowing the Trinity 179

**Suggestions for Further Reading** 189

**Glossary** 190
Sooner or later each of us receives something that we are told is valuable—a gift, an heirloom, or whatever. Sometimes its value is evident, its usefulness clear—gifts of cash, for instance. At other times, with other gifts, we invoke the saying, “It’s the thought that counts,” knowing that, regardless of its purported value, we have no use for it. In these cases the only important consideration becomes the question of where we will store it, certain that occasionally it will be necessary to put the gift on display. It’s not that we don’t appreciate these sorts of gifts, but they occupy space, are often not to our taste, and perform no useful service.

For many Christians, the doctrine of the Trinity is such a gift. We have received it and have been told it is valuable. We feel obliged to keep it in a safe place and to display it on appropriate occasions. We even become indignant if anyone criticizes it. But many Christians wonder why it is valuable, what it is good for, or even what the doctrine actually is. So we dutifully store it away in a safe place and, when asked, bring it out to display our orthodoxy. However, like most extravagant gifts, it makes little difference to our daily existence.
The purpose of this book is to help Christians better understand the doctrine of the Trinity, and why it is so central to our faith, to discipleship, and to the Christian mission.

**Why Is the Doctrine of the Trinity Important?**

For one thing, the Trinity is the central Christian teaching about God. It distinguishes Christianity from Islam, from Judaism, and from other religions. It also distinguishes mainstream, orthodox Christianity from movements on the Christian periphery, such as the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons), the Watch Tower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania (Jehovah’s Witnesses), and certain types of Pentecostalism. It is thus the distinctive Christian doctrine *par excellence*. It was, moreover, the first major doctrinal issue in Christian history, the first that required councils and creeds.

Additionally, the doctrine of the Trinity is important because it occupies a central and organic place in Christian theology: doctrines about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit, and salvation make no sense without the Trinity. It is the doctrinal glue that binds other doctrines into a coherent unity.

Finally, we note that the statements of faith of the various churches in the Wesleyan tradition are all Trinitarian, with the doctrine of the Trinity typically constituting the first article of faith:

> There is but one living and true God, everlasting, without body or parts, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness; the maker and preserver of all things, both visible and invisible. And in unity of this Godhead there are three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.
—Article 1, “Of Faith in the Holy Trinity,” Articles of Religion of the Methodist Church (used by both the United Methodist Church and the African Methodist Episcopal Church)

We believe in one eternally existent, infinite God, Sovereign Creator and Sustainer of the universe; that he only is God, holy in nature, attributes, and purpose. The God who is holy love and light is triune in essential being, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

—Article 1, “The Triune God,” Articles of Faith of the Church of the Nazarene

We believe in the one living and true God, both holy and loving, eternal, unlimited in power, wisdom, and goodness, the Creator and Preserver of all things. Within this unity there are three persons of one essential nature, power, and eternity—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

—Article 1, “Faith in the Holy Trinity,” Articles of Religion of the Wesleyan Church

There is but one living and true God, the maker and preserver of all things. And in the unity of this Godhead there are three persons: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are one in eternity, deity, and purpose; everlasting, of infinite power, wisdom, and goodness.

—Article 1, “The Holy Trinity,” Articles of Religion of the Free Methodist Church

And Yet . . .

In spite of our formal declarations about the Trinity—our affirmations of admiration and loyalty—the importance of this doctrine is often not evident in our worship and daily lives. Seldom do we hear sermons that clarify the doctrine and emphasize its importance to Christian faith and life. Seldom do we hear prayers and benedictions that reflect Trinitarian doctrine. We often hear the Trinity invoked during baptis-
mal liturgy and in the marriage pronouncement but seldom during the celebration of the Lord’s Supper. As a result, it would not be an exaggeration to say that this cardinal doctrine of the Christian church remains disconnected from the proper practice of Christian discipleship for many Christians. It constitutes a legacy of whose value we are certain but whose usefulness we doubt.

Why is this? Why do we say that the doctrine of the Trinity is of capital importance yet treat it as a useless gift? The reasons lie in the way the doctrine has been presented in the church’s education of clergy and laypeople.

The doctrine is often explained and defended on the basis of weak and unconvincing appeal to the Bible. As Christians, our instinct is to look to the Bible for our teachings, and that instinct is sound, but we should honestly acknowledge that the doctrine of the Trinity is not expressly set forth in the Bible. To be sure, the Bible bears witness to God’s Trinitarian life, but the doctrine we profess is not explicitly presented in the Bible. Failure to recognize this fact can lead to a fruitless search for proof-texts that are, at best, embarrassing and can damage the church’s credibility and doctrinal affirmations. For instance, interpreters have ransacked the Bible looking for verses that suggest a plurality of divine persons. These include Genesis 1:26 (“Let us make humankind in our image”);\(^1\) Genesis 18 and 19 (when three strangers visit Abraham); and Isaiah 6:8 (“Who will go for us?”). In a later chapter we will discuss the appropriate way to draw the doctrine of the Trinity from the Bible. For now, it is enough to avoid simplistic attempts to find the doctrine in particular biblical passages.

Even worse than the misleading appeals to Scripture are the poor analogies often employed to illustrate the Trin-

---

1. My translation.
ity. Many are familiar with the hit parade of absurd efforts, such as that the Trinity is like the three parts of an egg, or the three forms of water (ice, liquid, and steam). These metaphors fall short not because they are metaphors but because they equate God’s unity with the unity of material stuff; in them the Trinitarian persons become mere parts. Not only do these metaphors fail to illustrate anything of importance, but they also do damage to the Christian faith by implying things about God that are highly misleading.

Sometimes, especially in textbooks of theology written before 1980, the Trinity is presented as a speculative theory about God’s eternal being in a way that is far removed from the doctrine of salvation. A glance at the table of contents of older theological textbooks will show that the Trinity discussions typically appear in early chapters along with proofs of God’s existence. The doctrine of salvation comes much later. This approach does serious damage to the doctrine of the Trinity by ripping it from its natural connection to salvation. As a result, the doctrine receives an overly abstract and speculative character that removes it from the practice of Christian life.

Our corporate worship also does not typically promote a good understanding of the Trinity. For example, prayer and benedictions should be offered to God the Father, in the name of the Son, and in the power of the Spirit. Unfortunately, we too easily destroy the Trinitarian structure of prayer by indiscriminately praying to Jesus or to the Holy Spirit, forgetting that prayer should be offered to the Father, in the name of Jesus, and in the power of the Spirit.

Admittedly, the doctrine, as a result of its historical development, comes loaded with technical and somewhat abstruse terminology—especially Greek terms such as *homoousios* (“of the same substance”). Technical terminology does not lend itself to easy exposition.
Finally, it has proven difficult for teachers of the Trinity to reconcile the notion that God is a Trinity of persons with the belief that God is a personal being—a person. How can God be a person if God is three persons? This sort of puzzle has led to much unedifying speculation about how number applies to God.

As a result of our failure to develop effective ways of presenting the Trinity, we find ourselves in the paradoxical situation of possessing a doctrine of undoubted truth and existential importance that we allow to sit idle and unused in favor of other doctrines that give us profound insight into the human condition and rich resources for living the Christian life.

A Preliminary Response

The root of our problem with the Trinity lies in a misunderstanding of revelation. Our failure to understand the idea of revelation directly results in a misapprehension of the doctrine of the Trinity.

We begin with the affirmation that the ultimate and unsurpassable revelation of God is Jesus Christ. We begin here because Jesus is the Word, the *logos*, of God (John 1:1–4). Whatever God says to humankind is found in Jesus Christ, either expressly or implicitly (Luke 24:25–27; John 5:39–47; Acts 10:43). Theology is the church’s work of bearing witness to this revelation in forms suitable for teaching and preaching and in ways that will nurture the life of the church. Accordingly, the doctrine of the Trinity is the Christian community’s attempt, with fallible, human words and concepts, to bear witness to God’s revelation. It is the church’s understanding of the God who comes to us in Jesus Christ. It is the church’s verbalization of our encounter with God who reveals. It is thus a prayer, a human word offered up to God in the service of God.
The doctrine, consequently, is not:

- An incomprehensible mystery. Defining it as such is often simply an excuse for not engaging in the hard, intellectual task of thinking. God is not an impenetrable mystery; on the contrary, God is revealed. In revelation God has laid open God’s life to us and made it plain. That is why, when Philip asked Jesus to show him the Father, Jesus answered that by seeing Jesus they had seen the Father (John 14:8–9). Theology is the task of thinking through this revelation, this event in which God’s being is disclosed to us. However, while God has chosen to reveal Godself, thereby making it possible for us to know God, that doesn’t mean we necessarily will fully understand everything God is.

- A numbers puzzle. Trying to understand the doctrine of the Trinity is not a game of figuring out how three can be one. Number measures finitude; the infinite God cannot be measured with or described by numbers.

- A philosophical theory imported into theology. The doctrine of the Trinity rests on God’s revelation, not philosophy. However, philosophy presents us with powerful tools by which to think about God. It would be foolish for us to ignore these tools.

- A teaching about three beings. Whatever else the doctrine of the Trinity may be, it is not a doctrine about three beings. The orthodox belief that God is three Persons should never be interpreted to mean three separate and distinct beings.

**Where Do We Go from Here?**

This book is divided into three sections. Part I shows the connections between the Trinity and the rest of theolo-
It argues that there is a Trinitarian logic in every branch of Christian theology. In particular, the Christian doctrine of salvation makes sense only when we see it as the work of the triune God. Part II traces the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, especially during the early centuries of Christianity, when the doctrine’s distinctive vocabulary arose and some of Christianity’s most troublesome debates took place. Part III addresses some of the ongoing issues associated with understanding the doctrine today.