

# What is the Trinity?



Basics of  
the Faith

S E R I E S

David F. Wells



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Trinity?

## **Basics of the Faith**

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Sean Michael Lucas, Series Editor

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Third, it was “according to the Spirit of holiness” that Christ “was declared to be the Son of God in power . . . by his resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:3–4). The resurrection was the public announcement made by God the Father, and effected by the Spirit, that Christ was God and that he had been triumphant. It announced the completion of his work and the defeat of all our spiritual enemies. Christ entered into a new expression of his sovereignty in which he rules, not merely by supreme divine power, but also on account of his defeat of evil at the cross. So it is that he is now the head of the church (Eph. 1:20–23; 1 Peter 3:21–22).

God’s triunity is now taking unmistakable shape. Within this one being, there is a Father who is personally distinct from the Son and a Son who is distinct from the Holy Spirit. The Son speaks to the Father, who is other than himself: “Holy Father, keep them in your name” (John 17:11). The Father speaks to the Son. The Father “sent” him, and Christ’s works were those “that the Father has given me to accomplish” (John 5:36). And, as we have just seen, the Holy Spirit was intimately involved in all phases of Christ’s incarnate life and now points sinners to the second person of the Godhead, Christ, in whom alone salvation can be found. And this same Holy Spirit is “sent” into our hearts to witness to our spirits.

Although there must be much about life within the Godhead that we do not know, there are two facets that we especially need to note here. They are that, from all eternity, within the Godhead, there was love and communication.

Christ spoke of this love (John 17:26). As we have seen, there was much communication within the Godhead, as a result of which the Son and the Spirit were “sent” on their missions. It is important to reflect on this because we know only too well that in this fallen world, among the

many deficiencies that we experience are the fracturing of love and the breakdown of communication. We long for real love and genuine communication in the midst of a world of harshness and broken relations. It is hard to find. Indeed, the Holy Spirit's work of sanctification is, in part, to restore the lost capacity for Christlike love and the lost ability to communicate in the fullness of God's holiness. And we do get small glimpses of what life could be like if it were lived solely in love and if communications were utterly truthful, open, and kind. We do begin to experience partially what our full restoration in these ways will be like. We have, though, only the down payment, and we long for what is to come when God's redemptive work within us reaches its culmination. It is to this future, exhibited from all eternity in the Trinity, that we are now journeying.

Second, the deep interconnection between the Son and the Spirit, which we have seen, also has an important practical consequence. It gives us a way to test claims in the church. We often hear people telling us about what God has been doing inside or outside the church or what he has been saying to people personally. In relation to these claims, here is a simple test: as a result of what God "has been doing," are we seeing Christ elevated? Are the truths about him taking root? Are eyes being opened, is worship following, and is repentance from sin happening?

If the Spirit was the agent in carrying out the will of the Father in Christ's incarnation and death, and if the work of the Spirit is now correlated with the work of the Son, then we cannot claim that the Spirit has been at work if Christ and his work have not been magnified. If the life, death, and resurrection of Christ are not being made central, if our eyes are not being drawn to him, if we are not seeing that sin must be forsaken and he must be fully trusted, then the



Holy Spirit has not been at work. Where men and women turn from themselves as their life's center and turn to Christ in trust, there we can say with confidence that God has been at work.

There is, then, one divine being, but within this one being there are three centers of self-consciousness: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. A person, Charles Hodge said in an earlier generation, "is an intelligent subject who can say I, who can be addressed as Thou, who can act and be the object of action."<sup>8</sup> That, indeed, is what we see in the Trinity in the communication among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—all within the one being of God.

This is a profound mystery, but it is also a profound truth. It might be tempting to think that because we have difficulty in understanding how this can be, we can set it aside as being beyond us and, perhaps, irrelevant to Christian faith. That would be a great mistake. The gospel is simple only in the sense that the simplest people can understand enough of it to find acceptance with the Father through the work of the Son because of the working of the Spirit. But the gospel is not simplistic. We have sometimes made it so, but it is never other than the most profound truth that any person will ever encounter in life. It is a truth that brings our sin into the very depths of the being of God, face to face with his holiness, and it therefore brings us face to face with the infinite God. If the gospel is so simple that the simplest can understand it, it is also so profound that none can fully plumb its depths. We cannot sacrifice this profundity in the name of the gospel's simplicity, for then we will drift into superficiality. At the same time, in the name of the gospel's profundity, we cannot lose its simplicity; otherwise, it will not be a message for all people, and we will drift into irrelevance.



“With remarkable clarity, brevity, and verve, Wells presents the mysteries, beauties, and necessities of the Trinity. He also shows . . . [the jeopardy of] downplaying the importance of this vital distinction of the Christian faith.”

■ **Bryan Chapell**, Covenant Theological Seminary

“I wish this had been available when I was a theological student. It would have saved me hours of reading and helped me to grasp the essence of this vital doctrine. As good a summary of this vital doctrine as I have ever read.”

■ **Alistair Begg**, Parkside Church, Chagrin Falls, Ohio

The challenging nature of the Trinity often puzzles us—especially since no one passage in the Bible explains it on its own. Early creeds were written to unite the church’s beliefs about the doctrine, yet people still struggle to understand it even in our own time.

This booklet explores the teaching on the Trinity all throughout the Bible and through history. It addresses how God is both one and tripersonal and goes on to define the Trinity and its implications for our Christian practice.

Basics of the Faith booklets introduce readers to basic Reformed doctrine and practice. On issues of church government and practice they reflect that framework—otherwise they are suitable for all church situations.

David F. Wells is Distinguished Senior Research Professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary.

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