

Connected

Living in the Light of the Trinity

SAM ALLBERRY

With his characteristic self-deprecating humor and pastoral warmth, Sam Allberry takes us right to the heart of the God who is triune. In these pages he has managed to combine simplicity of style with profundity of thought. It makes for compelling reading.

---**Michael Jensen,** Lecturer in Theology and Church History at Moore College, Sydney

Sam Allberry has returned with another characteristically fresh and readable introduction. With wry humor and solid biblical moorings, we are drawn back to marvel at the wonders of God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He writes simply without being too simplistic and thus has produced a great book to put into the hands of young believers hungry to grow in their understanding and faith.

-Mark Meynell, Senior Associate Minister and European Program Coordinator, All Souls, Langham Place

Sam Allberry rightly points out how neglected the doctrine of the Trinity is, showing its importance clearly and warmly. I hope many will read this and be affected.

---Michael Reeves, Head of Theology, UCCF; Author of The Good God

This is heartwarming, awe-inspiring teaching that will fill the mind and feed the soul. Deep truths are expounded with a light touch and down-to-earth applications. Here is a book that not only will help readers to understand more deeply the mystery of God the Holy Trinity, but also moves us to worship and honor him in daily life.

---Vaughan Roberts, Rector of St. Ebbe's, Oxford; Director of the Proclamation Trust

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For Fiona Ellis, Edward Nash, Amelie Lewis, and Hannah Clarke: in the hope that you will always cherish the love of God the Trinity and that this dedication makes up for forgotten birthdays.

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WRITING ON THE TRINITY has been both an enormous joy and an enormous struggle. The joy has come from having the opportunity to think carefully about who God is. There can surely be no greater topic for reflection. Which is where the struggle comes in. I am painfully aware that the words in this book cannot do justice to the sheer wonder of God being Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

That the project ever got to this point at all is due in no small part to the encouragement of others. Eleanor Trotter and the team at IVP continue to be a joy to work with, and I am especially grateful to Eleanor for all her patience and encouragement. Ian Thompson and Aaron Gottier at P&R have, as always, been a pleasure to work with and a great help in readying the manuscript for an American market. I now know that no one on the left-hand side of the pond has the foggiest clue what I mean when I talk about "putting the boot in" (or, for that matter, when I talk about having the "foggiest clue").

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INTRODUCTION

I AM A PRETTY POOR JUDGE of people. Some of my closest friends are individuals who, at first meeting, I would never have imagined becoming so close to one day. People I didn't think I'd click with, people with whom I had little in common, people who, where close friendship was concerned, would probably not be my "type." They had radically different interests. Or a propensity not to find my jokes funny, and to wonder why on earth I ever thought they would. Not immediately obvious friends-for-life material. But now, years later, they're friends I couldn't imagine doing without.

It turns out I can be a pretty poor judge of doctrine, too. As a young Christian I had a basic understanding that, officially, God was triune. But unofficially, it made virtually no difference to my Christian life. I prayed to God. I knew Jesus had died for my sins. I read my Bible and tried to live in a way that pleased my heavenly Father. It never really occurred to me to go any further than that. The doctrine of the Trinity was carefully filed in the drawer of "Things That All Good Christians Believe" and then never really seen again.

I had no immediate need to look further into the Trinity, and a number of suspicions were holding me back:

- 1. It doesn't make sense. God is one. Oh, and he's also three. Get it? Didn't think so.
- 2. It's not *meant* to make sense. It's just one of those things. It's not supposed to be understood. It's a mystery and we shouldn't pry. To try to analyze it in some rational, systematic way would be to miss the point. It might even spoil it. Better to leave it be; as a mystery it feels more deep when it's left that way.
- 3. It's too technical. To get anywhere you need to be a theologian. When you start to scratch the surface you run into a sort of multisyllabic Neverland. Ask even a basic question about the Trinity and theologians fire back answers with terms like *perichoresis*. They may as well be speaking Klingon.
- 4. It's embarrassing. We commend the Christian faith on the basis that it makes sense—it coheres, it's not irrational. But then someone asks us about the Trinity and we're flummoxed. It's not explainable. So we hope like crazy that it doesn't come up.
- 5. It's irrelevant. Assuming we bust our way through all the jargon and find some way to explain it, what are we meant to do with it? Yes, one God, three persons, but so what? What practical difference could it possibly make to my life? It looks like it will have about as much bearing on my daily life as the quadratic equations I learned at school.

I didn't seem to be alone in having these suspicions. Even people I'd heard giving talks on the Trinity gave the impression they didn't really know what to do with it. They would tell us some of the history of the doctrine. We'd get introduced to guys like Athanasius, who fought hard for the church to be clear on what the Trinity was and wasn't. (The Athanasian Creed, for the record, uses the word *incomprehensible* a little too much for comfort, which does little to allay suspicion 2 above.) We might be given some of the technical terms. But there would be little sense of what difference the Trinity could actually make. It was hard to avoid the conclusion that, in the memorable words of Michael Reeves, the Trinity was a doctrine we might never have had if a bunch of theologians long ago had had girlfriends.¹

Such thinking comes to an abrupt and happy halt the moment we begin to look more closely at what the Bible shows us about the Trinity.

It really does make sense. It adds up. (Pun intended.) God wants us to understand what he is like. We don't need to learn a new language or start smoking a pipe to get our heads around it. We just need to come humbly and prayerfully to the Scriptures.

And what a difference it makes. Sinclair Ferguson highlights one of the ways we see the practical significance of the Trinity:

I've often reflected on the rather obvious thought that when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the Upper Room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!²

Understanding the Trinity helps us make sense of so much of what we hold dear: friendship, marriage, church, love, service, identity. Things that are precious to us, but which we are not always able to properly account for, find new significance when examined in the light of the Trinity. Things we cherish about God—his love and integrity, the coherence of his Word, the nearness of his presence, and above all his matchless love poured out for us through the death of Christ—all these can only make real sense when we discover that God is, in fact, triune.

One of the great privileges of pastoral ministry is being able to set yourself particular subjects to study and teach about. I find this the best way to respond to areas of Christian truth and the Bible on which I need to do more thinking, setting myself the task of doing a bit of in-depth teaching on it. Nothing like a deadline to sharpen the mind! So a few years ago I set myself the task of giving a series of talks on the Trinity, and I have attempted to teach on this subject a number of times since. My approach has been the same as for any other area of biblical truth: try to teach it the way the Bible does, to the extent that the Bible does and for the reasons that the Bible does.

The Bible, of course, doesn't use the word *Trinity*. You won't find it in Old or New Testament. But there's a difference between the word being absent and the concept being absent. *Trinity* is merely the term Christians have adopted to capture the fact that the one God has shown himself to be three persons. It sums up his three-in-oneness, his tri-unity.

And very few passages are actually "about" the Trinity. It is not as if Paul sets aside a chapter or so of a letter to hash it all out. No verse starts with, "Now about the Trinity, folks, here's what you really need to know . . ." The closest we get to this is the extended sections of Jesus' teaching in John's gospel, particularly John 14–17. Most of the time when it comes up, the Trinity is an essential background to the main point of a passage while not itself being that main point. It's like a prominent local building: pretty much always in view, but for most of the time not actually the thing you are looking at. Most of the insights we are given about the Trinity in Scripture come on the back of insights we are being given about something else. The Great Commission in Matthew 28 is not about the Trinity. It is about Jesus sending out disciple-making disciples. But really we can't understand *that* without making reference to the Trinity.

Despite my early impressions, the doctrine of the Trinity has become a dear friend. Far from being an irrelevance or a burden, it is a truth and a reality I now could not bear to be without. It is no exaggeration to say that, apart from my conversion, studying the Trinity has had a greater spiritual impact on me than anything else in my life. God is far bigger and more beautiful than I could ever have realized.

PART 1 The trinity and god

1

GOD: THE BOTTOM LINE God Is One: Part 1

IT ALL BEGAN WITH a question: "One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'" (Mark 12:28).

We can't be sure precisely why he asked. He seems to have been impressed with Jesus' debating skills. Jesus has just acquitted himself well before a delegation of Sadducees, seeing them off with some deft use of Old Testament Scripture, so he clearly has some game. Let's try him on the commandments and see how he fares.

The question may also reflect some genuine bewilderment. Jewish lawyers had enumerated 613 separate commandments within Old Testament law. Like someone overwhelmed by too much information, this man may have been looking to Jesus for some guidance, a sense of what really mattered most to God. Jesus seemed to possess some uncommon insight. "What's the bottom line here? Which commandment is the most important?" Whatever the motivation behind the question, Jesus leads in with a quotation from Deuteronomy. But he does something unexpected. He was asked for a commandment, but he opens with a truth about God: "'The most important one,' answered Jesus, 'is this: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one"'" (Mark 12:29).

Doctrine comes before ethics, confession before commandment. Before assessing what you need to do for God comes an understanding of who that God is.

And that God is one. This is the bottom line, the foundation. Everything else—including how he wants us to live—will need to flow from this context. Discipleship (following God) has to follow theology (knowing God). And the particular characteristic of God that Jesus puts front and center is his oneness. This is the truth about God that precedes everything else. It may be a subtle rebuke to Jesus' conversation partner: God's oneness makes trying to pick one commandment over another a moot point. They're not independent options on a menu; the same God stands behind them all.

This is where we need to start. God is one. It may be a short phrase, but it is packed with an explosive charge: God is one means that God is unique.

In the West, we're familiar with the concept of there being one God. It is the God most people would have in their mind: a unique, one-of-a-kind God. You believe in a God or you don't believe in a God. Whatever else people in the West might believe, if God comes into the equation, there tends to be only one of him.

Not so in the ancient world. While the norm in the West has been to believe (or not) in one God, the ancient world was proud of its polytheism. There were different gods for different things: you would have a god of travel or commerce or sport. In fact, the more gods the better—you stood a greater chance of covering all your bases. It was the equivalent of that episode of *The Simpsons* in which Homer, believing he is about to die, cries out in desperation, "Jesus! Allah! Buddha!—I love you all!" That was the kind of setup they had in the ancient world. Hedge your bets; believe in as many gods as possible. It was the fashion. To believe in one unique God, as Jews and Christians did, was dorky.

The Bible has always insisted on monotheism: there is only one God. The verse Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6 was not plucked from scriptural obscurity; it was one of the foundational verses for the people of God in the Old Testament. It was said every day, morning and evening. Nor

was it a lone verse in standing for God's uniqueness. Far from being a theological "blip" in the Bible, Deuteronomy 6 is in fact typical of many passages affirming God's uniqueness. Consider some of the others:

This truth was never intended to be just a matter of mathematical fact.

I am the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no God. I will strengthen you, though you have not acknowledged me, so that from the rising of the sun to the place of its setting men may know there is none besides me. I am the LORD, and there is no other. (Isa. 45:5–6)

This truth was never intended to be just a matter of mathematical fact. It's not like being able to number how many states there are in the United States or how many players make up a football team or how many planets there are in the solar system.¹ It is a truth that makes an enormous practical difference. It applies to us in any number of ways, but two stand out in particular: devotion and mission.

DEVOTION

God's uniqueness compels us to wholehearted devotion. If God is one, then our devotion to him must be total. Consider the logic of the verses Jesus quotes.

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. (Mark 12:29–30)

The observation that God is one is not incidental to what follows. It is the grounds for it. The Lord our God is one. *Therefore* we are to love him with all that we are and all that we have. His oneness and the totality of our love for him are tightly bound together. If God were anything other than one, we would not need to love him with our "all." Someone doing two jobs part-time could not be expected to give the entirety of their working life to one of their two bosses. But God's oneness means he deserves our everything.

In other words, we must not compartmentalize God—give him *some* of our heart, *some* of our soul; split our mind and strength between him and four or five other claimants. Yet this is so easily done. We allow God some parts of our lives but not others. I say he can have my Sundays but not my Saturdays, my church life but not my social life, my work but not my wallet, my industry but not my fantasy. For each of us there will be particular areas of our lives that we instinctively want to rope off from God.

Out of bounds

I love having people over to my house. But the half hour before they arrive tends to involve me frantically trying to make the place approximately presentable. A principle which has helped me greatly in this is to think of tidying up not as *getting rid of* a mess, but as *putting it somewhere else*. So the spare room upstairs becomes the dumping ground. The week's accumulated debris is scooped up and banished there. Actually putting it all away would take too much time and would require a system for where everything goes. So the room upstairs takes it all. And, once the guests have left, it all gets transferred back downstairs again.

The corollary of all of this is that, while everywhere else in the house is open to guests, the spare room is not. The door to that room remains firmly closed. If I could get my hands on some, I'd cover the doorway with that yellow police tape they use to cordon off crime scenes.

It works with houseguests. And so we think it will also work with God. I'll have certain areas of my life specially tidied up for his appreciation. Others remain strictly off-limits. God is very welcome in some areas, but not in all.

But because God is one, we can't brush him off like that. It's why the quotation from Jesus begins the way it does. If you're thinking you might follow him, you need to know that it's got to be all or nothing. He deserves all of my life, all my heart, soul, mind, and strength. And the truth is that I need him in all of my life. There is no corner of my heart, soul, mind, or strength where his presence would not be a huge blessing.

Where the demons get it right

Failure to grasp this is very serious indeed. James wrote a letter to Christians struggling at this very point. Many of them

seemed to think they could blend following God with following the ways of this world, giving God part of themselves but not all. Spiritually they were being disingenuous. James called them "double-minded." In today's language we would call them "two-faced."

James exposes their hypocrisy. They profess to follow one God, but their lifestyle demonstrates otherwise. And so James calls them on it: "You believe that there is one God. Good! Even the demons believe that—and shudder!" (James 2:19). This is tragic. On this point of the creed it turns out that the demons have got more consistent theology than the Christians have. Not a great position to be in—getting theologically trumped by demons, of all things. The demons know very well that God is one. And at least in their case, you can tell because they shudder: their belief is evident. But for James' readers it is not so. They are really leading only part-Christian lives. James has called their bluff. Their half-hearted faith shows that their God is not worthy of everything. He is not the God who is one. Their faith is dead, their response to God woeful. They are unfaithful.

A couple have got married. It has been a long, painful process getting to this point. The bride has not been, shall we say, entirely straightforward. The groom has hung in there hung in with her tantrums, her inconsistencies, and even her infidelities. And now, at long last, they are man and wife.

It is a few weeks later. The boxes are now all unpacked. The last of the thank-you notes has been sent off. It feels like home. Familiarity. Our groom has managed to leave work early and, ever the romantic, picks up some flowers on the way home. He doesn't spot the unfamiliar car parked across the street, nor the jacket that is not his hanging in the hall. It is only when he enters the bedroom that it all becomes clear.

Adultery. It's a horrific picture, but one sadly not unfamiliar in our world today.

And that is the picture that best captures what we're doing spiritually when we give God only a portion of our affection. James does not sugarcoat it for us: "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God" (James 4:4).

It is a situation we need to repent of. James calls us to come back to God. To recognize the abhorrence of what we've done when we've not given him our all. To be brokenhearted. To weep. Some sins warrant our tears. It astonishes me how quickly I will well up at a sentimental movie and yet how slowly I am moved to tears by my own sin.

We need to remember that God is one. He deserves our all. And, amazingly, when we do draw near to him again he draws near to us, washing us afresh in his grace and mercy.

MISSION

God's uniqueness also compels Christian mission. His oneness is linked directly in Scripture to the mandate to call on all peoples to come to him. It is the lens through which we need to view other belief systems.

Corinth was a place with tons of different gods. Like an enormous food court, the choice was vast and bewildering; the temptation was to pick and mix whatever took your spiritual fancy. A little Kung Pow chicken here, a little lamb tagine there.

In this context the early Christians were understandably cautious. A particular concern was that they might get spiritually contaminated through accidental contact with stuff associated with some of these other gods. Tim Chester encourages us to put ourselves in their shoes. Imagine you are having supper in Corinth with your pagan friends from across the street. You're enjoying a lovely meal, only to discover that the meat you've been eating had earlier been pledged to a pagan god.² What would you do? Carry on eating with your fingers crossed? Immediately spit the food out and do your best to retrieve the rest? Or ask for another helping without a care?

Paul had two things to say in response to their concerns.

No God but one

"So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one" (I Cor. 8:4).

The first thing to note is that idols are nothing at all. Those other gods being worshipped by the pagan neighbours across the street aren't actually real. They don't exist except in the minds of those who worship them. There is no God but one. Paul continues: "For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many 'gods' and many 'lords'), yet for us there is but one God" (I Cor. 8:5–6).

If the God of the gospel is one, then all other gods are nothing in this world. They are just "so-called" gods. God's oneness excludes all other supposed contenders. Jupiter is not real. Vishnu is not real. None of them are.

This is not to say that there is nothing there at all. Paul goes on to tell us later in the letter that there are demons behind these alternate deities. But the key point here is that the gods themselves do not actually exist.

This has massive implications for how we are to understand the non-Christian beliefs of our friends and neighbors. We're not to think that Vishnu is out there somewhere, even in an inferior position to the God of the Bible. Vishnu exists objectively nowhere outside the minds of those who believe in Vishnu. Vishnu is only a "so-called" god. Demonic forces are certainly there, misleading worshippers of Vishnu; Vishnu himself is not, and the same can be said of any other spiritual objects of worship reverenced by our friends.

This is not to say we should be flippant with our friends about this. Indeed, we need to take care how we articulate our faith. But we do need to be very clear in our own minds: there is but one God.

This has always been the testimony of Scripture. Consider the opening words of Psalm 96:

Sing to the LORD a new song; sing to the LORD, all the earth.
Sing to the LORD, praise his name; proclaim his salvation day after day.
Declare his glory among the nations, his marvellous deeds among all peoples.
For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods.
For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:1–5)

God's people are called to sing his praises. So far so good. But notice that they're not to do so in a holy huddle, sequestered away from the rest of society, but among the peoples. The pagans around were to hear the excellencies of God being proclaimed and sung by his people. The purpose was not to annoy them or get in their face. It was to be an invitation to those same peoples to come to know this God and praise him for themselves (as verse 7 says).

The rationale for all this has already been made clear by the psalmist:

For great is the LORD and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols, but the LORD made the heavens. (Ps. 96:4–5)

There is only one God, one creator, one Lord. The psalm again reminds us that these other gods worshipped by the nations are none other than "idols"—literally, "nothings." God's oneness precludes the existence of any other deity. It also reminds us of the corollary, that this one God is to be commended to all.

One God for all

To see this we need to head from Corinth over to Rome.

Some of the Jewish Christians in Paul's day were greatly concerned about some of the implications of his gospel. They had grown accustomed to people from other backgrounds becoming culturally Jewish in order to convert to faith in God. It was part of the "package" of works they presumed necessary to being made right with God. But Paul has been explaining that, through the death of Jesus, *anyone* can be justified by faith. Jewish culture has nothing to do with it. Through the cross, individuals of any cultural background can come straight to God. God's people can now be multicultural. You don't need to become Jewish to become Christian; no circumcision is necessary!

As Paul unpacks what it means to be justified by faith, he anticipates the objections of some of these Jewish Christians. His response is simple and very pointed: they have forgotten God's oneness.

Is God the God of the Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles too? Yes, of Gentiles too, since there is only one God, who will justify the circumcised by faith, and the uncircumcised through that same faith. (Rom. 3:29–30) God is the God of all people. Paul fires out a couple of rhetorical questions: You really think God is God just of the Jews? He's the God of the Gentiles too, right? And, just in case they get the second one wrong, Paul steps in and answers it himself: Yes, God of the Gentiles too; God of them all, not just the Jews, and because he is the God of all peoples and cultures, they all come to him on the exact same basis, irrespective of background or culture. We all get right with God the same way: through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.

This is something we need to hear today. We can easily fall into the same trap as those Jewish Christians, by implying, for example, through our church practice that you have to become like "us" in order to be a Christian. We would never say that—in fact, we'd probably never even consciously think it—but it is very easy to imply.

Our way of doing things in church probably reflects the subculture from which the church has grown or to which the majority of the congregation belongs. We probably don't even notice the extent to which the life of the church reflects "our way" of doing things. But the message to everybody else can unwittingly be that they need to become like us to become Christian, that the great God of Scripture is only the God of people like us.

I suspect this is a blind spot for many of us. It is all too easy for our cultural practice to feel like the norm, to assume it's just the obvious and right way of doing things. I come from a white, English, middle-class background, as do the majority of people at my church. Now there's nothing wrong with that. But our locality is becoming increasingly diverse. There are growing communities of people from south Asia and Eastern Europe. We therefore need to be careful not to imply that our way is *the* way to be if you want to be a Christian around here. It might be the style of music, or the amount of emotional openness we consider to be normal, or the extent to which we build deep relationships with one another that conveys this. It might even be the level of literacy our congregational life assumes of those participating. Are we willing to hold loosely to these things for the sake of reaching and involving those from other cultural backgrounds? Do we resist the change in "feel" that would result from having a culturally broader church family? Will we try to accommodate them or just assimilate them?

Or we could put it Paul's way: is God just the God of people like us? Or of others too? There is only one God. And his one gospel is for all peoples.

We can begin to see why, when asked which was the most important commandment, Jesus answered in the way he did. Foundational to everything involved in following him is the understanding that he is one. As we double-click on that concept, we begin to see how much flows from it. "God is One" means that God deserves our all. Wholehearted Christian devotion stems from this. And "God is one" also means that God is unique. The heartbeat of Christian mission is the conviction that there is no God but one, and the gospel of this one God is for all.

How is the doctrine of the Trinity really meant to be understood? Can it be applied to our everyday lives?

Sam Allberry shows us that the Trinity really matters; in fact, this insight God gives us into himself has enormous implications for how we understand him and how we understand ourselves—as beings made in his image.

The Trinity shows us that the persons of God in their oneness are both unique and perfectly integrated. In his triune nature, his relational qualities are foundational to our understanding of the unity and diversity of the church and the equality of and differences between men and women.

Have you been avoiding the mystery of the Trinity as complicated and unapproachable? Get connected instead to this foundational and life-changing truth!

"As a pastor I am really happy when someone writes a clear and accessible book about the Trinity. I'm even happier when that person is Sam Allberry.... It's the kind of book that I want people in my church to read and discuss and take to heart." —MICHAEL MCKINLEY, Senior Pastor, Guilford Baptist Church, Sterling, Virginia

"Sam Allberry rightly points out how neglected the doctrine of the Trinity is, showing its importance clearly and warmly. I hope many will read this and be affected."

-MICHAEL REEVES. Head of Theology, Universities and Colleges Christian Fellowship

"Heart-warming, awe-inspiring teaching with a light touch and down-to-earth applications. Here is a book that not only will help readers to understand more deeply the mystery of God the Holy Trinity, but also moves us to worship and honor him in daily life."

-VAUGHAN ROBERTS, Rector of St. Ebbe's, Oxford; Director of the Proclamation Trust

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