

# The God Revealed in Jesus Christ

A Brief Introduction to Trinitarian Faith



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## An Introduction to Trinitarian Faith

If we want the most accurate picture of God, we don't need to look any further than Jesus Christ. In Jesus we meet God as God really is. "Anyone who has seen me," Jesus said, "has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus Christ is the perfect revelation of the Father. "No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son [Jesus]...has made him known" (John 1:18).

Through Jesus' words and actions, we hear and see what matters most to every human being—that God the Father loves us unconditionally. "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Even at our worst, God loves us. John continues, "For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him" (verse 17). The Father sent Jesus out of his love and his commitment to save us.

### Trinitarian-based

Jesus is God's self-revelation to the world. God has broken through to us by sending his eternal Son into our world. Jesus upheld the understanding that the one God is the object of our love and worship (Mark 12:29-31).

Jesus emphasized that God (Father, Son and Holy Spirit) was reconciling humanity to himself. That is why he instructed his followers to welcome people into right relationship with God by baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matthew

28:19).

The God we worship through Jesus Christ is the Triune God. The doctrine of the Trinity is central to how we understand the Bible and all points of theology<sup>1</sup> that flow from it. That theology begins with an essential “who” question: “Who is the God made known in Jesus Christ, and who are we in relation to him?”

Trinitarian faith is based on a belief in the doctrine of the Trinity (the biblical teaching that there is one God, who is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit). Furthermore, it refers to a Christ-centered understanding of who God is.

## **Christ-centered**

Christians recognize Jesus as the center of our faith and our devotion to God. Jesus reveals to us what God is like (John 6:37). “No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). Trinitarian theology is first and foremost Christ-centered. Jesus is the unique Word of God to humanity and the unique Word of humanity to God (John 1:1-14). As the representative of all humanity, Jesus responded to God perfectly.

Jesus indicates that he is the key to understanding Scripture. He said to a group of Jewish religious leaders in John 5:39-40: “You diligently study the Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me, yet you refuse to come to me to have life.” Jesus, who is the focus of Scripture, is our source of salvation.

So we seek to understand the Bible through the lens of who Jesus is. He is the basis and logic of our faith—for he alone is the self-revelation of God.

## **Relationship-focused**

Trinitarian faith is relational. Even before creation, there was a relationship of love between the Father and the Son (John 17:24). And in Jesus, that relationship of love is extended to all humanity. Jesus Christ,

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<sup>1</sup> Theology explains, as faithfully as we can, the understanding we have of the truth and reality of God and our relationship to God.

the only Son of God, has become one with us in our humanity to represent us as his brothers and sisters in the very presence of the Father (see John 1:14; Ephesians 1:9-10, 20-23; Hebrews 2:11, 14).

Human beings have turned away from God and broken the bonds of communion with God. But because of Jesus, God has reconciled us and renewed our relationship with him!

Not only that, as we respond to his call to us to share in that restored relationship, he comes to live in us by the Holy Spirit (Romans 8:9-11). In Jesus and through the Holy Spirit, we become God's treasured children, adopted by grace (Romans 8:15-16).

This means that Christian life and faith are primarily about four kinds of personal relationship:

1. the relationship of perfect love shared by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit from all eternity,
2. the relationship of the eternal Son with humanity, established when the Son became human in the person of Jesus,
3. the relationship of humanity with the Father through the Son and by the Spirit, and,
4. the relationship of humans with one another, in the Spirit, as children of the Father.

## **Who is Jesus?**

"Who are you, Lord?" was Paul's anguished question on the Damascus Road, where he was confronted by the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9:5). He spent the rest of his life answering this question and then sharing the answer with all who would listen. The answer, revealed to us in his writings and elsewhere in Scripture, is the heart of the gospel and the focus of Trinitarian theology.

The Son of God, who is united from eternity to the Father and the Spirit, is now also joined to humanity because of his incarnation—his becoming a real flesh-and-blood human being (John 1:14). We summarize this by saying that Jesus is both fully God and fully human. That fact will never change, because he remains, in his divine nature and his human nature, the one mediator between God and humanity for all time (1 Timothy 2:5). His Incarnation did not end with his death or with his ascension. It continues forever. He was resurrected bodily and he

ascended bodily. He will return bodily, the same as he departed. So when we say Jesus Christ, we are referring to God, and we are also referring to humanity.

As the One who is uniquely God (Creator and Sustainer of all) and also fully human, Jesus is the unique meeting place of God and humanity. Through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus, God and humanity were reconciled and human nature was regenerated—made new (2 Corinthians 5:17-18). In Jesus Christ all humans are reconciled to God. As the Lord and Savior of all humanity he has opened up the way for all to enter into an eternal union and communion with God.

## **Incarnation for salvation**

The miracle of the Incarnation is not something that happened “once upon a time,” now long past and simply affecting one person, Jesus. What he accomplished changed human nature itself, changed history, changed how the entire cosmos is “wired”—it is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The spiritual reality is, for now, hidden in Christ, and we still experience the effects of evil that still occur in this world. The Incarnation of the eternal Son of God, entering time and space and taking on our human nature to change everything forever, reaching back through all human history, and reaching forward to encompass all time. He has now become our Lord and Savior, not as an external agent, but from the inside, in his humanity.

As Paul teaches, God was, in Christ, reconciling the world to himself (2 Corinthians 5:19). Paul speaks of this transformation in Romans 7:4, where he says that even while we are alive, we are already dead to the law by the body of Christ. Jesus’ death in human flesh for us, though a historical event, is a present reality that applies to all humanity (past, present and future). “You died,” Paul says to the Colossians, “and your life is now hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). Even before we die physically, we are given new life—made alive with Jesus in his resurrection.

Christ’s incarnation and atoning work accomplished the renewal of our human nature. In him, God has reconciled to himself every human being, even those who lived before Jesus came.

In Ephesians 2:5-6 we read that those who trust in Christ share in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Here Paul asserts that just as we are dead already in Jesus' substitutionary death, we have also already been "made alive together with him" and we are "raised up together with him" and "seated together with him in the heavenly realms." All this comes from God's grace and is experienced through faith—the faith of Jesus that he shares with us by the Spirit.

## **Jesus, the second Adam**

In Romans 5, Paul addresses believers, but he also explains what Christ accomplished on behalf of all humanity even before anyone came to faith in God through Christ. Jesus Christ died for people who were still:

- "powerless" and "ungodly" (verse 6).
- "sinners" (verse 8).
- "God's enemies" (verse 10).

God accomplished his great work for us out of his "love for us" even while "we were still sinners" (verse 8). The result was that even "while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son" (verse 10).

Paul goes on to explain that what Jesus Christ accomplished as the second Adam counteracts what the first Adam did. Through Christ, as the new head of all humanity, "God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of that one man Jesus Christ abounded for the many" (verse 15). Paul continues:

- The gift "brought justification" rather than condemnation (verse 16).
- "Those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ" (verse 17).
- "One righteous act resulted in justification and life for all people" (verse 18).
- "Through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous" (verse 19).
- "Grace increased all the more" so that "grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord" (verses 20-21).

God did all this for us before we were even born. The benefit of what Jesus did so long ago extends to the past, to the present and into the future. Paul says, “how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (verse 10). This shows that salvation is not a one-time event, but an enduring relationship that God has with all humanity—a relationship formed within the person of Jesus Christ, who has brought God and humanity together in peace.

Jesus has not simply done something for us, he has done something *with* us by including us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension. Paul explains this in Ephesians 2:4-6:

- When Jesus died, we, in our sinful human nature, died with him.
- When Jesus rose, we, in our reconciled human nature, rose with him.
- When Jesus ascended, we, in our redeemed human nature, ascended and became seated with him at the Father’s side.

Everything God has done in Christ shows us the mind, heart and character of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. God is on the side of his people and all his creation. God is for us, even before we respond to him (verse 5). He has provided reconciliation and eternal life in communion with himself for every human being.

## **For all humanity**

As Jesus made his way into Jerusalem for his final Passover with his disciples, the crowds shouted: “Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the king of Israel!” (John 12:13).

Shortly thereafter, he proclaimed his impending death to those who went up to the Temple to worship. Jesus called to the Father: “Father, glorify your name!” A voice then thundered to the crowd: “I have glorified it, and will glorify it again” (verse 29).

Jesus told them the voice was for their benefit and that God’s judgment on evil had come so that the prince of this world would be driven out (verses 30-31). He also said, “And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself” (verse 32). Jesus conquered evil in order to attract all people to himself. The apostles believed that Jesus died to redeem us all:

- 2 Corinthians 5:14: “Christ’s love compels us, because we are

convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”

- Colossians 1:19-20: “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”
- 1 Timothy 2:3-6: “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and mankind, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all people.”
- 1 Timothy 4:9-10: “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance... we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.”
- Hebrews 2:9: “We do see Jesus, who...suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”
- 1 John 2:2: “[Jesus is] the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

These passages show that Jesus died for all humanity, that is, in their place and on their behalf. Jesus did for us, as one of us, what we could never do for ourselves. This is what is meant by the vicarious humanity of Jesus (the word *vicarious* refers to a representative substitute).

## **In our place and on our behalf**

Throughout the book of Hebrews, Jesus is depicted as our great High Priest, representing all humanity, providing on our behalf a perfect response to God. He is presented as the one who stands among us, in the midst of the congregation, and who leads us in worship (Hebrews 2:12-13). He represents us as our older brother. He has become one of us, sharing our very nature, learning obedience, being tempted as we are, but overcoming that temptation perfectly (Hebrews 2:14-18; 4:15).

Theologian Thomas Torrance explained it this way:

Jesus steps into the actual situation where we are summoned to have faith in God, to believe and trust in him, and he acts in our place and in our stead from within the depths of our unfaithfulness and provides us freely with a faithfulness in which we may share.... That is to say, if we think of belief, trust or faith as forms



of human activity before God, then we must think of Jesus Christ as believing, trusting, or having faith in God the Father on our behalf and in our place. (*The Mediation of Christ*, p. 82)

Jesus is the one who, as we respond, perfects our faith and makes us holy (Hebrews 12:2; 2:11; 10:10, 14). He acted as one of us “in our place” or “on our behalf” (Hebrews 2:9; 5:1; 6:20; 7:25, 27; 9:7).

## **The response of faith**

So how do we personally share in all that Christ has graciously done for us? How can we personally participate and be in communion with God who has, already, reconciled us to himself? We do so by trusting in him—by having faith that he, by grace, has accomplished for us all that is needed for our salvation. In short, we say we are saved by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8).

Does this mean that we are saved by a faith that we work up? Does our salvation depend upon how great and sincere our repentance or our faith is? No, for salvation would then be dependent on something we do rather than dependent upon grace alone.

The good news is that our salvation does not depend on what we do—it does not depend on the strength of our faith or our repentance. It depends on the strength of our Savior, it depends on his faithfulness. He died for us. The gift has been given; our repentance and faith are simply responses to what God has given us. They are the way we accept and receive the free gift. Jesus has done everything necessary for our salvation from start to finish, so even our responses of repentance and faith are gifts of sharing in Jesus’ perfect responses for us as our faithful mediator.

As Thomas Torrance explained, “if we want to think of faith as a human activity, then we must think of Jesus as having done that for us as well. Just as he died for us, he lived righteously for us.” As our representative, he presents to God a perfect response on behalf of all humanity. We are saved by his obedience (Romans 5:19)—and that includes his faith. Our salvation rests on Jesus—the perfect foundation.

As our High Priest, Jesus takes our responses, perfects them and gives them to the Father, all in the Spirit. As our mediator (1 Timothy 2:5), he ministers both from God to us and represents us in our relationship to God. So we join him in his response.

## The role of human choice

What God has done in Christ to reconcile us to himself calls for a response. We are urged to accept him, to welcome and receive him. We do so by trusting in him and what he has accomplished for us. The Holy Spirit enables us to freely welcome the truth and walk in it. But God does not force us to accept the truth of his love for us. A love that forced a responding love would not be loving. God's love then calls for our decision to freely receive and freely love God in return.

Our choice is to either affirm or deny the reality that God loves us and has made every provision for us to be his children. Denial of this truth has consequences, but it will not change the reality of what God has done for us in Christ and thus who we are in Christ. Human beings choose to accept who Christ is or attempt to live in denial of who he is.

Real freedom is found in God, as theologian Karl Barth reminds us:

The real freedom of man is decided by the fact that God is his God. In freedom he can only choose to be the man of God, i.e., to be thankful to God. With any other choice he would simply be groping in the void, betraying and destroying his true humanity. Instead of choosing freedom, he would be choosing enslavement. (*Church Dogmatics* IV.1, p. 43)

So what is our place in all of this? We choose to accept Jesus and all he has to offer or to reject him. Through the Spirit, God the Father is calling all people to place their trust in Jesus with a thankful and hopeful heart, and to share with other believers in the Body of Christ, which is the church. As we celebrate together in communities of faith and worship, our lives are transformed.

## Personal response

Jesus called people to repent and believe (Mark 1:15). The early church continued this message, calling people to repent and be baptized (Acts 2:38) and to be changed (3:19).

Our response is important. The apostle Paul writes in Romans 5:17 that "those who *receive* God's abundant provision of grace and of the free gift of righteousness [will] reign in life." Abundant and freely given grace calls for us to *receive* it in faith. In Romans 5 Paul weaves together

1) elements of the reality accomplished by Christ on behalf of all humanity and 2) our response and participation in that relationship and reality. We must take care not to confuse what is true in Jesus for all humanity with each person's response to that truth.

God's gift is offered to all in order to be received by all. It is received by having faith in what God in Christ through the Holy Spirit has done for us. It is by faith in the grace of God that we begin participating in the relationship Jesus has restored, and start receiving the benefits included in that relationship.

We do not "decide for Christ" in the sense that our personal decision causes our salvation. Rather, we accept what is ours already in Christ, placing our trust in Jesus, who has already perfectly trusted for us in our place. When we accept the grace of Jesus Christ, we begin to participate in God's love for us. We begin to live according to who we really are, as the new creation that God, prior to our ever believing, made us to be in Christ.

Some people find it helpful to explain this using the terms *objective* and *subjective*. An objective truth is a reality, whereas our understanding of and response to that reality is subjective. There is a universal, or objective, truth about all humanity in Jesus, based on the fact that he has joined himself to our human nature and turned it around. But there is also the personal, or subjective, experience of this truth that comes as we surrender to the promptings of the Holy Spirit and join with Jesus Christ.

These categories of objective (universal) and subjective (personal) truth are found in Scripture. For one example, in 2 Corinthians, Paul starts with the objective nature of salvation: "All this is from God, who reconciled [past tense] us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation" (verses 18-19).

Here we find an objective truth that applies to all—God has already reconciled all to himself through Jesus, the incarnate Son of God. Paul then goes on in verses 20-21 to address the subjective truth: "We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God."

How can all be "reconciled" already and yet some need to "be reconciled"? The answer is that both are true. All are already reconciled in Christ—this is the universal/objective truth—but yet not all embrace

and therefore personally experience their reconciliation with God—that is the personal/subjective truth. God has a gracious attitude toward all people, but not everyone has responded to his grace. No one benefits even from a freely given gift if that gift is refused, especially the gift of coming under the grace of God in Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit.

A second example of objective/subjective truth is found in the book of Hebrews where the author states in a straightforward manner, “For good news came to us just as to them, but the message they heard did not benefit them, because they were not united by faith with those who listened” (Hebrews 4:2) The benefits of a relational reality such as salvation can only be subjectively (personally) experienced when received by faith.

So while Christ is Lord and Savior of all, has died for all, and has reconciled all to God, not all will necessarily be saved. Not all will necessarily receive Christ who is their salvation. Not all will necessarily enter into their salvation, which is eternal union and communion with God as his beloved children. Some may somehow “deny the Savior who bought them” (2 Peter 2:1). While Scripture teaches the unlimited scope of Christ’s atoning work, taking away the sins of the whole cosmos, it does not offer us a guarantee that all will necessarily receive the free gift of grace.

No explanation is given as to why or how this rejection of grace could happen. But rejection is presented as a real possibility, one that God has done everything needed to prevent. If there are those who reject Christ and their salvation, it will not be due to any lack or limit of God’s grace. So we, sharing in the very heart of God, can also be those “not wanting any to perish, but all to come to repentance” (2 Peter 3:9).

## **What is our Christian mission?**

Jesus’ life and ministry provides the motivation for every aspect of our life, including our participation in mission and ministry with Jesus. The love of Christ compels us to take part in what Jesus is doing in the world through the Spirit. Out of love we declare the gospel and invite all people to receive and embrace it. In doing so, we hope what is true of them already in Christ will be experienced by them personally in faith. Like Jesus, we desire all to participate and receive all the benefits of

Christ now. Then they, too, can join in Jesus' ongoing mission to draw others into a living relationship with their Lord and Savior. What greater joy and privilege could there be?

Our participation now in Jesus' love and life bears good fruit and personal joy that stretch into eternity. As we welcome the truth of the gospel, we can't help but worship our Lord and Savior!

### **Key Points of Trinitarian Theology**

Following are some basic precepts of the theology presented in this booklet.

1. The Triune God created all people through the Son of God, who also is known as the Word of God.
2. We were created so that we could participate in the love relationship enjoyed by the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.
3. We are enabled and qualified to participate in this relationship of love through Jesus Christ.
4. The Son became human, the man Jesus Christ, taking on our human nature.
5. He did this to reconcile all humanity to God through his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension.
6. The crucified, resurrected and glorified Jesus is the representative and the substitute for all humanity.
7. As Savior and Lord of all humanity, Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father, and he draws all people to himself by the power of the Holy Spirit.
8. In Christ, humanity is loved and accepted by the Father.
9. Jesus Christ paid for all our sins—past, present and future—and there is no longer any debt to pay.
10. The Father has in Christ forgiven all our sins, and he eagerly desires that we receive his forgiveness.
11. We can enjoy his love only as we believe/trust that he loves us. We can enjoy his forgiveness only when we believe/trust he has forgiven us.
12. When we respond to the Spirit by turning to God, believing the good news and picking up our cross and following Jesus, the Spirit leads us into the transformed life of the kingdom of God.

## Recommended Resources for Further Study

To study Trinitarian theology in greater depth, we recommend the following resources:

### GCI articles

Grace Communion International has hundreds of helpful articles that address Christian belief and practice. Following is a list of articles (with web addresses noted) that unpack key aspects of GCI's Trinitarian, Christ-centered theology.

- "Getting a Grip on Repentance" [www.gci.org/repentance](http://www.gci.org/repentance)
- "Introduction to Trinitarian Theology" [www.gci.org/intro](http://www.gci.org/intro)
- "The Gospel Really Is Good News" [www.gci.org/reallyis](http://www.gci.org/reallyis)
- "The Trinity: Just a Doctrine?" [www.gci.org/god/trinity](http://www.gci.org/god/trinity)
- "Theology: What Difference Does It Make?"  
[www.gci.org/god/theology](http://www.gci.org/god/theology)

### GCI video programs

*Speaking of Life*. This online program presents short messages by Dr. Joseph Tkach, GCI president, on biblical topics from a Trinitarian perspective. View or download the programs at [www.speakingoflife.org](http://www.speakingoflife.org).

*You're Included*. This online program presents interviews with Trinitarian theologians and authors. View or download these interviews at [www.youreincluded.org](http://www.youreincluded.org).

### Books

- Michael Jenkins, *Invitation to Theology* (InterVarsity, 2001; 278 pages)
- Darrell Johnson, *Experiencing the Trinity* (Regent College, 2002; 112 pages)
- C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (HarperCollins, often reprinted; 225 pages)
- Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Crossway, 2010; 256 pages)
- James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (InterVarsity, 1996; 130 pages)
- Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Helmets & Howard, 1992; 144 pages)

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If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help. First, we offer weekly worship services in hundreds of congregations worldwide. Perhaps you'd like to visit us. A typical worship service includes songs of praise, a message based on the Bible, and opportunity to meet people who have found Jesus Christ to be the answer to their spiritual quest. We try to be friendly, but without putting you on the spot. We do not expect visitors to give offerings—there's no obligation. You are a guest.

To find a congregation, write to one of our offices, phone us or visit our website. If we do not have a congregation near you, we encourage you to find another Christian church that teaches the gospel of grace.

We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

Our work is funded by members of the church who donate part of their income to support the gospel. Jesus told his disciples to share the good news, and that is what we strive to do in our literature, in our worship services, and in our day-to-day lives.

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