



Truth Builders Ministries

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Do you have to believe in the Trinity to be a Christian?

Question: “The Bible doesn’t explicitly teach the Trinity. And there is so much controversy about this. Do you have to believe in the Trinity to be saved? Or isn’t belief in Jesus enough to be a Christian?”

My Answer: Essential Christian doctrines are being questioned more and more frequently. And the biblical doctrine of the Triune God is no different. This is a question of crucial importance.

First of all, let’s address the statement that “the Bible doesn’t explicitly teach the Trinity.” It is true that the technical language about the Trinitarian nature of God as found in the creeds of the church, such as the Nicene and Athanasian Creeds, are not found explicitly in the Bible. However, this does not mean that there are no clear-cut Scriptural passages that present a definite teaching about God as a Triune Being. The more you study both and Old and New Testaments, the more clearly you will see a distinctly straightforward understanding of God as being both One and Three. Indeed, it was because this truth was so evident to the early church that they spent centuries studying, debating, discussing, and coming to grips with how to clearly define and understand what the Scriptures plainly presented. Thus, we came to have the carefully chosen words of creeds, as well a clear exposition of the doctrine by many of the Church Fathers. The truth came first—the technical and defining language came afterwards.

Okay, so we accept that the Bible does teach the Trinity. But this is an admittedly challenging doctrine to grasp and explain. So is it worth it? Is it even necessary? If a person understands the basics of who Jesus is, what He did in His atoning work, and that His redemptive plan has provided salvation for us—is this not enough? Can’t someone be saved and not accept the doctrine of the Trinity?

First of all, please understand that I fully accept that salvation is by grace. And I do not limit His grace. Salvation is not based on intellectual knowledge and understanding. Yet, knowing the truth is an essential feature of the faith. There are some ideas, concepts, and teachings that you simply have to believe if you are to be a Christian. And knowing the true God is one of them.

Jesus said that eternal life consists in knowing the true God and the true Christ (John 17:3). If you give this just a moment’s thought you will see that it makes sense. In Evangelical circles we often say that Christianity is more about a relationship than it is about religion. Coming into a personal relationship with Christ is a large part of what it means to become a Christian. Understanding this truth then begs the question: Is it not necessary to have a relationship with the right God, and the right Christ? If you enter into a relationship with a false god or a false messiah, how can you say that you have a true salvation experience? A true saving relationship? And who is the true God? Who is the true Christ?

The answer is certain. The God of the Bible is a Triune Being.¹ The Christ of the Scriptures is God the Son, Second Person of the Trinity.² There is no other God and there is no other Christ—and it is only in knowing Him/Them that you have eternal life.

It is also noteworthy to consider what the Apostle John said in 2 John 1:9. He declares that “anyone who does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God.” It is unclear in the original whether the phrase “the doctrine of Christ” means the doctrine that Christ taught or the doctrine about Christ. But for the purpose of our discussion, either understanding is appropriate. Among the many things Christ taught there is clear assertion of Trinitarian truth. And when we consider the writings about Christ, as found in the rest of the New Testament, again the Trinity shines forth brightly. In other words, one of the plain teachings both by Christ and about Christ is that of the Trinity. Thus, to reject this specific teaching is to reject essential, necessary doctrine. And John declares that to reject such teaching is to reject God Himself. You cannot have God, truly know Him, and believe false things about Him.

We should also consider the active roles of each member of the Godhead in all divine endeavors. A careful study of the Bible demonstrates that all three Persons were operational in creation.³ The Bible says that all three Persons were involved in Christ’s Resurrection—Father,⁴ Son⁵ and Spirit⁶. All three Persons worked (and presently work) in the plan of bringing salvation to mankind.⁷ All three Persons are active in the life of the believer—sanctifying,⁸ establishing,⁹ empowering,¹⁰ nurturing, helping, guiding, and aiding in his maturing process. All three Persons are involved in a believer’s prayer life.¹¹ All three Persons are deserving of worship, and participant in the believer’s worship experience.¹² God as One and God as Three is/are present, effective, and engaged in all that happens in both the spiritual and natural worlds. He is at work. They are at work. So how can you deny the reality of this Triune Being and yet believe in the true Christian faith?

Paul said that “in Him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28). All of existence is wrapped up in His being. There is nothing that exists apart from Him. There is nothing that can be real without having its very being derived from His reality. He is truly the underlying substance of the universe. And He is God who is One, and God who is Three. Can we deny Him in regard to His own self-revealed identity and yet still claim to know Him, to have a saving relationship with Him? This is not only unbiblical, it is illogical. It is ludicrous. He has revealed Himself as the Three-in-One Deity. To deny His self-revelation is to reject God Himself, as He truly exists.

For me, the bottom line is this: If someone has enough understanding to grasp salvation by grace and the work of Christ, then he can be saved. And if initially he is ignorant of the true biblical teaching about God, then we cannot limit God’s grace in this situation. However, ignorance is not a state a Christian should abide in. And as a believer grows in his relationship with Christ, he should and will grow in his understanding of who His Lord is—including His Trinitarian nature. Further, I also think that if anyone has a true knowledge of nature of God, understands the doctrine of the Triune Deity, and rejects this biblical truth, then he is a genuine heretic. Such a person has placed himself outside the doctrinal boundaries that define what it means to “know the true God and Jesus Christ” whom the Father has sent (cf. John 17:3 again).

References

¹ Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14, Deuteronomy 6:4, Genesis 1:26, Isaiah 48:16.

² John 8:58, John 1:1-3, John 10:30, 1 John 5:20, Hebrews 1:8, Titus 2:13.

³ Genesis 1:1, Isaiah 64:8, Malachi 2:10, Genesis 1:2, Psalm 104:30, Job 33:4, Psalm 33:6, Colossians 1:16-17, John 1:3, Hebrews 1:2.

⁴ Acts 2:24, Acts 13:30

⁵ John 2:19, John 10:18

⁶ Romans 1:4, Romans 8:11, I Peter 3:18

⁷ All three are seen as working in salvation in Ephesians 1:3-14, Galatians 4:4-6, 1 Peter 1:2, and scattered throughout Romans 8. In addition, there are numerous verses throughout the New Testament mentioning the work of each Person of the Godhead in His individual role in salvation.

⁸ Romans 15:16, 1 Peter 1:2, John 17:17, 1 Thess. 5:23-24, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 1 Corinthians 1:30, Hebrews 10:10 & 14.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 1:21-22.

¹⁰ Acts 1:8, Luke 24:49, Matthew 28:18-20, Luke 10:19.

¹¹ We pray to the Father, in the name of the Son, through the agency of the Holy Spirit. Cf. Ephesians 2:18, Jude 1:20-21.

¹² Note Ephesians 5:18-20. Worship of the Father is obvious. The Son was often worshiped even while here on earth: Matthew 14:33, 28:9, 17; John 9:38. As God, the Spirit is certainly deserving of worship. The explicit worship of the Holy Spirit would emerge later in church history.