

REVISED & UPDATED

JAMES R. WHITE



THE  
FORGOTTEN  
TRINITY

RECOVERING THE HEART  
OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

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BETHANYHOUSE

*a division of Baker Publishing Group*  
Minneapolis, Minnesota

© 1998 by James White

Published by Bethany House Publishers  
11400 Hampshire Avenue South  
Bloomington, Minnesota 55438  
www.bethanyhouse.com

Bethany House Publishers is a division of  
Baker Publishing Group, Grand Rapids, Michigan

New paperback edition published 2019  
ISBN 978-0-7642-3382-1

Printed in the United States of America

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The Library of Congress has catalogued the original edition as follows:

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

White, James R. (James Robert)

The forgotten Trinity / James R. White.

224 p. : ill. ; 22 cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-55661-725-9 (pbk.)

1. Jesus Christ—Person and offices. 2. Trinity. 3. Christian life. 4. Spiritual life.  
I. Title.

BT111.2 .W48 199

00551790

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Cover design by Studio Gearbox

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19 20 21 22 23 24 25      7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Christian fellowship comprises a little taste of heaven here on earth. Close brothers in the Lord are a treasure not to be taken lightly. One such brother in Christ who has come to mean so much to me and my family is Chris Arnzen. It is with joy that I dedicate this work to a man of God, a brother in the Lord, a true “son of encouragement,” a friend who is precious to me. Thank you, Chris, for being a Christian man who loves the Lord and has allowed that love to flow into my life.

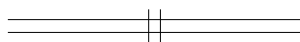
And yet I will exert special effort to the end that they who lend ready and open ears to God's Word may have a firm standing ground. Here, indeed, if anywhere in the secret mysteries of Scripture, we ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation; let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends. For how can the human mind measure off the measureless essence of God according to its own little measure, a mind as yet unable to establish for certain the nature of the sun's body, though men's eyes daily gaze upon it? Indeed, how can the mind by its own leading come to search out God's essence when it cannot even get to its own? Let us then willingly leave to God the knowledge of himself. For, as Hilary (of Poitiers) says, he is the one fit witness to himself, and is not known except through himself. But we shall be "leaving it to him" if we conceive him to be as he reveals himself to us, without inquiring about him elsewhere than from his Word.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I XIII:21.

# Contents

1. Why the “Forgotten” Trinity? 9
  2. What Is the Trinity? 20
  3. God: *A Brief Introduction* 30
  4. A Masterpiece: *The Prologue of John* 43
  5. Jesus Christ: *God in Human Flesh* 62
  6. I Am He 94
  7. Creator of All Things 105
  8. Carmen Christi: *The Hymn to Christ as God* 119
  9. Jehovah of Hosts 131
  10. Grieve Not the Holy Spirit 140
  11. Three Persons 153
  12. A Closer Look 162
  13. From the Mists of Time: *The Trinity and Church History* 176
  14. Does It Really Matter? *Christian Devotion and the Trinity* 192
- Notes 197
- Subject Index 219
- Scripture Index 227

## CHAPTER 1



# Why the “Forgotten” Trinity?

I love the Trinity. Does that sound strange to you? For most people, it *should* sound strange. Think about it: when was the last time you heard anyone say such a thing? We often hear “I love Jesus” or “I love God,” but how often does anyone say, “I love the Trinity”? You even hear “I love the cross” or “I love the Bible,” but you don’t hear “I love the Trinity.” Why not?

Someone might say, “Well, the Trinity is a doctrine, and you don’t love doctrines.” But in fact we do. “I love justification” or “I love the second coming of Christ” would make perfect sense. What’s more, the Trinity isn’t just a doctrine any more than saying “I love the deity of Christ” makes Christ just a doctrine.

So why don’t we talk about loving the Trinity? Most Christians do not understand what the term means and have only a vague idea of the reality it represents. We don’t love things that we consider very complicated, obtuse, or just downright difficult. We are more comfortable saying “I love the old rugged cross” because we *think* we have a firm handle on what that actually means and represents. But we confess how little we understand about the

Trinity by how little we talk about it and how little emotion it evokes in our hearts.

Yet we seem rather confused at this point because most Christians take a firm stand on the Trinity and the fundamental issues that lead to it (the deity of Christ, the person of the Holy Spirit). We withhold fellowship from groups like the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses because they reject the Trinity and replace it with another concept. We hang a person's very salvation upon the acceptance of the doctrine, yet if we are honest with ourselves, *we really aren't sure exactly why.*

It's the topic we won't talk about: no one dares question the Trinity for fear of being branded a "heretic," yet we have all sorts of questions about it, and we aren't sure who we can ask. Many believers have asked questions of those they thought were more mature in the faith and have often been confused by the *contradictory* answers they received. Deciding it is best to remain confused rather than have one's orthodoxy questioned, many simply leave the topic for that mythical future day "when I have more time." And in the process, we have lost out on a tremendous blessing.

## **The Blessing of the Trinity**

A true and accurate knowledge of the Trinity is a blessing in and of itself. Any revelation of God's truth is an act of grace, of course, but the Trinity brings to us a blessing far beyond the worth normally assigned by believers today. Why? Because, upon reflection, we discover that the Trinity is the highest revelation God has made of himself to His people. It is the capstone, the summit, the brightest star in the firmament of divine truths. As I will assert more than once in this work, God revealed this truth about himself most clearly, and most irrefutably, in the Incarnation itself, when Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, took on human flesh and walked among us. That one act revealed the Trinity to us in a way that



no amount of verbal revelation could ever communicate. God has been pleased to reveal to us that He exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Since God feels it is important to know, we should likewise. And since God went through a great deal of trouble to make it clear to us, we should see the Trinity as a precious possession, at the very top of the many things God has revealed to us that we otherwise would never have known.

When Paul wrote to the Colossians, he indicated that he was praying for them. He did not pray that they would obtain big houses and fancy chariots. He prayed that they would be blessed by God in the spiritual realm with spiritual wealth. Note his words:

That their hearts may be encouraged, having been knit together in love, and attaining to all the wealth that comes from the full assurance of understanding, resulting in a true knowledge of God’s mystery, that is, Christ Himself, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge. (Colossians 2:2–3)

How is one “rich” spiritually? One is rich spiritually who has a “full assurance of understanding.” How many people today can honestly claim to have a true understanding of God’s nature so as to have “full assurance”? Or do most of us muddle along with something far less than what God would have for us? A person who has such spiritual wealth, seen in a full assurance of understanding, has a “true knowledge” of God’s mystery, that is, Christ himself. The goal of the Christian life, including the goal of Christian study and scholarship, is always the same: Jesus Christ, “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” Do we long for a “true knowledge” of Christ? When we sing, “Lord, I want to know you,” do we really mean it, and then take advantage of the ways He has given us to attain this “true knowledge” of Him? To know Christ truly is to know the Trinity, for God has not revealed himself in such a way as to allow us to have *true* and *balanced* knowledge of the Father outside of such knowledge of the Son, all of which comes to us through the Spirit. A person who

wants to “know Jesus” must, due to the nature of God’s revelation, know Him as He is related to the Father and the Spirit. We must know, understand, and love the Trinity to be fully and completely Christian. This is why we say the Trinity is the greatest of God’s revealed truths.

## Why “Forgotten”?

Why has the Trinity become a theological appendage that is more often misunderstood than rightly known? I believe there are many reasons. There is the utterly false idea that God does not want us to use our minds in loving and worshiping Him (anti-intellectualism), as well as the idea that “theology is for cold, unfeeling people. We want a living faith.” This last reason is the most irrational because a living faith is one that is focused upon the truths of God’s revelation. The deepest feelings and emotions evoked by the Spirit of God are not directed toward unclear, nebulous, fuzzy concepts, but toward the clear revealed truths of God concerning His love, the work of Christ, and the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It makes no sense whatsoever in human relations to say “I love my wife” while doing our best to remain ignorant of her personality, likes, dreams, etc. And even worse, if my wife has put forth the effort to make sure that I *can* know these things about her, and I go about *ignoring* her efforts, what does that say about how much I really *love* her? The idea that there is some kind of contradiction between the in-depth study of God’s Word, so as to know what God has revealed about himself, and a living, vital faith is inherently self-contradictory.

Whatever the reasons for the general ignorance of the specifics of the Trinity, the result is plain. Most Christian people, while remembering the term “Trinity,” have forgotten the central place the doctrine is to hold in the Christian life. It is rarely the topic of sermons and Bible studies, rarely the object of adoration and

worship—at least worship *in truth*, which is what the Lord Jesus said the Father desires (John 4:23). Instead, the doctrine is *misunderstood* as well as *ignored*. It is so misunderstood that a majority of Christians, when asked, give *incorrect* and at times downright *heretical* definitions of the Trinity. For others, it is ignored in such a way that even among those who correctly understand the doctrine, it does not hold the place it should in the proclamation of the Gospel message, nor in the life of the individual believer in prayer, worship, and service.

## The Solution

Thankfully, the solution to this problem is near at hand. The Holy Spirit of God always desires to lead God’s people to a deeper knowledge of God’s truth. This is the wonderful “constant” that every minister and teacher can rely upon: every true believer is indwelt by the Holy Spirit of God, and the Spirit is always going to fulfill the promise to lead us into all truth. Any believer who honestly seeks God’s truth, and is willing to lay aside any preconceptions and traditions that might stand contrary to that truth, will find strength and encouragement for the *work* (yes, “work”) that is required to come to that true knowledge and full assurance of which Paul spoke. We do not just sit back and expect God to zap us with some emotional surge. Instead, the Spirit drives us into His Word, enlightening our minds and filling our hearts with love for the truths we discover.

Many theological works flow from an intellectual, scholarly stance. There is nothing wrong with such works, for there is a need for them. However, this work, while incorporating necessary elements of scholarship, is written from a position of “passion.” Passion, not in the sense of unordered, chaotic feelings, but passion in the sense of a burning love for something—in this case, the truth about God we call “Trinity.” This book is not meant to

be a handbook of all the “arguments” you can use to “prove” a point. There are plenty of such works in existence. Instead, this work is written *by* a believer *for* other believers. While I must explain and teach, illustrate and document, I do so to achieve a higher goal.

I wish to invite you, my fellow believer, to a deeper, higher, more intense love of God’s truth. It is my longing that when you complete this work, you will not simply put it down and say, “I got some good ammunition to use the next time I debate the Trinity.” Instead, I hope that God, in His grace, will use this to implant in your heart a deep longing to know Him even more. I pray that longing will last the rest of your life, and that it will result in your loving Him more completely, worshiping Him more fully, honoring Him with the totality of your life. I desire that you will join with me in being able to say, “I love the Trinity.” A person who *loves* this truth of God will likewise be able to explain and defend it, but the *motivation* for doing so will be so much richer, and the end result will be the edification of the believer and the church at large rather than a mere “victory” in a particular debate or argument. And one thing is for sure: a person who speaks God’s truth from *conviction* and *love* does so far more convincingly than the person who lacks such motivations.

True worship must worship God *as He exists*, not as we wish Him to be. The essence of idolatry is the making of images of God. An image is a shadow, a false representation. We may not bow before a statue or figure, but if we make an image of God in our mind *that is not in accord with God’s revelation of himself*, then we are not worshiping in truth. Since sin and rebellion are always pushing us toward false gods and away from the true God, we must seek *every day* to conform our thinking and our worship to God’s straight-edge standard of truth, revealed so wonderfully in Scripture. We must be willing to love God *as He is*, and that includes *every* aspect of His being that might, due to our fallen state, be offensive to us, or beyond our limited capacities to fully

comprehend. God is not to be edited to fit our ideas and preconceptions. Instead, we must always be asking Him to graciously open our clouded mind and reveal himself to us so that we may love Him truly and worship Him aright.

## The Example of Edwards

I have always been challenged by the example of Jonathan Edwards<sup>1</sup> when it came to this matter of loving God *as He has revealed himself* rather than loving an image I have created of Him in my mind:

Sometimes, only mentioning a single word caused my heart to burn within me; or only seeing the name of Christ, or the name of some attribute of God. And God has appeared glorious to me on account of the Trinity. It has made me have exalting thoughts of God, that he subsists in three persons; the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The sweetest joys and delights I have experienced, have not been those that have arisen from a hope of my own good estate, but in a direct view of the glorious things of the gospel.

Once, as I rode out into the woods for my health, in 1737, having alighted from my horse in a retired place, as my manner commonly has been, to walk for divine contemplation and prayer, I had a view that for me was extraordinary, of the glory of the Son of God, as Mediator between God and man, and his wonderful, great, full, pure and sweet grace and love, and meek and gentle condescension. This grace that appeared so calm and sweet, appeared also great above the heavens. The person of Christ appeared ineffably excellent with an excellency great enough to swallow up all thought and conception—which continued, as near as I can judge, about an hour; which kept me the greater part of the time in a flood of tears and weeping aloud. I felt an ardency of soul to be, what I know not otherwise how to express, emptied and annihilated; to lie in the dust, and to be full of Christ alone; to love Him with a holy and pure love; to trust in Him; to live upon

Him; to serve and follow Him; and to be perfectly sanctified and made pure, with a divine and heavenly purity. I have, several other times, had views very much of the same nature, and which have had the same effects.<sup>2</sup>

When people today talk about “spiritual experiences,” I am often forced to reflect upon the fact that rarely are these experiences focused upon *God*, but rather upon what that person believes God has done for him or her, or what that person has *accomplished* “for God.” How much deeper, how much more meaningful, is the experience of Edwards. The object of his reflection is unchanging, for it is nothing other than the eternal truth of God. The world, and his circumstances, cannot take away from him what is most precious: his God.

I confess that the times when my soul is so enraptured by such divine joys is far too infrequent in comparison with how often it is taken up with worldly things and distracted by much less worthy objects of consideration. It seems as though the whole world does its best to keep me from enjoying myself in my God, in contemplating His nature, His attributes, and His works. But I read of great men of God in the past and realize there are two common elements in their lives: suffering and a love of the contemplation of God’s attributes and works. When I compare myself with Edwards, or any other of the great godly men and women of the past, I quickly see how influenced I am by worldly standards and worldly priorities.

But most importantly, Edwards was drawn heavenward by the very attributes of God that turn the worldly person cold and, in fact, are often the most offensive to the natural or unsaved man. Do we love God—*all of God, including the “tough” parts of His nature*—or do we refuse to bow before those elements that cause us “problems”? If we love Him and worship Him as He deserves, we will not *dare* to “edit” Him to fit *our* desires. Instead, we will seek to worship Him in truth.

## God Is Great

The Trinity is a truth that tests our dedication to the principle that God is smarter than we are. As strange as that may sound, I truly believe that in most instances where a religious group denies the Trinity, the reason can be traced back to the founder’s unwillingness to admit the simple reality that God is bigger than we can ever imagine. That is really what Christians have always meant when they use the term “mystery” of the Trinity. The term has never meant that the Trinity is an inherently irrational thing. Instead, it simply means that we realize that God is completely unique in the way He exists, and there are elements of His being that are simply beyond our meager mental capacity to comprehend. The fact that God is eternal is another facet of His being that is beyond us. We cannot really grasp eternity, nor how God exists eternally rather than in time. Yet this truth is revealed to us in Scripture, and we believe it on the logical basis that God is trustworthy. It is a “mystery” that we accept on the basis of faith in God’s revelation.

When men approach God’s truth with a haughty attitude, they often decide that particular elements of that truth are not “suitable” to them, so they “modify” the message of the faith to fit their own notions. Since the Trinity is the highest of God’s revelations concerning himself, it is hardly surprising to discover that many groups deny it. If one denies any of the preceding truths upon which the Trinity is based, one will end up rejecting the entire doctrine *en toto*. An unwillingness to worship God *as God is and has revealed himself* lies behind every denial of the Trinity that appears down through history. We want a God we can fit in a box, and the eternal, Triune God does not fit that mold.

William G. T. Shedd saw the truth when he wrote,

The doctrine of the Trinity is the most *immense* of all the doctrines of religion. It is the foundation of theology. Christianity, in the last analysis, is Trinitarianism. Take out of the New Testament

the person of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and there is no God left. Take out of the Christian consciousness the thoughts and affections that relate to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and there is no Christian consciousness left. The Trinity is the constitutive idea of the evangelical theology, and the formative idea of the evangelical experience. The immensity of the doctrine makes it of necessity a mystery; but a mystery which like night enfolds in its unfathomed depths the bright stars—points of light, compared with which there is no light so keen and so glittering. Mysterious as it is, the Trinity of Divine Revelation is the doctrine that holds in it all the hope of man; for it holds within it the infinite pity of the Incarnation and the infinite mercy of the Redemption.

And it shares its mysteriousness with the doctrine of the Divine Eternity. It is difficult to say which is most baffling to human comprehension, the all-comprehending, simultaneous, successionless consciousness of the Infinite One, or his trinal personality. Yet no theist rejects the doctrine of the Divine Eternity because of its mystery. The two doctrines are antithetic and correlative. On one of the Northern rivers that flows through a narrow chasm whose depth no plummet has sounded, there stand two cliffs fronting each other, shooting their pinnacles into the blue ether, and sending their roots down to the foundations of the earth. They have named them Trinity and Eternity. So stand, antithetic and confronting, in the Christian scheme, the trinity and eternity of God.<sup>3</sup>

One attitude of the heart struggles against an eternal God, desiring to make Him “more like us.” But a godly attitude, the attitude that is imparted by the Spirit of God, bows in humble reverence, and instead of *struggling*, it *embraces* in love the God who is beyond all comprehension. Such an attitude cannot be forced on anyone. It takes a miracle for the naturally hostile<sup>4</sup> soul to be made willing to love God and seek His face. That miracle is the work of regeneration, of causing one to be “born from above,”<sup>5</sup> made “a new creature.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, such truths as the eternity of God, and His Triune nature, are doctrines *for Christians*, in the



sense that to truly love, accept, and hunger for these things, the miracle of salvation must take place.

The more exhaustive our knowledge of God’s revelation, the deeper our love for Him will be. So we must delve into God’s revelation, “put our waders on,” so to speak, and explore the Scriptures so that we can properly understand the pinnacle of God’s revelation about himself the Trinity.

### **A Brief Word about the Format**

I wish to bring my love for the Trinity into the hearts of many of my fellow believers. As a result, I have done my best to avoid the temptation that comes from having defended this great truth against those who deny it: to attempt to be *exhaustive* at every point. Anyone who has spent a great deal of time “debating” with someone who denies the Trinity knows how one must, at times, get very, *very* particular in responding to certain arguments and points. But since I am not writing specifically for those who *don’t* believe, but for those who *do*, I have tried to be brief, concise, and direct. There are many passages of Scripture I *could* have presented, objections I *could* have addressed, but I did not. My reason was simply to make sure that the final result was readily available to the widest possible audience.