

Does the Trinity Really Matter?

Greg Albrecht

You believe in the Trinity but I don't," said my friend. "But I still believe in God. Are you saying that I don't really believe in God unless and until I accept your definition of God?"

Is God only known by those who accept a particular definition of him? Does God love Trinitarians more than non-Trinitarians? Here are some thoughts I shared with my friend:

- I believe that the Trinity is the best human attempt, based on the biblical revelation, to comprehend the nature of God.

- I also believe that it's possible to academically embrace the belief system that surrounds a Trinitarian God, knowing facts about God without fully knowing him as a loving, personal God. Memorizing and reciting a creed does not equate to authentic relationship.

- I also believe that God's limitless love does not stop at the boundaries of Trinitarian faith. *I do not believe that all those who fail to believe in the Trinity are outside of his grace, and are, by definition, unable to know him and are thus unloved by him.*

Why then do I believe that God is a Trinity as defined by traditional Trinitarian beliefs? In my experience it seems that **those**

whose understanding of God falls short of the biblical revelation of God are more vulnerable to cultic, abusive and toxic faith.

While endorsing the humanly derived definition of God as Triune certainly does not guarantee healthy, grace-based Christianity, the historical record confirms that the Trinity is foundational in those who fully experience God as revealed in the life and teachings of Jesus. *I believe that the Triune God is the very fountainhead of Christ-centered faith.*

The historical record confirms that those who, for whatever reason, do not embrace the profound love and unity of the Triune Godhead, and its implications for humanity, will be far more likely to be deceived and thus accept some lesser god. Believing in the nature of a lesser god leaves humans far more exposed to twisted faith and religious abuse.

Proud Trinitarians?

On one hand, it is true that a rejection of the Triune God of the Bible is one of the common denominators of Christ-less religion. *On the other hand*, if we understand the gracious invitation of the gospel, passing a doctrinal litmus test is not the sign of Christianity.

The doctrine of the Trinity is not the gospel—but the gospel assumes a Triune God. Jesus reminded the religious authorities of his day, "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" (John 38-40). I believe that Jesus makes virtually the same observation about doctrines and creeds, in essence saying (my paraphrase), "Diligent study and affirmation of all the orthodox and accepted creeds and traditions does not amount to eternal life."

Signing on the bottom line of a humanly formulated doctrinal statement, however accurate and beneficial that doctrinal statement might be, is not the sign of being a Christian. The sign of being an authentic Christ-follower is, of course, the love of God produced by him in their lives (John 13:35).

Since the sign of authentic Christianity is love, Christ-followers must reject any and all calls to condemn or relegate all non-Trinitarians to some lesser status than Trinitarians. While correct belief and teaching is absolutely important, it is also vital for us to understand that human pride has no boundaries. We must realize the grave temptation of

exalting ourselves because of what we believe to be superior doctrinal creeds and doctrines. Many proudly proclaim their membership in or identify with a long history or tradition that generally goes back to the historic creeds of Christianity. But our identity as Christ-followers is *love*, not a doctrinal statement.

What is a creed? *A creed is a biblically based, historically and traditionally affirmed statement of Christian faith.* A basic Christian creed (like the Trinity) has been historically accepted and historically tested—“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). While the history of the universal body of Christ is filled with flaws and foibles (what else would we expect from imperfect humans?) Christ-followers accept, as an article of faith, that God the Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Advocate is the “Spirit of truth” (John 15:26) and that the Spirit of truth has historically guided the body of Christ in its core, central teachings, as Jesus promised (John 16:13).

By the same token, Jesus is the risen Lord, alive and dynamic, the head of the universal body of his followers and believers. *Christ-followers do not view humanly produced creeds and beliefs as eternally closed, but always subject to fresh and inspiring insights directed by God the Holy Spirit.*

Deeds or Creeds?

Some view the study of doctrine and theology as boring and unnecessary and attempt to rally others to their position through the cry, “deeds not creeds.” Those who favor “deeds not creeds” often say that they prefer to follow what Jesus said and did—without realizing that their statement is itself a creed. But that creed is, of course, not enough—it must be and is followed by interpretations as to what he said and did, and how we should then live our lives.



The sign of being an authentic Christ-follower is the love of God produced by him in their lives (John 13:35)... Since the sign of authentic Christianity is love, Christ-followers must reject any and all calls to condemn or relegate all non-Trinitarians to some lesser status than Trinitarians.

Doing deeds based on the foundation of what Jesus said and did is a *de facto* creed.

Most human beings, including those outside of Christendom at large, follow and give allegiance to some sort of creed (stated or unstated). Our actions flow out of a central belief or philosophy we embrace and by which we live our lives. So it is somewhat silly to suggest that Christ-followers depart from a creed and simply pay attention to their deeds.

Further, *there is a huge danger in proclaiming the centrality of deeds.* The idea that what we do is more important than what we believe invites legalism, which is a way of life that purports that God favors those who please and appease him more than he would have otherwise.

There is no doubt deeds matter, but *the deeds that matter most, and are eternally significant, are those of Jesus Christ which are given to us and which he lives in and through us by God's grace.* Deeds that we produce through human effort and performance are meaningless. We must therefore conclude that neither getting our doctrinal ducks and creeds lined up, nor working hard to ensure that our personal deeds and works please God are the basis of true Christianity.

Pitting one belief against a differing or seemingly

contradictory belief or practice is called a dichotomy. Whether the cry is “deeds, not creeds” or “creeds, not deeds”—we are dealing with a *false* dichotomy. Two things: 1) deeds and creeds are not mutually exclusive, but they feed off each other, and 2) neither deeds nor creeds are the basis or foundation of true Christianity.

Jesus is the center and core of our faith. So does the Trinity really matter? As Christ-followers:

- We do not worship our deeds, as if they gain us merits with God. We worship Jesus alone.
- We are not ashamed of our guilt, as if our shortcomings and sins are demerits that God will eternally hold against us. “...There is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus...” (Romans 8:1).
- We do not worship the creeds that define our faith, as if our acceptance of something humanly devised, however good it may be, will ensure God's love of us. We worship God, whom creeds fall short of perfectly defining. Creeds do not confine or limit the one, true God.
- We do not dismiss those who do not accept the creeds we embrace, gifts we feel God has given us, by his grace—as if they are less worthy in God's sight.

Faith alone, grace alone and Christ alone. □