

PAPER #1

Introduction

This paper is an introduction to the set of papers that will serve as a defense of my views on the Trinity. Specifically, they are offered as evidence that my views are in accord with the statement of methodological commitment of our college. My approach will be to simply lay out the theological, philosophical, and exegetical reasoning that has led me to my views. I leave it to the faculty and board of Gutenberg to decide whether that reasoning is compatible with Gutenberg’s commitments to biblical authority and to rational, commonsensical exegesis—as defined in our Statement of Methodological Commitment.

Definition of Labels

I will begin by briefly defining the labels that I will use throughout these papers to identify the three positions that will be most significantly in view: **Orthodox Trinitarianism** (or simply, **Trinitarianism**); **Creedal Trinitarianism**; and **Transcendent Monotheism**.

Orthodox Trinitarianism (*Trinitarianism*) is the view that God—the ultimate, eternal, self-existent being—is a triune being who is three distinct persons [*hupostases*] in one being or essence [*ousia*].

I call it “orthodox” Trinitarianism because it is the view of God that is espoused by those creeds that are universally accepted as defining the essence of the true (orthodox) Christian faith. I call it Trinitarianism because its distinctive view of God is that God is a Trinity. I will alternate labeling this view Orthodox Trinitarianism and simply Trinitarianism; but both labels define the same doctrinal position.

In a later paper I will spell out the nature of this view in greater detail. There are many different Orthodox Trinitarians who differ widely in the nuances of how they articulate this position. It is not my purpose to understand, critique, or refute the detailed nuances of particular Trinitarians. My concern is with Trinitarianism in its broad outline. My contention is that Trinitarianism in any form whatsoever is a misreading of the Bible.

Creedal Trinitarianism holds exactly the same view of God that Orthodox Trinitarianism holds—namely, that God is a triune being who is three distinct persons [*hupostases*] in one being or essence [*ousia*]. The noteworthy difference between Creedal Trinitarianism and Orthodox Trinitarianism is that a Creedal Trinitarian believes, additionally, that anyone who does not acknowledge the triunity of God and confess belief in the Trinity as

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articulated by Orthodox Trinitarianism is an unbeliever whose destiny is eternal condemnation.

I call it “creedal” Trinitarianism because most of the creeds that spell out the theological formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity as held by Orthodox Trinitarians explicitly anathematize and condemn anyone who declines to believe in their formulations of the Trinity. Accordingly, to believe in the doctrine that is prescribed by the creeds is to believe that anyone who does not ascribe to those doctrines is liable to damnation. Not everyone who believes in the doctrine of the Trinity on the basis of the creeds is a Creedal Trinitarian. Some, who otherwise revere the creeds’ articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, conveniently retreat from those same creeds’ insistence that salvation hinges on one’s belief in the Trinity. Such individuals are not Creedal Trinitarians; they are merely Orthodox Trinitarians.

My primary concern in this set of papers is to refute Creedal Trinitarianism. Creedal Trinitarianism is not only false; it is dangerously and diabolically false. Orthodox Trinitarianism, by way of comparison, is often an unwitting and innocent mistake. It is of relatively little consequence to me if someone insists on believing in the Trinity. (However, it is not of NO consequence; for, to maintain a belief in the Trinity, one must forsake or ignore serious, thoughtful, informed, commonsensical exegesis of the Bible and/or the superior authority of the Bible.)

Transcendent Monotheism is the view that there is one and only one personal God—the eternal, transcendent, self-existent author of all that is and all that occurs. This God is NOT a trinity of persons. He is one—and only one—morally good, transcendent person.

This view is that alternative to the doctrine of the Trinity that I shall propose and defend in this set of papers. My contention will be that it is Transcendent Monotheism, and not Trinitarianism, that best represents the Bible’s view of God.

I call it “Transcendent Monotheism” to make it clear that it is a distinct and specific view that articulates a specific view of God and of his relationship to Jesus. Monotheism is simply a generic belief in one God. Even Trinitarians describe themselves as monotheists. Transcendental Monotheism is the particular set of beliefs about the one God that attempts to accord with the Bible’s perspective on the nature of God, the nature of Jesus and the incarnation, and the nature of the Holy Spirit. Transcendent Monotheism is an alternative model to Trinitarianism that attempts to come to terms with exactly the same biblical data.

In Paper #3, I will spell out the nature of this view in greater detail; and I will outline the essential differences between Transcendental Monotheism and Orthodox Trinitarianism.

Why do people believe Orthodox Trinitarianism?

Because all Christians have been enculturated to believe that an attack on the doctrine of the Trinity is an attack on the Christian faith itself, few have ventured to even examine the merits of Trinitarian doctrine—to determine whether it is true and biblical. In their minds, nothing is more firmly established. The Trinity is so foundational to the Christian faith that to question it is tantamount to questioning the faith itself. The net result of this thorough enculturation is this: the individual’s belief in the Trinity is not a hard-fought, well-considered conclusion that has resulted from careful personal study and reflection. It is a belief held through sheer theological inertia.

Why do so many Christians content themselves with this? Why are they willing to believe in the Trinity out of inertia when they are eager to make up their own minds and “decide for themselves” on virtually any other doctrinal issue? There are a number of factors that contribute to this willingness to just be swept along on the momentum of theological orthodoxy with respect to the Trinity.

(1) Fear of being labeled a non-believer.

All modern Christians learn quite quickly within the context of Christian culture that you dare not question or challenge the Trinity. The one who challenges the Trinity is a “heretic.” Any group that dares to differ from Orthodox Trinitarianism is a “cult.” Anyone who calls Trinitarian doctrine into question is undoubtedly one of those liberal Christians who doesn’t believe in the supernatural, doesn’t believe Jesus is God, doesn’t believe the Bible is true and authoritative, and doesn’t really believe Christianity itself is true. In other words, anyone who rejects the Trinity is rejecting the Christian faith itself; he is an unbeliever.

One also learns quickly that the assigned labels—“heretic,” “cult,” etc.—are not just tame identifiers; they have a sting to them. Christianity has developed these labels over the centuries to intimidate and control people. We have learned to fear their sting. There is nothing worse than having the H word assigned to you! Even if that is not so, we have been enculturated to feel that it is so. And because we feel it is so, we fear it. Our fear of the label controls us, keeps us in line, and keeps us faithful believers in the Trinity.

The vast majority of Christians for many centuries have been Trinitarians not out of conviction, but out of cultural expectation. To not be a Trinitarian would be to put oneself beyond the pale of Christianity and to bring social ostracism on oneself.

(2) Ignorance of the history of the doctrine.

Most Christians are completely ignorant of the origins of the doctrine of the Trinity and of how it came to be such an important doctrine among Christians. If you were to ask the average Christian, he would give this account of the doctrine:

In the fourth century a large group of intelligent, responsible, knowledgeable, gifted, and godly Bible scholars convened a council. At that council, they compared their observations and conclusions and reached a consensus on what they believed was the only way to understand the biblical data on the nature of the incarnation and, consequently, on the nature of God himself. That consensus, broadly speaking, was Orthodox Trinitarianism.

This account could not be further from the truth; but it is a powerful myth that has a powerful influence on Christians down to this very day.

It is beyond the scope of my project here to give a true account of the genesis of Trinitarian doctrine. I would recommend *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome* by Richard E. Rubenstein for a more accurate account of the origins of Trinitarianism. Suffice it to say here that Trinitarian doctrine was a weapon used by a certain faction of Bishops to gain political power in the Roman Empire by gaining ecclesiastical power within the institutionalized church in the 3rd through 5th centuries and beyond. Far from enjoying a consensus among Bible scholars at the time, it was a hotly debated doctrine. For long stretches during the early history of the church, the doctrine of the Trinity was out of favor. Anyone who DID believe in the Trinity during those times was excommunicated by the ecclesiastical powers. To the extent that Trinitarianism gained virtually universal acceptance, it was through coercion: excommunication, exile, assassination, murder, imprisonment, confiscation of property, and any number of cruel things. It finally became too dangerous not to believe in the Trinity; hence, it gained universal "acceptance."

Since the truth about the genesis of the doctrine would hardly inspire confidence in it (were it known), many modern scholars and theologians try to rationalize its universal acceptance in other ways. It is not uncommon to hear modern Christians engage in incredible hyperbole as they proclaim the doctrine of the Trinity the "central tenet of the Christian faith," or "the most important teaching of Christianity," or "that doctrine upon which every other Christian doctrine hinges." Objectively speaking, these are absurd claims. Can anyone seriously believe that the most important doctrine that the Bible teaches is a doctrine that the Bible doesn't actually teach at all!? (All Trinitarians will admit that the doctrine of the Trinity is not actually a teaching of the Bible, it is a "necessary deduction" from the biblical evidence.) We are asked to believe that *the most central doctrine of our faith* was never explicitly formulated by Jesus or the apostles. That stretches credulity to the limits. But this revisionism is understandable. How else are

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we to understand the virtual universality of the doctrine's acceptance—if not because of its central and foundational importance? The truth is less attractive. It is “universally” accepted because, for thousands of years, earnest believers have been frightened away from even asking whether it is true.

(3) The overwhelming consensus of Christians.

It is an empirical fact that Christians of almost every stripe believe in the Trinity. It is one of the few things that every *bona fide* Christian can agree on. (Indeed, no Christian can be considered *bona fide* if he doesn't believe in it.) Without a context, this empirical fact is quite impressive, and quite powerful. Why investigate a belief that every actual Christian accepts?

However, there is a problem. This virtual unanimity may not be as impressive as it first appears. In the first place, as I have explained, out of all those hoards of Christians who believe in the Trinity, virtually none of them have actually come to believe in it because they have studied, reflected, and concluded that it is the irrefutable teaching of the Bible. They believe because everyone else expects them to believe, not because the doctrine has recommended itself to them. Secondly, as we have seen, the engine that drives this unanimity is intimidation and fear. Just because a murderous, absolute dictator gets 100% of the vote does not mean that the citizens want him to rule over them. How meaningful is a vote if the citizen is not at liberty to vote otherwise? Analogously, since no Christian is at liberty to believe otherwise, casting their “vote” in favor of the Trinity has little if any meaning. Whether the doctrine of the Trinity is worthy of belief must be decided on other grounds than the completely artificial consensus that it enjoys.

(4) The plausible arguments of bible teachers and theologians.

If an intrepid soul does overcome all of these obstacles and decides to investigate the Trinity, he soon learns it is not an easy task. To decide the merits of this doctrine is quite involved. The data is so vast, the issues so complex and intertwined, the background so obscure, biblical exegesis so difficult, that he soon feels overwhelmed. Inevitably, he will turn to Bible commentaries, systematic theologies, and books that defend the Christian faith and its doctrines. Inevitably, these various resources will “help him see” the truth of Trinitarian doctrine. However, there is a very important question concerning these resources that will never occur to him to ask:

Were these theologians, scholars, and bible students rationalizing belief in a doctrine that they were not at liberty to reject? Or were they engaged in an honest search for whatever is actually true? Even if they were engaged in an honest search for whatever is actually true, was their search unaffected by any predilection to assume the Trinity? Or

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were their conclusions pre-determined, the result of seeing everything they look at through the lenses of Trinitarian dogma?

In every age there will be brilliant men and women who use their inestimable intellectual abilities to simply rationalize and make plausible what others have told them they must believe. Some of them may do so knowing full well that they are engaged in fraud. The vast majority of them, however, are never conscious of the unspoken pressures on them that constrain their thinking within the acceptable bounds. Accordingly, they create plausible—sometimes brilliant—arguments that defend the Trinity to the layperson. From what possible standpoint can a layman challenge them? The layman is without the resources to be able to assess the arguments himself.

I have read many specious, tendentious arguments in support of the Trinity over the course of my life. In my early intellectual journey I found them utterly convincing. I did not know enough then to judge otherwise. When I read them now I find them tendentious and utterly unconvincing. I know more now. I have the background and expertise that gives me a standpoint from which to judge. All of these arguments are well-meaning. I do not question that. But all of them show the signs of thinking that is being constrained within the acceptable bounds of orthodoxy.

(As an example, many books defending the Trinity have the following logical structure: The Bible teaches that God (the Father) has divine attributes. The Bible teaches that Jesus has divine attributes. The Bible teaches that the Spirit has divine attributes. Therefore, the Bible teaches that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Holy Spirit is God. Therefore, the Bible teaches Orthodox Trinitarianism. This is a fallacious argument. For one thing, the conclusion is under-determined by the evidence. Transcendent Monotheism, as we shall see, also holds that the Father is God, that the Son is God, and that the Holy Spirit is God. Accordingly, one could just as well conclude that the biblical teaching supports Transcendent Monotheism as Orthodox Trinitarianism. The argument does not *prove* Orthodox Trinitarianism; it only shows that the biblical data is not incompatible with it. Yet, tendentiously, it is offered more or less as *proof*.)

It is relatively easy to construct an argument that persuades someone who is not at liberty to believe otherwise. It does not take much to convince a man that he should, in fact, believe what he dare not fail to believe. Those are the sorts of arguments that one tends to find in support of the Trinity. They tend to reinforce belief in the Trinity among those who lack the background and experience to form an independent judgment on the matter. If I am right, however, those arguments are unsound and flawed. They are attempts by well-meaning thinkers to rationalize a faulty doctrine that they feel conscience-bound to ably defend.

(5) Personal bible study that appears to confirm the truth of Trinitarianism.

Finally, it would be highly unlikely that a well-meaning student who pursued his own examination of the Scriptures in order to decide the matter for himself would ever reject the doctrine of the Trinity. It would be easy at this point to suggest that that proves how compelling and well-founded the doctrine is. However, as will probably become clear throughout the course of my defense, there is something important that we lose sight of. All the resources available to anyone who wants to learn to study and interpret the Bible have been influenced by a prior belief in the Trinity. The English translators who translated our English Bibles were Trinitarians, convinced that the Trinity was foundational to everything the Bible said. The Greek grammars that instruct us in the finer points of New Testament Greek syntax were written by Trinitarians, convinced that the Trinity was foundational to everything the Bible (in Greek) said. The Greek lexicons that we must consult in order to learn the meaning of Greek words were written by people who—even if they were not Trinitarians themselves—believed that the New Testament writers were convinced Trinitarians. Accordingly, there will be no shortage of elements in a person's "independent" study of the Bible that will direct him toward seeing the Trinity taught in the Bible. This must not impress us more than is warranted. None of us can study the Bible altogether independently. It just isn't possible. No one has thought anything about the Bible for thousands of years that has been independent of Trinitarian assumptions.

To reject the doctrine of the Trinity is a major paradigm shift. If one rejects the Trinitarian formula, then everything must be reconsidered: Greek grammar, syntax, lexicography, translation, textual criticism, cultural background, Church history—*everything!* That is a lot for a single individual to do. It is too much to expect the typical Christian to challenge. So, inevitably, even the Christian who—against all the pressures—decides to make up his own mind, will more than likely succumb in the end. "Who am I to challenge everything that every scholar and theologian seems to be in agreement on? Everything that they teach me about the Bible, about its background, and about the Greek language ends up pointing toward the Trinity. It simply must be right!"

Fundamental Argument and Proposal

Here is what I am ultimately proposing for our college, and the fundamental argument that I am seeking to make and defend in the set of papers that accompany this:

(1) In light of the biblical evidence we shall have considered through the exegetical inquiries pursued in these papers, I will conclude that it is entirely unfounded for anyone to confidently maintain that Orthodox Trinitarianism is true and biblical. Even if Orthodox Trinitarian doctrine is ultimately true, it is not clearly and incontrovertibly so.

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(2) In light of the above conclusion, it is wrong to hold that belief in Orthodox Trinitarianism is a prerequisite to salvation. Something that is not clearly and incontrovertibly taught by the Bible cannot be a prerequisite of salvation.

(3) Furthermore, to the extent that Orthodox Trinitarianism makes belief in its doctrines an absolutely necessary, inviolable condition of salvation, it is the propagation of a "false gospel." That is, to the extent that Orthodox Trinitarianism is actually Creedal Trinitarianism, it is the propagation of a "false gospel."

(4) Therefore, to the extent that Orthodox Trinitarianism makes belief in its doctrines an absolutely necessary, inviolable condition of salvation (that is, to the extent that it is Creedal Trinitarianism), it must be rejected and opposed by anyone who wants to preserve the truth of the gospel.

(5) Therefore, to the extent that it is important that our college and its institutions preserve the truth of the gospel, it would be wrong of them, as organizations, to capitulate to the perspective of Creedal Trinitarianism or even to appear to capitulate to the perspective of Creedal Trinitarianism.

Description of the Accompanying Set of Papers

The purpose of this whole set of papers is, in effect, to make and defend the argument outlined immediately above. I will approach the argument in the reverse order. Paper #2 will immediately make the argument outlined in steps (3) through (5) above. Looking at a very important passage in Galatians, I argue that Creedal Trinitarianism propagates a "false gospel" just as surely as did the Circumcision Party in Paul's day. Accordingly, I argue that we should emulate Paul's vigorous opposition to the Circumcision Party by vigorously opposing Creedal Trinitarianism in our own day.

Then, in Paper #3, I set the stage for an extended investigation of what the Bible teaches. Specifically, my exegetical studies will focus on whether the Bible teaches Orthodox Trinitarianism or whether it teaches Transcendent Monotheism. Accordingly, I set the stage for that investigation by spelling out in more detail what Orthodox Trinitarianism and Transcendent Monotheism each believe. I end Paper #3 with an analysis of the distinctive differences between the two models.

In Paper #4, I begin to make the argument for steps 1 and 2 of the argument outlined above. Specifically, I examine the meaning and significance of the various titles that are ascribed to Jesus. Jesus is called "the Son," "the Son of God," "the Son of Man," "the Christ" (the Messiah), "the Son of David," and various less frequent titles. I examine what these titles do and do not mean. This will be important for the exegetical studies that follow; so I examine their meaning in Paper #4.

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Then, in Papers #5 – 8, I examine crucial New Testament passages that would likely be advanced by a Trinitarian as proof of his Trinitarian doctrine as over against my Transcendent Monotheist model. Paper #5 is an exegetical study of John 1, especially the Prologue to John’s gospel. Paper #6 is an exegetical study of the opening paragraph of Paul’s letter to the Hebrews. Paper #7 is a briefer exegetical study of a crucial passage in Colossians 1. Paper #8 is a brief exegetical examination of an important passage in Philippians 2. In each paper I conclude that the Orthodox Trinitarian model is not required by a careful and sound exegesis of the passage. Indeed, I argue that, in some of them, the Transcendent Monotheist model seems a more natural underlying assumption than Trinitarianism.

All of the exegetical studies through Paper #8 will have focused on the nature of Jesus and his relationship to God, his Father. In Paper #9 I turn my attention to the Holy Spirit, asking whether the Trinitarian doctrines with regard to the Holy Spirit are required by the teaching of the New Testament. I focus on one passage in Romans 8 in particular. I conclude that there is nothing in the New Testament that necessitates the Trinitarian view of the Holy Spirit.

In Paper #10, I explore briefly a miscellany of other exegetical objections that could be raised against Transcendent Monotheism and in favor of Orthodox Trinitarianism. I show there that, in each case, Orthodox Trinitarianism is not required, as the Trinitarian is want to believe.

In Paper #11, I explore a few objections to Transcendent Monotheism that are of a theological or philosophical nature, rather than of an exegetical nature. I defend Transcendent Monotheism against those objections.

In Paper #12, I turn to the issue of the art and practice of biblical interpretation. In that paper I make some observations about the nature of biblical interpretation—particularly about aspects of biblical interpretation that have had some bearing on the controversy between me (Transcendent Monotheism) and Trinitarianism.