

What We Believe, and Why it Matters

Part 1: The Trinity

COTN Articles of Faith 1-3

1. **Explain**

* God is **one**

- Deuteronomy 6:4-5; John 10:30; Matthew 3:16-17;
Matthew 28:18-20

* God is **three**

* God is **diversity**

* God is **unity**

2. **Experience**

- 1 John 4:8; John 3:16; Genesis 1:27

3. **Exercise**

It will change the way you:

* **love others**

- 2 Peter 1:4; John 13:34-35, 17:20-21; Ephesians 2:11-22

* **view God**

- Romans 11:33-34, 36

* **worship**

* **pray**

- Hebrews 7:24-25; Romans 8:26-27

* **receive love**

- Romans 5:5, 8:15

love.learn.live.

westvalleychurch.com



West Valley Church
Michael O'Neill
09/16/18

What We Believe, and Why it Matters
Part One: The Trinity¹
COTN Articles of Faith 1-3

*Genesis 1; Leviticus 19:2; Deuteronomy 6:4-5; Isaiah 5:16; 6:1-7; 40:18-31;
Matthew 3:16-17; 28:19-20; John 14:6-27; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 2 Corinthians 13:14;
Galatians 4:4-6; Ephesians 2:13-18; 1 John 1:5; 4:8*

What if I told you that $1+1+1=1$? You'd probably accuse me of doing some funny math, or maybe you'd tell me to go back to basic math class. I'll admit that getting a Master in Ministry and a Master of Divinity meant that math was not a priority. In fact, when I started out in college as an undergrad, I tested out in math, which means I took a test and passed it, so that I didn't have to take any math courses at all. So I have not had a math class for 38 years! I guess you probably should not believe me if I try to convince you that $1+1+1=1$. And I'd wholeheartedly agree with you, *if* that were a math equation. But it's not; it's actually a *theology* equation. I'll explain that in a minute.

Today we are beginning a new series called, "What We Believe, and Why it Matters." There are some important truths about the Christian faith that we all need to be sure that we not only understand, but that we experience if we are going to enjoy this life-to-the-fullest that God has for us in Christ, and if we are going to carry out our purpose in this world. So we will be going through our Articles of Faith as a church. You can call them doctrines or theology – both would be accurate words, and they are founded in Scripture and date back to as early as the first century Christian Church. And here's something really cool: last spring our 5th and 6th graders and their parents went through a class on the Articles of Faith, and for their class they made posters – you can see them on the back wall. Please stop and check them out when you leave today.

When it comes to the Articles of Faith, some of them you might simply believe without ever having really thought about it, especially if you grew up in the church. But you need to be fully conscious of these. Also, there are some conflicting

¹ Resources: Frank Moore, *Coffee Shop Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 1998); Al Truesdale, Ed., *Global Wesleyan Dictionary of Theology* (Beacon Hill Press, 2013); Gay Leonard, *Articles of Faith: What Nazarenes Believe and Why* (Beacon Hill Press, 1995); Matt Woodley, "Trinity": *The Christian Name for God* (Preaching Today, <https://www.preachingtoday.com/sermons/sermons/2006/may/godspartyoflove1.html>); Skye Jethani, *What is the Trinity?* (Preaching Today); Kevin DeYoung, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: No Christianity Without It*, (The Gospel Coalition, 9/28/2011, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/the-doctrine-of-the-trinity-no-christianity-without-it/>)

doctrines and theologies out there on the radio, internet, and bookstores, so it will be important for you to know *what* you believe, because it really does matter!

So we are starting off with perhaps the most difficult and confusing of all the articles of faith, and it has to do with that equation I showed you a minute ago: $1+1+1=1$. That is the formula that describes what we call the “Trinity.” The Trinity is not a simple concept, but it is at the very heart of the Christian faith. It is a word to describe the nature of God as the three-in-one, co-equal yet distinct, revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But let me start with a warning for us: The Trinity is not just a concept. We are talking about a real person who is present and is here right now. It is easy for us to approach the Trinity as if we are talking about a biology experiment or like we are dissecting a frog. But keep in mind that we are talking about God – a real, living, vibrant, loving God. God wants to pour out his love into your heart this morning, so remember that we are talking about a real God that we can be in relationship with, and who can transform our lives.

Let’s begin with an attempt to...

1. ***Explain*** the Trinity.

Right up front we need to acknowledge that, despite how vital and central the belief in the Trinity is to our Christian faith, you will not find the word “Trinity” in the Bible. Now, sometimes people will use that as an excuse to dismiss the Triune Godhead, but to do so is a flimsy argument. Just because the word isn’t in the Bible doesn’t mean it isn’t true. It is simply a word we use to try to describe what God has revealed of himself to us in Scripture and experience. Let me ask you this: how many of you know what it means when we say the word, “communion”? It means when we celebrate the Lord’s Supper, right? How many times is the word “communion” in the Bible? Zero. How many times do you find the word “Christmas” in the Bible? You won’t. So should we stop celebrating communion and Christmas? Of course not. They are words we use to describe a reality of Scripture.

Now, there are really only three belief systems in the world: polytheism, which is a belief in many gods, monotheism, which is a belief in one god, and atheism, which is a belief in no gods. They are all belief systems; they all require some measure of faith to adhere to them. Christians belong to the group of monotheists, and we share that group with Judaism and Islam. All three are related; all three start with the God revealed in the Old Testament, but Islam and Judaism part company significantly with each other and with Christians. Christianity is born *out of* Judaism, or, in the words of Jesus the Christ, is the fulfillment of God’s full intention for people as initially revealed in Judaism. Because of that, we strongly adhere to the doctrine that there is only ONE GOD. However, we realize that God has revealed himself to us as Father, Son, and Spirit.

Matt Woodley is an author and pastor who points out some things we need to know²:

- God is *one*

We are not bi-theists or tri-theists. We know One God, and can declare and pray right along with our Jewish friends the greatest statement of the Jewish faith, which is called the “Shema,” or, “hear,” which is the first word of the statement found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 –

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”
(Deuteronomy 6:4-5, niv)

Every first follower of Jesus – the very first disciples – were deeply devoted to that prayer and command of monotheism. But then they met Jesus. They watched Jesus do the things that only God can do – Jesus calmed seas, healed the blind and mute and deaf and lame and lepers, Jesus raised the dead and he forgave sins. Only God can do those things. The disciples heard Jesus say things like:

“I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30, niv)

Then they heard numerous times Jesus’ promises that they would experience the indwelling Holy Spirit of God. So Christians started talking about the Trinity to try and make sense out of the way that God had come to them as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The disciples remembered that when Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, that all three of the Godhead were present in that moment:

“As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” (Matthew 3:16-17, niv)

After Jesus was resurrected from the dead and right before he ascended into heaven, they heard Jesus give them their marching orders until he returns, commissioning them in the name of the Trinity:

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” (Matthew 28:18-20, niv)

So this led to the second, equally important conclusion:

- God is *three*

God is not a solitary monarch but a community of three. The early church used the Greek word, *perichoresis*, which means something like “mutual indwelling” or

² Woodley, *Trinity: The Christian Name for God*

“rotation.” It is really a word picture that looks like a divine dance; the Father and Son and Spirit are in perfect, mutual, joy-filled step with each other. Which also leads to the next important part:

- God is diversity

The three are one, and yet the three are different. The Father, Son, and Spirit are eternally different from each other. And by the way, when we say “Father and Son,” we’re not saying that God is like some kind of paternal brotherhood or couple of dudes in the sky. The limited and finite vocabulary of language that we use to try to describe God will never fully explain the eternal, mysterious Holy Other that God is. These are names that God has given us to describe the relationships between the Three-in-One and with us.

Finally...

- God is unity

God is always in absolute and perfect unity and intimacy. The Son will never contradict the Father or the Spirit. The Spirit will always do what the Father and Son say. The Father will always honor and glorify the Son and Spirit.

There have been many attempts to try and describe the Trinity. Maybe you’ve heard that the Trinity is like a spring that flows into the stream that flows in the lake, or a plant with a root, and shoot, and a flower. Or three torches that burn separately and together in a holy flame. Or like a clover or an egg or an apple or a pizza...all of them fall short, of course.

Here, at least, is a diagram that maybe will help you visualize the dynamics of this relationship that the Trinity has within itself:

As you can see by the three points of the triangle, God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son glorifies the Father and the Spirit, the Spirit glorifies the Father and Son, and the Father glorifies the Son and Spirit. Each one *is*, and is “in” the other, but each one is *not* the other.

Again, this falls short of being able to completely describe the eternal mystery of the Trinity in a way that our human brains can comprehend. God will always be the Creator, and we will always be the created.

“Here's the beautiful thing: you don't need to fully understand the Trinity to worship the Trinity, pray to the Trinity, and enter into the life of the Trinity.



I've read that deep within the core of the sun, the temperature is 27 million degrees. The pressure is 340 billion times what it is here on Earth. And in the sun's core, that insanely hot temperature and unthinkable pressure combine to create nuclear reactions. In each reaction, four protons fuse together to create one alpha particle, which is .7 percent less massive than the four protons. The difference in mass is expelled as energy, and after one million years, through a process called convection, this energy from the core of the sun finally reaches the surface, where it's expelled as heat and light.

Now that was all kind of interesting, but you know what? I didn't need to know all that in order to get a tan."³

You see, God is a real person whom we can...

2. *Experience*

The Trinity loves you and created you to be in relationship with you. The Trinity IS relationship, three, in one. And that relationship is pure, complete, white-hot holy LOVE. God tells us this about himself in his Word, the Bible:

“Whoever does not love does not know God, because *God is love.*”
(1 John 4:8, niv *italics added*)

That's why we're told over and over and over again that God loves us. The whole reason Jesus came to us was because of the Father's love:

“This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.” (John 3:16, tmt)

God is not a judgmental law-giver. Nor is God like a watchmaker who built creation, wound it up, set it in motion, and now stays out of it. “If you could peel back the layers of time and space, if you could peer back long before the creation of the world, if you could look back to when there was nothing but God, you would see LOVE. Love is an interpersonal quality. Love cannot exist outside relationship; in order for love to exist it requires an object to love. Love requires both a lover and a beloved; one to love and one to be loved. God has eternally existed as both the one who loves and the one who is love, as the Trinity in self-existent love.”⁴

Now that does not mean that God created humans because he was lonely and wanted someone to love. If God needed us, that would indicate some kind of deficiency and therefore he would be an incomplete God. Theologian Kevin DeYoung has said,⁵ “With a biblical understanding of the Trinity we can say that God did not create in order to be loved, but rather, created out of the overflow of the perfect love that has always existed among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who ever live in perfect and mutual relationship and delight. The Christian vision of God as

³ Kevin Miller, in the sermon “*Getting to Know Your God*” (Preaching Today)

⁴ Jethani

⁵ DeYoung

revealed in Scripture tells us that before there was anything there was love – because at the foundation of the universe is not matter or laws or energy or even will, but *relationship*. We believe in a relational God – a God who has existed forever in perfect, loving, relationship with himself – Father, Son, and Spirit. Before there were planets, stars, or galaxies – and long before there was you or me or anyone else for God to love – the Trinity has been a community of perfect love.

The Trinity is the only community on the face of the earth that actually works all the time. Every community that we know and experience is broken and doesn't work as well as it could, whether we are talking about schools or churches or families or marriages. But within the Trinity, they each give glory to the other, they each honor and submit to the other, they each love and serve each other, and they each carry out the will of the other. There is never, ever, an ounce of jealousy, insecurity, distrust, hostility, or selfishness. It is a community of perfect love.

We were created to be in relationship with God, and therefore the Trinity means that we have a God who can be experienced by us; we can enter into a real experience of a relationship with the Trinity.

The God of Judaism requires that we completely obey the law (which is impossible for us to do), or we constantly make animal and ritual sacrifices that equal the degree of our latest sins. The God of Islam is a stern and vengeful God who also requires ritual sacrificial actions in obedience to the laws that are like a carrot on a stick; acceptable obedience is always one step ahead of where you are. Pluralistic Gods means there is always one more God to please, or to carry out mischief or vengeance against us. Atheism is a hopeless religion because there is no God at all to rescue us. Look around at humanity; for atheists, this is as good as it's going to get, and it's only going to get worse.

We have one God who created us out of love, and we sinned against him and we rejected his love and chose our own selfishness. The result of that sin is death. But God didn't want us to die, or to be in bondage to sin, and couldn't bear the thought of eternity without us. So God the Son took the punishment for our sin and became, once and for all, our perfect sacrifice. God the Son died on the cross, but thank God he rose from the grave! He opened the door to forgiveness and cleansing, which allowed us to be in relationship with God the Father. But we are still prone to sin – we need more than a positional sacrifice; we need a transformation of our heart and nature. God the Spirit moves into the new Temple which is no longer a building but is your very body and life. We are the new temple. God the Spirit powerfully changes your character so that you can now grow in Christ-likeness and perfect, holy love, in an ever-increasingly intimate relationship with God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit!

Is this your experience? If you desire to be in relationship with God, to be filled with the Love of God, to be different so that you don't have to struggle with sin, then you must accept ALL of the work of the Trinity in your life.

Perhaps you became a Christian, but truthfully right now you have only been involved in an interaction with one part of the Trinity. Maybe you accepted Christ's

sacrifice for you. But you don't know the Father and you haven't been changed by the Spirit. If that's you, let me lovingly say that you have no idea what it means to be a Christian; you are not living in the abundant life that Jesus promised you. You need the Trinity.

Prayer

Now here's the deal: Scripture is very clear that we were made in the image of God:

“So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” (Genesis 1:27, niv)

That means that our lives are and can be different. We can, and we need to...

3. ***Exercise*** our new life.

We need to apply these changes; we need to put them into action.

We were made in God's image; that means that we have a body, soul and spirit. That means we can enter into a divine relationship with the Trinity. But that also means that like the Trinity, we must extend that Love to others. We are now, like Christ, ministers of the New Covenant of Love to others – in the same way Jesus loved others as we see in the Bible. We love our friends. We love our enemies. We love the oppressed. We love the different. We love those who are sick with sin. We love those who love in ways that are less than God's love. We love others who do, and don't, deserve it.

With the Trinity, this loving relationship **will change the way you:**

- ***Love others***

According to the Apostle Peter:

“Through his honor and glory he has given us his precious and wonderful promises, that you may share the divine nature and escape from the world's immorality that sinful craving produces.” (2 Peter 1:4, ceb)

We share God's life. We base our life together on God's life together. Since the very nature of the Trinity is shared life, the relationships, the community of love, the essence of our life together is our love for one another (John 13:34-35; 17:20-21; Ephesians 2:11-22). We are to reflect the love and unity that exist in the Trinity. Our friends in Guyana have a word that they use for this. When good friends get together with no agenda but just to enjoy each other's company in that deep acceptance and comfort of simply hanging out together, they have a word for it. It's called “Limin'.” It's when you can be together and you might talk deeply about things or you might not have to speak at all. That's what we need to do together. That's why we have small groups – so we can learn to lime!

Do you see why the Bible says it's so important for us to meet together regularly in worship and small groups? Do you see why Jesus said that when we gather in his

name that he is here with us (Matthew 18:20)? He is Trinity, and when we gather in Trinity relationship, God can't help but be in on it.

It will also change the way you...

- **view God**

The Trinity deepens our sense of depth and the mystery of God's nature. There is beauty and wonder and awe in the depths of God. God is not boring and he is never bored. He is bursting with life and activity. He loves to laugh and he laughs in love. He is the most holy, loving, living, creative, and fascinating being in all of creation and beyond. You will never stop learning and growing in him. Why would you want a God that you can figure out? The wonder of God's nature caused the apostle Paul to cry out:

"Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable his judgments, and his paths beyond tracing out! Who has known the mind of the Lord? ... For from him and through him and for him are all things. To him be the glory forever! Amen." (Romans 11:33-34, 36 niv)

This will change the way you...

- **worship**

We often come to worship with an agenda and with all kinds of expectations. We want the songs to be the kind we like. We have an attitude that we have to "be fed" to our liking. We have to be intellectually stimulated. We judge the pastor's sermon as "too shallow" or "too intellectual." We want the microphones to work right and we want the slides to move forward at the right times and match the words to the songs. We have to raise our hands or stand up at the right times or we are annoyed by those who raise their hands or stand up. What anxiety. What pressure.

But did you know there was already worship going on before we got here this morning? I mean even before the worship team rehearsed. Worship is the gift of participating in Jesus the Son's offering to the Father in the power of the Spirit. God is a worship service within himself. Jesus offers his life to the Father. The Father gives glory to the Son. The Spirit leads the Son and gives glory to him. So whenever we gather together in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, we are invited into that eternal service of praise and worship.

It will change the way you...

- **pray**

You don't have to say the right words or quote the right Scripture or pray in Elizabethan English with "thou's" and "thy's" and "thee." You don't have to get your act together to pray. Did you know that the Trinity is *already* praying for you? Jesus the Son is interceding for you (Hebrews 7:24-25). Sometimes we don't have the right words and we hurt so bad that all we can do is groan. But the Holy Spirit takes our groans and brings them to the Father, and he listens to the deep groanings in our hearts and translates them for the Father (Romans 8:26-27). Do you see how

powerful this is?! Invite and invoke the Trinity into your life, your marriage, your house, your children's lives. Tonight when the house gets still, raise your hands and say, "Triune God, I invoke your presence over this house, my marriage, my life, over the lives of my children, over this neighborhood, my city, and this world." This isn't magic; this is asking the living God, the triune God, to come in all his power and majesty and grace and love into your home and church and community. There's power in that prayer!

Finally, it will change the way you...

- **receive love**

The Trinity tells us that God was and is love from all eternity, because God is a community of love. And then that love spills over into our hearts (Romans 5:5; 8:15) and through us into our world. Certainly, God's love is a holy love, but the triune God has opened the way for you to know him. So be loved. At the end of this day you may consider yourself broken and insignificant, yet you are deeply loved. You may feel at the end of your rope. You may feel small, dirty, and ashamed. You may feel lost and empty. But you are loved by a three-fold cord of love. Jesus the Son has left the glory of heaven to come to Earth—living, dying, and rising again for our sake. The Father has said, "I will offer my only Son to save my fallen and broken and wayward people." The Spirit has been poured out in the Earth and into your heart. And you are invited into the loving presence of God, and then out of your own brokenness, to share that love into a loveless world, into the hearts of broken and unloved people.

To quote a mentor of mine, Brennan Manning, "Do you believe that the God of Jesus loves you beyond worthiness and unworthiness, beyond fidelity and infidelity—that he loves you in the morning sun and in the evening rain—that he loves you when your intellect denies it, your emotions refuse it, your whole being rejects it. Do you believe that God loves without condition or reservation and loves you this moment as you are and not as you should be."⁶

Stand up please.

"Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is the true self. Every other identity is illusion."⁷

Walk out of this room, into the world as one who is transformed by the love of the Trinity, loving others as Trinity has loved you.

⁶ Brennan Manning, *All is Grace: A Ragamuffin Memoir* (David C. Cook, Colorado Springs, CO. 2011)

⁷ Brennan Manning, *Abba's Child* (Colorado Springs, CO, NavPress 1994)