

The God Revealed in Jesus Christ

A Brief Introduction to Trinitarian Theology



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If we want the most accurate picture of God, we don't need to look any further than Jesus Christ. In Jesus we meet God as God really is. "He who has seen me," Jesus said, "has seen the Father" (John 14:9).

Jesus Christ is the perfect revelation of the Father. No one has ever seen God, but Jesus Christ, the only Son of the Father, has made him known (John 1:18).

In Jesus' words and actions, we hear and see what matters most to every human being—that the Father loves us unconditionally. He sent Jesus out of his immeasurable love and his unbending commitment to human redemption. To know Jesus is to know God, which means that what we believe about Jesus is our theology

In one way or another, we all have a theology. Simply stated, theology is "God knowledge." In other words, whatever we believe to be true about God is our theology.

And certainly every church and denomination has a theology. It's the framework that undergirds and informs their doctrines and practices.

Trinitarian theology sees the doctrine of the Trinity as the cen-

tral and foundational doctrine that forms the basis for how we read the Bible and how we understand all points of theology.

It deals with not only the “how” and the “why” of doctrines and practices, but most importantly, it begins with the “who.” It asks, “Who is the God made known in Jesus Christ, and who are we in relation to him?”

Trinitarian theology, then, does not simply refer to a belief in the doctrine of the Trinity (the Bible teaching that there is one God, who is eternally Father, Son and Holy Spirit). It refers to a Christ-centered way of understanding who God is.

Christ-centered

Trinitarian theology is first and foremost Christ-centered. As noted by Thomas F. Torrance (a leading Trinitarian theologian of the 20th century), Jesus is the unique Word of God to humanity and the unique Word of humanity to God. Because of this, even Holy Scripture is under his Lordship.

Jesus indicates that he is the key to understanding Scripture. He said to a group of Jewish religious leaders in John 5:39-40: “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.”

We seek to read and interpret the Bible through the lens of who Jesus is. He is the basis and logic of our theology—for he alone is the *final* and the *full* self-revelation of God.

Relationship-centered

Because it is Christ-centered, Trinitarian theology is by its very nature relational. Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, has become one with our flesh in order to be our saving substitute and to represent us as his brothers and sisters in the very presence of the Father (see John 1:14; Ephesians 1:9-10, 20-23).

Because of Christ, we have a relationship with God! The Holy Spirit dwells in us. We belong to the Father and are, in Christ, the beloved of the Father.

This means that the Christian life and faith are primarily about four kinds of personal *relationships*:

1. the internal relationships of holy love shared by the Father, Son and Holy Spirit from all eternity,
2. the relationship of the eternal Son with humanity in Jesus Christ incarnate,
3. the relationship of humanity with the Father through the Son and by the Spirit, and
4. the relationship of humans with one another as children of the Father redeemed by Jesus Christ.

Early history

In the 20th century, Trinitarian theology was advanced in the West largely through the work of Karl Barth and his students, especially Thomas F. Torrance and his brother James B. Torrance.

But this theology is as old as the Church itself. Trinitarian theology formed the basis of early Christian teaching. This is reflected in the Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed and the Definition of Chalcedon. Early prominent Trinitarian teachers and theologians included Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nazianzus.

Irenaeus (died A.D. 202) was a disciple of Polycarp (who had studied with the apostle John). Irenaeus sought to show that the gospel of salvation taught by the apostles and handed down from them is centered on Jesus. He saw that the Bible presents the Incarnation as a new point of beginning for humanity. Through the Incarnation, the entire human race was "born again" in Jesus, delivered from the sin and death that had enslaved the world since Adam. In Jesus, humanity has a new beginning and a new identity.

The biblical foundation of Irenaeus' thinking included Paul's statements in Romans 5, where Jesus is presented to us as the "second" (or "final") Adam of the human race. "In Jesus," wrote Irenaeus, "God recapitulated in Himself the ancient formation of man [Adam], that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and vivify man..." (*Against Heresies*, III.18.7).

Irenaeus understood that Jesus took all humanity into himself, both as our representative before God and as our perfect substitute before God, thereby renewing the human race through his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Irenaeus taught that this renewing, or re-creating, of the human race in Jesus through the Incarnation is not merely a work

done “by” Jesus. Our salvation involves much more than just the forgiveness of our sins. It means our entire re-creation “in” and “through” Jesus.

Athanasius (died A.D. 373) defended the gospel against false teachers who denied the Son’s eternal divinity. This defense led to the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity affirmed at the Council of Nicea in A.D. 325. In his treatise *On the Incarnation*, Athanasius wrote the following:

Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in the place of all, and offered it to the Father. This He did out of sheer love for us, so that in His death all might die.... This He did that He might turn again to incorruption men who had turned back to corruption, and make them alive through death by the appropriation of His body and by the grace of His resurrection... (section 8).

What then was God to do? What else could He possibly do, being God, but renew His Image in mankind, so that through it men might once more come to know Him? And how could this be done, save by the coming of the very Image Himself, our Savior Jesus Christ?...

The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the Image of the Father, Who could recreate man made after the Image. Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord’s body; yet because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished. Death there had to be, and death for all, so that the due of all might be paid (section 13).

Wherefore the Word...being Himself incapable of death, assumed a mortal body, that He might offer it as his own in the place of all, and suffering for the sake of all through His union with it, “might bring to nought him that had the power over death, that is, the devil, and might deliver them who all their lifetime were enslaved by the fear of death” (Hebrews 2:14-15) (section 20).

By his death salvation has come to all men, and all creation

has been redeemed (section 37).

Athanasius and Irenaeus emphasized that the Incarnation, when the Son of God became a human being, affected all humanity. God chose to save humanity through the birth, life, sacrificial death and resurrection of the Incarnate Son of God. This is the essence of the gospel understood by the early church and revealed in the Scriptures.

Gregory of Nazianzus (died A.D. 389) wrote of how Christ shared in our broken humanity through his Incarnation:

That which He has not assumed He has not healed; but that which is united to His Godhead is also saved. If only half Adam fell, then that which Christ assumes and saves may be half also; but if the whole of his nature fell, it must be united to the whole nature of Him that was begotten, and so be saved as a whole. (*Epistle 101*)

Christ united himself with our actual condition, that is, with fallen humanity, not a pre-fall humanity, in order to redeem it. As J.B. Torrance was fond of saying, the doctor became the patient in order to heal us. It's important for us to know that God, in Christ, really loves us enough to embrace us at our sinful worst.

Who are you, Lord?

“Who are you, Lord?” was Paul’s anguished question on the Damascus Road, where he was confronted by the resurrected Jesus (Acts 9:5). He spent the rest of his life answering this question and then sharing the answer with all who would listen. The answer, revealed to us in Scripture, is the heart of the gospel and the focus of Trinitarian theology.

Jesus is fully God and fully human, and that will never change. His Incarnation did not end with his death or with his ascension. It continues forever. He was resurrected and ascended bodily. He will return bodily, the same as he departed. So when we say Jesus Christ, we are saying God, and we are also saying “humanity.”

As the One who is uniquely God (Creator and Sustainer of all) and also fully human, Jesus, in himself, is the unique union of God and humanity. In and through the life, death, resurrection and

ascension of Jesus, all humans are included in the life and love of God. As the apostle Paul wrote, the man Jesus is the one mediator for all people—past, present, and future (1 Timothy 2:5).

For all humanity

The scope of Christ’s vicarious human life extends to all who have ever lived.

Likewise, the Bible declares that Jesus died for *everyone*—and that his death applies to everyone now. Relevant passages include:

- John 12:32: “I [Jesus], when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself.”
- 2 Corinthians 5:14: “Christ’s love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”
- Colossians 1:19-20: “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”
- 1 Timothy 2:3-6: “This is good, and pleases God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men.”
- 1 Timothy 4:9-10: “This is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance...that we have put our hope in the living God, who is the Savior of all men, and especially of those who believe.”
- Hebrews 2:9: “We see Jesus, who...suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”
- 1 John 2:2: “[Jesus is] the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”
- See also John 1:29; 3:17; Romans 8:32; 2 Corinthians 5:18-19; Titus 2:11; and 1 John 4:14.

These passages make it plain that Jesus died for all humanity.

Jesus, the second Adam

In Romans 5, Paul addresses believers, but what he says applies

to all humanity—believers and non-believers alike. According to Paul, through Jesus, all humans are...

- Justified through the faith of Christ (vv. 1, 18).
- At peace with God (v. 1).
- Standing in his grace (v. 2).
- Reconciled to God through the death of Jesus (v. 10).
- Saved through Jesus' life (v. 10).

This justification, reconciliation and salvation occurred:

- When we were “still powerless” (v. 6).
- When we were “still sinners” (v. 8).
- When we were still “God’s enemies” (v. 10).

God did all this for us before we were even born. The benefit of what Jesus did so long ago extends to the past, to the present and into the future. Paul says, “how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life” (v. 10)—showing that salvation is not a one-time *transaction*, but an enduring *relationship* that God has with all humanity—a relationship forged within the person of Jesus Christ—the one who, in himself, has brought God and humanity together in peace.

Continuing in Romans 5, Paul compares the first Adam to Jesus, calling the latter the “second” or “final” Adam. Note Paul’s main points:

- “Just as sin entered the world through one man [Adam]... [and] all sinned...” (v. 12).
- “How much more did God’s grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ [the second Adam], overflow to the many?” (v. 15).
- And, “just as the result of one trespass [that of the first Adam] was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness [that of Jesus, the second or final Adam] was justification that brings life for all men” (v. 18).

Jesus has not simply done something for us, he has done something *with* us by including us in his life, death, resurrection and ascension.

Therefore, we understand from Scripture that...

- When Jesus died, all humanity died with him.
- When Jesus rose, all humanity rose to new life with him.
- When Jesus ascended, all humanity ascended and became

seated with him at the Father's side (Ephesians 2:4-6).

When people become believers, they begin to know Christ and enjoy their relationship with him.

Salvation is re-creation

The miracle of the Incarnation is not something that happened “once upon a time,” now past. It changed how the entire cosmos is “wired”—it is a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17). The Incarnation changed everything forever, reaching back to all human history, and reaching forward to encompass all time as it unfolds.

Paul speaks of this transformation in Romans 7:4, where he says that even while we are alive, we are already dead to the law by the body of Christ. Jesus' death in human flesh for us, though a historic event, is a present reality that applies to all humanity (past, present and future). “You died,” Paul says to the Colossians, “and your life is hid with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). Even before we literally die, therefore, we are already dead in Jesus' death and alive in Jesus' resurrection.

Our union with Christ in his life, death, resurrection and ascension is expressed in Ephesians 2:5-6. Here Paul asserts that just as we are dead already in the mystery of Jesus' substitutionary death, we have also already been “made alive together with him” and we are “raised up together with him” and “seated together with him in the heavenly realms.” All this comes from God's grace.

God's union with humanity in Christ includes every human being, even those who lived before Jesus came.

The faith of Christ

What does it mean to be saved by grace through faith? Does it mean that we are saved by something that we do, a human work of faith? If it is, what happens to us when our faith is weak or fails? The good news is that Jesus has done everything necessary for our salvation from start to finish, including believing for us. David Torrance writes:

We are saved by Christ's faith and obedience to the Father, not ours. My brother Tom [Torrance] often quoted Gal. 2:20: “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ

liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself for me.” Such is the wording of the KJV, which I believe is a correct translation of the Greek....

Other translators, like those of the New International Version, apparently because they found it so difficult to believe we can live by Christ’s faith rather than our faith, have altered the text to make it read, “I live by faith in the Son of God”! – something altogether different! That translation takes away from the vicarious nature of Christ’s life of faith. It is by his faith [not ours] that we are saved and live! Our faith is a thankful response to his faith.

When we look back along our lives and ponder how disobedient we at times have been and continue to be, it is marvelously comforting to know that Christ gives us his life of obedience to the Father and that it is Christ’s obedience which counts. We are saved by his obedience, not ours. (*An Introduction to Torrance Theology*, pp. 7-8)

In our place

The Bible tells us that Jesus is the *alpha* and the *omega*, the beginning and the end (Revelation 22:13). That is why we can freely trust him to be our all in all and not even worry about whether our faith itself is good enough or strong enough. Thomas Torrance explains it this way:

Jesus steps into the actual situation where we are summoned to have faith in God, to believe and trust in him, and he acts in our place and in our stead from within the depths of our unfaithfulness and provides us freely with a faithfulness in which we may share.... That is to say, if we think of belief, trust or faith as forms of human activity before God, then we must think of Jesus Christ as believing, trusting, or having faith in God the Father on our behalf and in our place....

Through his incarnational and atoning union with us our faith is implicated in his faith, and through that implication, far

from being depersonalised or dehumanised, it is made to issue freely and spontaneously out of our own human life before God. Regarded merely in itself, however, as Calvin used to say, faith is an empty vessel, for in faith it is upon the faithfulness of Christ that we rest and even the way in which we rest on him is sustained and undergirded by his unfailing faithfulness. (*The Mediation of Christ*, pp. 82-84)

But what about human choice?

If it is the life, faith and obedience of Jesus Christ that saves us and includes us in that salvation, what is our role? Before discussing the role of human response, it will be helpful to review the following scriptural truths: Through union with Jesus, all humanity is...

- reconciled to the Father,
- liked, loved and wanted by the Father,
- accepted “in the Beloved” (Ephesians 1:6, KJV), and
- forgiven (no record of sin and no condemnation).

The gospel declares not the *possibility* or the *potential* of these things being true for us, but a reality that we are urged to accept. By the Holy Spirit we may freely welcome the truth and walk in it, but God does not force us to accept the truth. God insists that love must be freely given and freely received; it cannot be coerced, or it is not love.

While the integrity of our God-given human freedom must be maintained, it must also be maintained that human beings do not start from a neutral point where they may equally and freely choose to love or reject God. Since the truth of every human being is already implicated in the truth of Jesus Christ, to reject God would be an anti-truth move and therefore an anti-free one. Truth and freedom always go together, as Karl Barth never hesitates to remind us:

The real freedom of man is decided by the fact that God is his God. In freedom he can only choose to be the man of God, i.e., to be thankful to God. With any other choice he would simply be groping in the void, betraying and destroying his true humanity. Instead of choosing freedom, he would be choosing

enslavement. (*Church Dogmatics* IV.1, p. 43)

So what is our role? We may freely choose to respond to the gospel with thankful and hopeful hearts, encouraging and building one another up in the Body of Christ. As we celebrate the reality of grace together in our communities of worship, our lives are truly transformed.

Personal response

We must take care not to confuse what is true in Jesus for all humanity with each individual's personal response to that truth.

We do not "decide for Christ" in the sense that our personal decision causes our salvation. Rather, we accept what is ours *already* in Christ, placing our trust in the one who has already trusted for us in our place.

When we personally believe the gospel, which is to accept what is already ours by grace, we begin to participate in God's love for us. We begin to live out the new creation that God, prior to our ever believing, made us to be in Christ.

There is the general, or objective, truth about all humanity in Jesus, and also the personal, or subjective, experience of this truth.

Objectively, all people, past, present and future, are justified already; all are sanctified; all are reconciled in Jesus in and through what he has done as their representative and substitute. In Jesus, objectively, the old self has *already* passed away; in him, objectively, we are *already* the new humanity, represented as such by him before and with God.

However, although all people are already *objectively* redeemed by Jesus Christ, not all have yet personally and *subjectively* awakened to and accepted what God has done for them. They do not yet know who they truly are in union with Jesus.

What is objectively true for everyone must be subjectively and personally received and experienced through repentance and faith. Repentance and faith do not cause a person's salvation, but salvation cannot be experienced and enjoyed without them. Repentance and faith are themselves gifts of God.

In the Scriptures, we find some verses that speak to the general/objective nature of salvation, while others speak to the personal/

subjective nature of salvation. Both are real and true—but the *personal* is true only because the *general* is a pre-existing reality.

These two categories are found throughout Scripture—both sometimes occurring in one passage, as happens in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21. Paul starts in verses 18-19 with the objective/universal nature of salvation: “All this is from God, who reconciled [past tense] us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men’s sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.”

Here is a *general* truth that applies objectively to all—all are already reconciled to God through what Jesus has done in union with all humanity.

Having established the general truth in 2 Corinthians 5:18-21, Paul goes on in verses 20-21 to address the subjective/personal: “We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us.”

How can *all* be “reconciled” already and yet the invitation go out to “be reconciled”—suggesting a reconciliation yet to occur? The answer is that *both* are true—these are two aspects of one truth. *All* are *already* reconciled in Christ—this is the universal and objective truth—but not all yet embrace and therefore experience their reconciliation with God.

To be reconciled and yet not know and experience it is to continue to live as though one is not reconciled. Having one’s eyes opened by the Spirit to this reconciliation, choosing to embrace it, and then experiencing it does not cause the reconciliation to occur, but it does make it *personally realized*.

Thus, the evangelistic invitation from Christ’s ambassadors (verse 20) is to “be reconciled.” But this appeal is not to do something that would cause God to reconcile us; rather it is an appeal to *receive* the reconciliation that exists already with God in Christ. As we welcome the truth of the gospel, we can’t help but worship our Lord and Savior!

Part 2:

Questions & Answers

Let's now address several common questions and objections to Trinitarian theology.

Q Are you saying there is no difference between a Christian and a non-Christian?

A No. We are saying that because of who Jesus is and what he has done, *all humans*—believers and non-believers—are united to God in and through Jesus. As a result, all people are reconciled to God; all have been adopted as his dearly loved children. All, in and through Jesus, are included in the Triune love and life of God: Father, Son and Spirit.

However, not all people know who Christ is and therefore who they are in Christ. They are not believers.

One way to speak of the distinction between believers and non-believers is to say that all people are *included* in Christ (universally) but only believers *actively participate* (personally) in that inclusion.

We see these distinctions spoken of throughout the New Testament, and they are important. However, we must not take these distinctions too far and think of non-believers as not *accepted* by and not *loved* by God. To see them in this way would be to overlook the great truth of who Jesus Christ is and what he has done already for all humanity. It would be to turn the “good news” into “bad news.”

When we see all humanity in Christ, some of the categories we might have held in our thinking fall away. We no longer see non-believers as “outsiders” but as children of God in need of understanding how much their Father loves them, likes them, and wants

them. We approach them as brothers and sisters. Do they know who they are in Christ? No—and it is our privilege to tell them of God’s love for them.

Q If all are reconciled already to God in Christ, why does Scripture say so much about repentance and faith?

A In the New Testament, the Greek word translated “repentance” is *metanoia*, which means “change of mind.” All humanity is invited and enabled by the Spirit to experience a radical change of mind away from sinful egoistic self-centeredness and toward God and his love experienced in union with Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.

Notice Peter’s invitation to this change of mind in Acts 2:38-39: “Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off—for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

God does not forgive people in *exchange* for their repentance and belief. As Scripture proclaims, forgiveness is an unconditional free gift that is entirely of grace. It is a reality that exists for us even before we enter into it in our experience.

The gospel truth—the truth about Jesus and about all humanity in union with God in Jesus—is that God has *already* forgiven all humanity with a forgiveness that is unconditional and therefore truly free: “Therefore,” invites Peter, “repent and believe this truth—and be baptized by the Spirit with the mind of Jesus—which involves supernatural assurance that we truly are the children of God.”

Repentance is a change of mind and heart; it involves coming to know who Jesus is for us and who we are in him, apart from anything we have done or will yet do. Through repentance, which is God’s gift to us, our minds are renewed in Jesus through the Spirit and we turn to him and begin to trust him.

The Spirit moves us to repent *because* our forgiveness has already been accomplished in Christ, not in *order to* be forgiven. We repent because we know that, in Jesus, our sins have already been forgiven and that, in Jesus, we are already a new creation. In

this repentance, we turn from the alienation within us as the Spirit baptizes our minds in Jesus' acceptance and in the assurance that comes with it.

Q Why does Paul say that if you don't have the Spirit, you don't belong to Christ?

A Romans 8:9 says, "You are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ."

The sentence "And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ" is not meant to be lifted out of context and turned into a proof that some people do not belong to God. In the context of this passage, Paul is addressing believers; he is not making a statement here about non-believers. He is warning disobedient *believers* who are refusing to submit to the Holy Spirit in their lives. In effect, he is saying, "You say that the Spirit of God is in you, and you are right. However, your life should be reflecting the presence of the Spirit of Christ." As Paul says in verse 12, "We have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature..." (see verses 10-17).

Q If the world is reconciled, why would Jesus say that he doesn't pray for the world?

A In John 17:9, Jesus says: "I pray for them [his disciples]. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours."

Just because Jesus said in one instance that he was not praying for the world, but instead for his disciples, does not imply that he never prayed for the world. It is just that right then, his emphasis was on his disciples.

It is also important to understand how John uses the word "world" (*kosmos* in Greek) in the flow of his Gospel. At times the word can refer to all people (who are all loved by God; see John 3:16) while at other times it can refer to the worldly "system" that is hostile toward God.

It is apparently this system that Jesus has in mind in John 17. Since this system resists God, Jesus' prayer does not include it. He

is not praying for the world in its current form, rather, he is praying for a group of people whom he can use to declare his love for the world.

Later on in his prayer, Jesus does have the whole world in mind. He prays that all of his followers “may be one, Father...so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). Just as John 3:16 said, God loves the whole world and wants to save everyone.

Q If all are reconciled already to God, why does Scripture speak of hell?

A Scripture speaks of hell because it is the natural consequence of rebellion against God. That is why Christ came. God allows us to respond to what he has done for us in Christ. We are included in Christ, but we can refuse that inclusion. We are reconciled to the Father, but we can refuse that reconciliation.

However, such refusal does not negate what God has done for all humanity in Christ.

In *The Great Divorce*, C.S. Lewis wrote:

There are only two kinds of people in the end; those who say to God, “Thy will be done,” and those to whom God says, in the end, “Thy will be done.” All that are in hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.

Q Why does the Bible talk about people whose names are not in the book of life?

A Revelation 13:8 says, “All inhabitants of the earth will worship the beast—all whose names have not been written in the book of life belonging to the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world.”

Revelation 17:8 says, “The inhabitants of the earth whose names have not been written in the book of life from the creation of the world will be astonished when they see the beast.”

We need to consider the literary context of these statements in Revelation. John writes using a literary genre (style) known

as *apocalyptic*. This genre, which was commonly used by Jewish writers in John’s day, is highly symbolic. There is not a literal “book of life.” The “book of life” is a figure of speech, a symbolic way of referring to those who are in allegiance with the Lamb. These verses in Revelation refer to people who reject the new life that Christ has already secured for them.

Q Why does Peter say it is hard to be saved?

A First Peter 4:17-18 says: “For it is time for judgment to begin with the family of God; and if it begins with us, what will the outcome be for those who do not obey the gospel of God? And, ‘If it is hard for the righteous to be saved, what will become of the ungodly and the sinner?’”

The point of verses 17-18 is found in verse 19: “So then, those who suffer according to God’s will should commit themselves to their faithful Creator and continue to do good.”

Peter has been encouraging persecuted believers to live in accord with their identity as children of God and not like those who live in debauchery and idolatry (verses 1-5).

As part of his argument, he points out that persecution is participation in the suffering of Christ, and therefore if believers are to suffer, they should suffer for their faith and godly behavior instead of suffering for sinful and ungodly behavior (verses 12-16). His point is that believers, who know that Jesus, the Savior, is the merciful Judge of all, should not be living in the same base and evil ways as those who oppose Christ.

It is actually impossible for *anyone* to be saved—were it not for Christ. Christ has done what is impossible for humans to do for themselves, but those who reject Christ are not participating in Christ’s suffering; they participate in their own suffering as they reap what they sow.

Q What is everlasting contempt and destruction?

A Daniel 12:2 reads, “Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.”

Second Thessalonians 1:6-9 says, “God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.”

Both of these passages refer to the time of the final judgment when Jesus is “revealed” (sometimes referred to as the Second Coming or Jesus’ “return in glory”). This is the time when all humans will see clearly who Jesus is and thus who they are in union with Jesus. And this “revealing” presents to them a choice—will they say “yes” to their inclusion in Christ, or will they say “no”?

Their decision neither creates nor destroys their inclusion, but it does determine their attitude toward it—whether they will accept God’s love for them and enter the joy of the Lord, or continue in alienation and frustration (and thus in shame and everlasting contempt and destruction). The destruction is a self-destruction as they refuse the purpose for which they have been made, and the redemption that has already been given to them.

In the Judgment, everyone will face Jesus, the Judge who died for all, and they will have to decide whether they will trust him. Those who trust their Savior take part in the joy of the life God has given them in Christ. Those who reject him continue in their hostility and the hell that goes with it.

Q What about the “narrow gate”?

A Jesus says in Matthew 7:13-14: “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.”

Jesus is speaking of this life now—on this side of the general resurrection. In this day, most are living on the “broad road” of destruction. Though they are included in Christ, they live as if they were not. Only the “few” have in this time embraced the truth that is in Jesus—and it is he who is “the narrow gate.”

Jesus addresses a similar issue in Matthew 7:21-23: “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’”

These people have done miracles, and in doing so have deceived many. They claim to know Jesus, and though Jesus obviously knows them (he is omniscient), he does not see himself in them with regard to their actual faith or behavior, and so he proclaims, “I never knew you.”

Q But don’t we become God’s children only at the point of belief?

A John 1:12-13 says, “Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born neither of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God.”

We have already seen in Scripture that God has included everyone in the vicarious humanity of Jesus. When he died, we all died; when he rose, we all were born again in him. Therefore all humans are, from God’s perspective, *already* his children. He gives people that “right” long before they accept it.

Those who believe and accept Jesus enter into and begin to experience the new life that has been theirs all along, the new life that has been “hidden with Christ in God” (Colossians 3:3). In other words, what has been objectively true for them all along becomes subjectively and personally experienced when they become believers.

Q Is this universalism?

A Not in the sense that every person will be saved regardless of whether they ever trust in Christ. There is no salvation outside of Jesus Christ (Acts 4:12). But Jesus’ atonement is universal (Romans 5:18).

Scripture shows that God, in Christ, has reconciled all humans

to himself (Colossians 1:20), but he will never force any person to embrace that reconciliation. Love cannot be coerced.

God wants *sons* and *daughters* who love him out of a joyful response to his love, not zombies who have no mind or choice of their own. As has been revealed in Jesus Christ, God is love in his innermost being, and in God the Persons of the Trinity relate to one another in the freedom of love.

To hope that all people will finally come to Christ is not universalism—it is simply Christian and reflects the heart of God (1 Timothy 2:3-6; 2 Peter 3:9). However, we cannot profess to know whether every person will finally come to faith.

Q If we are included already, why struggle to live the Christian life?

A Some people do not like the idea that others who do not work as hard as they do will end up with the same reward as they (see parable of the laborers in the vineyard, Matthew 20:12-15). But this concern overlooks the truth that *no one*, no matter how hard they work, deserves salvation. That is why it is, for everyone, a free gift.

However, in Scripture we learn that our participation now in Jesus' love and life bears good fruit and personal joy that stretch into eternity. Living in ungodly ways results in pain, anguish and misery for oneself and others. That is why God doesn't want us to live that way. Consider the following passages:

- 1 Corinthians 3:11-15: "No one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames."
- Galatians 6:7-8: "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit

will reap eternal life.”

Q What about Christian mission? If all are included already in God’s love and life through Jesus, why do we proclaim the gospel to the world and make disciples for Jesus?

A It is Jesus’ union with each of us that provides the basis and foundation for every aspect of our life, including our participation in mission and ministry with Jesus. The love of Christ compels us to take part in what Jesus is doing in the world through the Spirit. We declare the gospel and invite all people to receive and embrace it. In doing so, we hope what is true of them already (in an objective sense) will be experienced by them personally (in a subjective sense).

Q How do we explain John 6:44?

A John 6:44 says, “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him.”

The Jewish religious leaders were seeking to deflect Jesus’ seemingly outrageous claim: “I am the bread of life that came down from heaven” (John 6:41). This statement was tantamount to claiming divine status.

Jesus’ reply to the Jewish leaders’ complaint concerning this claim was that they “stop grumbling” (v. 43) and realize that “no one can come to me [the bread of heaven] unless the Father who sent me draws him...” (v. 44). Jesus’ point is that the people would not be responding, except that God was making it possible for them to do so.

In this passage, Jesus is not limiting the number of people who are drawn to him; he is showing that he is doing the Father’s work. Elsewhere he says: “When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself” (John 12:32). And since Jesus does only what his Father wants, John 12:32 shows that the Father indeed draws all people to Jesus.

Q If the entire cosmos is included in Christ, why is there still evil in the world?

A The fullness of the kingdom of God will not arrive until Jesus' Second Coming. As Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, "Repent, then, and turn to God, so that your sins may be wiped out, that times of refreshing may come from the Lord, and that he may send the Christ, who has been appointed for you—even Jesus. He must remain in heaven until the time comes for God to restore everything, as he promised long ago through his holy prophets" (Acts 3:19-20).

In the meantime, we find assurance in Jesus' words: In this world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world (John 16:33).

Q **How does this theology compare to Calvinism and Arminianism?**

A In comparing and contrasting Christian theologies, we are talking about different approaches among Christian brothers and sisters who seek to serve the same Lord. Thus, our discussion should reflect respect and gentleness, not arrogance or hostility.

Calvinism is a theology that developed from the teachings of the Protestant reformer John Calvin (1509-1564). Calvinism emphasizes God's sovereignty in election and salvation. Most Calvinists define God's "elect" as a subset of the human race; Christ died for only some people ("limited atonement"). Those he did die for, however, were truly and effectively saved in the finished work of Christ, long before they became aware of it and accepted it. According to Calvinist doctrine, it is inevitable that those Christ died for will come to faith in him at some point. This is called "irresistible grace."

Trinitarian theology's main disagreement with Calvinism is over the scope of reconciliation. The Bible asserts that Christ made atonement "not only for our sins, but for the sins of the whole world" (1 John 2:2). And while Trinitarian theology rejects the restrictive extent of "limited atonement" and the determinism of "irresistible grace," it agrees with Calvinism that forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, justification, etc. were all accomplished effectively by what Christ did. These gospel truths have nothing to do with what we do or don't do.

Arminianism derives from the teachings of another Protestant

reformer, Jacob Arminius (1560-1609). Arminius insisted that Jesus died for all humanity, and that all people can be saved if they take necessary, personal action, which is enabled by the Spirit. This theology, while not ignoring God's sovereignty, tends to rely on a person's human decision and free will. Its premise is that salvation, forgiveness, reconciliation, redemption, justification, etc. are not actually effective until a person has faith.

Trinitarian theology differs from Arminianism over the effectiveness of the reconciliation. Atonement, or at-one-ment between God and humanity, is only a hypothetical possibility for Arminians; it does not become an accomplished actuality until one's decision of faith. Trinitarian theology, however, teaches that the atonement and reconciliation is objectively true even before it has been subjectively accepted and experienced.

While Calvinism and Arminianism emphasize different aspects of salvation theology, Trinitarian theology has attempted, as did Church Fathers Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory, to maintain in harmony the wideness emphasized by Arminians with the effectiveness emphasized by Calvinists.

Q What is *perichoresis*?

A The eternal communion of love that Father, Son and Spirit share as the Trinity involves a mystery of inter-relationship and interpenetration of the divine Persons, a mutual indwelling without loss of personal identity. As Jesus said, "the Father is in me, and I in the Father" (John 10:38). Early Greek-speaking Christian theologians described this relationship with the word *perichoresis*, which is derived from root words meaning *around* and *contain*. Each person of the Trinity is contained within the others; they dwell in one another.

Tips on Biblical Exegesis

In this booklet, we have sought to address typical questions and objections that arise as people consider Trinitarian theology. No doubt, there are other verses that bring similar questions or objections. What we have sought to do in this booklet is to demonstrate a Trinitarian, Christ-centered approach to reading and interpreting all passages of Holy Scripture.

Some object to the idea of *interpreting* Scripture. They say, “I just let the Bible say what it means.” This idea, though admirable, is not accurate. The act of reading is, necessarily, an act of interpretation. So the issue is not *whether* to interpret; it is this: What criteria do we use in interpreting as we read?

We always bring to Scripture certain ideas and advance assumptions. What we are urging here is that we come to Scripture with the truth of who Jesus Christ is as the beginning point and the ongoing criterion by which we read and interpret the Holy Scriptures. Jesus must be the “lens” through which all Scripture is read.

Therefore, in reading Scripture, we recommend thinking about the following questions:

- How does this passage line up with the gospel, which answers the question, “Who is Jesus?”
- Is this passage referring to the universal, objective salvation of all humanity in Jesus, or is it referring to the personal, subjective experience of accepting or rejecting that salvation?
- What is the historical, cultural, and literary context?
- How is this passage worded in other translations? Other translations can sometimes help us see passages from different perspectives. It’s also helpful to check Greek lexicons and other translation helps, because some of the richness and subtleties of the Greek New Testament are lost in translations into other languages.
- For a guide to biblical exegesis, you may find it helpful to consult *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan, 1981, 1993) or *Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers*, by Michael J. Gorman (Hendrickson, 2009).

Key points of Trinitarian, Christ-Centered Theology

Following are some basic precepts of the theology presented in this booklet.

1. The Triune God created all people to participate through the vicarious humanity of Jesus Christ in the love relationship enjoyed by the Father, Son and Spirit.
2. The Son became human, the man Jesus Christ, to reconcile all humanity to God through his birth, life, death, resurrection and ascension.
3. The crucified, resurrected and glorified Jesus is the representative and the substitute for humanity at the right hand of the Father, and he draws all people to himself by the power of the Holy Spirit.
4. In Christ, humanity is loved and accepted by the Father.
5. Jesus Christ paid for all our sins—past, present and future—and there is no longer any debt to pay.
6. The Father has in Christ forgiven all our sins, and he eagerly desires that we turn to him.
7. We can enjoy his love only when we believe that he loves us. We can enjoy his forgiveness only when we believe he has forgiven us.
8. When we respond to the Spirit by turning to God, believing the good news and picking up our cross and following Jesus, the Spirit leads us into the transformed life of the kingdom of God.

Recommended Resources for Further Study

To study Trinitarian, Christ-centered theology in greater depth, we recommend the following resources, listed alphabetically:

Books¹

- Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (Harper & Row, 1959; 130 pages)
- Karl Barth, *Evangelical Theology: An Introduction* (Eerdmans, 2000; 210 pages)
- Graham Buxton, *Dancing in the Dark* (Paternoster, 2001; 310 pages)
- Robert F. Capon, *Kingdom, Grace, Judgment* (Eerdmans, 2002; 522 pages)
- Elmer Colyer, *How to Read T.F. Torrance* (InterVarsity, 2001; 393 pages)
- Gerrit Scott Dawson, editor, *An Introduction to Torrance Theology* (T&T Clark, 2007, 179 pages)
- Trevor Hart, *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Wipf & Stock, 2005; 248 pages)
- George Hunsinger, *How to Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (Oxford University Press, 1993; 320 pages)
- Michael Jinkins, *Invitation to Theology* (InterVarsity, 2001; 278 pages)
- C. Baxter Kruger, *The Great Dance* (Regent, 2000; 121 pp.)
- Paul Louis Metzger, *The Word of Christ and the World of Culture: Sacred and Secular Through the Theology of Karl Barth* (Wipf & Stock, 2005; 252 pages)
- Paul D. Molnar, *Thomas F. Torrance* (Ashgate, 2009; 382 pages)
- James B. Torrance, *Worship, Community and the Triune God of Grace* (InterVarsity, 1996; 130 pages)

¹ Our recommendation of these books does not mean that we agree with every statement within each one. However, we are in substantial agreement with what each presents.

- Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Helmets & Howard, 1992; 126 pages)

GCI articles

Grace Communion International has hundreds of helpful articles that address Christian belief and practice. Following is a list of articles (with web addresses noted) that unpack key aspects of GCI's Trinitarian, Christ-centered theology.

- *Good News for Bad People* www.gci.org/gospel/badpeople
- *The Gospel Really Is Good News* www.gci.org/gospel/reallyis
- *Getting a Grip on Repentance* www.gci.org/gospel/repentance
- *Predestination—Does God Really Let You Choose Your Own Fate?* www.gci.org/god/predestination
- “Theology: What Difference Does It Make?” www.gci.org/god/theology
- “The Trinity: Just a Doctrine?” www.gci.org/god/trinity
- “Foundations of Theology for Grace Communion International” www.gci.org/av/theology

GCI video programs²

- *You're Included*. This online program presents interviews hosted by Dr. J. Michael Feazell, GCI vice president, with Trinitarian theologians and authors. View or download these interviews at www.youreincluded.org.
- *Speaking of Life*. This online program presents short discussions by Dr. Joseph Tkach, GCI president, on biblical topics from a Trinitarian perspective. View or download these programs at www.speakingoflife.org.

2 Our interviews with these theologians should not be construed as endorsing everything that these individuals teach.

Watch...

You're Included

Host J. Michael Feazell talks to leading Trinitarian theologians, writers and pastors about life in Jesus Christ. Our guests have included:

Ray Anderson, Fuller Theological Seminary
 Douglas A. Campbell, Duke Divinity School
 Elmer Colyer, U. of Dubuque Theological Seminary
 Gerrit Dawson, First Presbyterian Church, Baton Rouge
 Gary Deddo, InterVarsity Press
 Gordon Fee, Regent College
 Trevor Hart, University of St. Andrews
 George Hunsinger, Princeton Theological Seminary
 Chris Kettler, Friends University
 C. Baxter Kruger, Perichoresis
 John McKenna, Azusa Pacific University
 Jeff McSwain, Reality Ministries
 Steve McVey, author of *GraceWalk*
 Paul Louis Metzger, Multnomah University
 Paul Molnar, St. John's University
 Roger Newell, George Fox University
 Cherith Fee Nordling, Antioch Leadership Network
 Robin Parry, theological books editor, Wipf & Stock
 Andrew Purves, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary
 Andrew Root, Luther Seminary
 Dan Thimell, Oral Roberts University
 Alan Torrance, University of St. Andrews
 David Torrance, retired pastor, Church of Scotland
 Robert T. Walker, Edinburgh University
 William P. Young, author of *The Shack*

Complete programs are available free for viewing and downloading at **www.youreincluded.org**

If you want to know more...

This booklet is published by Grace Communion International, a denomination that has members and ministers in almost 100 nations. If you want to know more about the gospel of Jesus Christ, we offer help.

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We also offer personal counsel. If you have questions about the Bible, salvation or Christian living, we are happy to talk. If you want to discuss faith, baptism or other matters, a pastor near you can discuss these on the phone or set up an appointment for a longer discussion. We are convinced that Jesus offers what people need most, and we are happy to share the good news of what he has done for all humanity. We like to help people find new life in Christ, and to grow in that life. Come and see why we believe it's the best news there could be!

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