

PENTECOSTALS AND THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY

Andrew Gabriel

While God's triune nature (three distinct persons in one—Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is difficult to understand or explain, Andrew Gabriel impresses upon Pentecostal believers the importance of adhering to the traditional doctrine of the Trinity. This contribution reflects part of the PAOC's journey to refresh its Statement of Essential Truths (SOET).

For many Christians, the doctrine of the Trinity appears to be little more than a mathematical puzzle that they must accept "by faith." Throughout the history of the church, however, nothing could be further from the truth. Indeed, the belief that God is triune (three in one) is foundational to the oldest theological affirmations of the church, such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.¹

Moving ahead hundreds of years, the doctrine of the Trinity became a key issue early on within the North American Pentecostal movement. I will leave you to read more about the issue elsewhere, but as a result of the Oneness-Trinitarian debates, 29 per cent of the first *Statement of Fundamental Truths* that the PAOC published in 1928 was devoted to the doctrine of the Trinity.² Today, those within the PAOC continue to affirm that "there is one God, the creator, who exists eternally in unity as three equal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit" (SOET).³

While there were a number of theological issues at stake in those early Pentecostal discussions about the Trinity, why would they have cared about this doctrine at all? One

answer is that without the Trinity, you have no gospel. Or, to put it another way, the doctrine of the Trinity is an affirmation that "God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself" (2 Corinthians 5:19, NLT) so that we might be born again by the power of the Holy Spirit (John 3:3-8).

Without the Unity?

Some have thought of the doctrine of the Trinity as an optional appendage to Christian belief—or perhaps a necessary appendage, but an appendage nonetheless. In some cases, people give the impression that it really wouldn't make any difference if we dropped the doctrine altogether. On the contrary, however, belief in the Trinity is foundational to all that is core to Christianity. In fact, if you are prepared to drop the doctrine of the Trinity, you must be prepared to drop most of your distinctly Christian beliefs.

Without the doctrine of the Trinity and its assertion that God is one, we would essentially end up serving three gods. Would this mean, then, that we are committing idolatry in serving more than one god? And of the three—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—which one would we seek to please? Which one would we serve?

We might also wonder, if the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not *one* God, then who is really in charge? They all seem to get along, but how can we be assured that they will continue to co-operate? And, at the end of the day, can we really trust *all three*?



Dividing God into three separate beings (which is *not* what the doctrine of the Trinity does!) could also lead to a distorted understanding of God's character. For example, we might ask, which of the three is saving us? Perhaps Jesus, the nice god, is saving us from the angry god who hates us and can't find a way to forgive us.

Without the Three?

I suppose one could take an alternative approach and, instead of giving up on the unity of God, one could deny that God is three persons. This would lead to the unfortunate conclusion that Jesus is *not* "fully God" and that God is *not* "through the Spirit's indwelling ... present to all believers" (SOET).

To get around this problem, one could postulate that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are something like three masks God puts on as He relates to us (this is *not* what the doctrine of the Trinity teaches!). If this were the case,

then it would put into question the idea that Jesus existed before all of creation (Colossians 1:15-17) and that Jesus, the Word, was "in the beginning with God" (John 1:2, NLT).

If God wears three masks in relationship to us but doesn't truly exist as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, then we can't be sure we know God in any true way as He remains hidden behind His three masks. We could not, then, be sure that "God is loving, holy, infinite, just, and worthy of all worship" (SOET). In addition, we might even wonder if God is really a relational being. Perhaps God is not a personal being at all, but just an impersonal force of some sort, like Brahman of Hinduism. Moreover, if the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are simply three masks, what would make us think that God doesn't wear *many other masks*?

Triune Love of God

When the PAOC affirms that God "exists eternally in unity

as three equal persons" (SOET), it is a recognition of God's identity—God *truly* is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. And "unless we grasp these [three persons], only the bare empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God."⁴

As the idea of "Trinity" affirms the identity of God, it thereby also serves as an affirmation of the gospel and that "God is love" (1 John 4:8,16). The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God truly is the Father who personally reaches out to the world—so to speak—with His two hands of the Son and the Spirit to draw the world into a relationship with Himself.

It is because God the Father "so *loved* the world" that He "sent his Son to be the Savior of the world" (John 3:16, KJV, emphasis added; 1 John 4:14, NLT). Christ, who is "fully God" (SOET), "*loved* us and offered himself as a sacrifice for us" (Ephesians 5:2, NLT, emphasis added). And because of this "we who are believers might receive the promised Holy Spirit through faith" (Galatians 3:14, NLT) and "know how dearly God *loves* us, because" He gives "us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with *his love*" (Romans 5:5, NLT, emphasis added). This love makes us God's children, and "the Spirit of his Son [in] our hearts" prompts "us to call out, 'Abba, Father'" (Galatians 4:6, NLT). Can I hear an amen?

Unbiblical "Trinity"?

Some people protest that the word "Trinity" is not in the Bible. And they are right! I could add that the word "Trinity" also doesn't appear in the refreshed *Statement of Essential Truths*. But regardless of what one



”

...The belief that God is triune (three in one) is foundational to the oldest theological affirmations of the church, such as the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed.¹



thinks of the word, it is clear from Scripture that God is triune—three in one. That is, it is clear that God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and that there is only one God. And it is clear that "the Father accomplishes his plan of salvation" by sending the Son, who "revealed the Father" and "died for our sin," and that "through the Spirit's indwelling, the Father and the Son are present to all believers, making them children of God" (SOET). Finally, it is clear that this God, who loves us, is truly "worthy of all worship" (SOET). Amen!

1. Note that the preamble to both the current *Statement of Fundamental and Essential Truths* and the proposed refreshed *Statement of Essential Truths* affirm the "historic creeds" of the church.
2. "A Statement of Fundamental Truths Approved by The Pentecostal Assemblies of Canada," *The Pentecostal Testimony*, Vol. 9, No. 10 (October 1928), 3-5.
3. SOET refers to wording from the proposed and refreshed *Statement of Essential Truths*.
4. John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.2 (originally published in the 1500s). Princeton University Press describes this volume as "a defining book of the Reformation and a pillar of Protestant theology."

Andrew Gabriel, PhD, serves as vice-president of Academics and associate professor of theology at Horizon College & Seminary in Saskatoon, Sask. Read more from him at www.andrewkgabriel.com.