

... AND OTHER STUPID STATEMENTS

THEOLOGY

THEOLOGY PROPER

TRINITY

"The Trinity is Like 3-in-1 Shampoo" . . . And Other Stupid Statements

🕒 2009-08-27

💬 161



BY C MICHAEL PATTON

Alternate title: "Trinitarian Heresy 101"

"The doctrine of the Trinity is like an egg: three parts, one thing." Ever heard that? How about this, "The doctrine of the Trinity is like a three leaf clover: three leaves, one clover." Or how about THIS, "The doctrine of the Trinity is like water: three forms (ice, steam, liquid) one substance." But the greatest I ever heard was by a guy in one of my classes. He said that he thought that the Trinity was like 3-in-1 shampoo: three activities, one substance."

Stupid statements. Creative, but stupid. Don't use them. Any of them. Ever.

Explanation coming... Hang with me.

Last week I taught a group of kids about the doctrine of the Trinity here at the *Credo House* as part of our Theology for Kids series. The ages were anywhere from 7 to 13. Though I regularly teach this subject to adults, this was the first time that I taught the doctrine of the Trinity to kids. I was surprised that it went well. It is confusing enough for adults, how much more for kids?

Teaching the Trinity, I have found, is more about giving basic principles of *what it is* and then shooting down illustrations about *what it is not*. Proper Trinitarianism is about a delicate balance between the unity and diversity in the Godhead. Christians believe in one God, i.e., one essence, who eternally exists in three separate persons, all of whom are equal.

We often employ illustrations that help us to make the ineffable, effable, the abstract, concrete. But when it comes to the nature of God, especially with regard to the Doctrine of the Trinity, illustrations should only be used to show what the Trinity is not.

Let me list the three major heresies or departures from orthodoxy with regard to the Trinity:

1. Modalism: The belief that God is one God who shows himself in three different ways, sometimes as the Father, sometimes the Son, and sometimes the Holy Spirit. It describes God in purely functional terms. When he is saving the world on the cross, he is called Jesus. When he is convicting the world of sin, he is called Holy Spirit, and when he is creating the world, he is called Father. The error here is that this is contrary to what we believe: one God who eternally exists in three *persons*, not modes of functionality. It is not one God with three *names*, but one God in three *persons*.

2. Tritheism: The belief that we have three Gods, all who share a *similar* nature, but not the exact same nature. In this, the nature of God is either distinguished or divided, which destroys the unity of God. We don't believe in three persons who share in a species called "God," but three persons who share in an identical, united nature.

3. Subordinationism: This is a subset of tritheism, but deserves its own category. In other words, if you are a subordinationist, you are also a tritheist by definition, even if you don't recognize it. The subordinationist says that there is one God in three persons, but the essence of each person exists in a hierarchy. For example, many believe

that God the Father is the greatest and the most powerful. Coming in second is God the Son, followed by the second runner-up, the Holy Spirit. Orthodox trinitarianism confesses an essential equality among all the members of the Godhead. None are greater *in essence* than the other.

Here is a “Trinitarianism Heresy Test Chart” I have created. Keep this by your bed.

Notice:

- If equality is denied, on the opposite side it points to subordinationalism.
- If diversity is denied, the result is modalism.
- If unity is denied, the result is tritheism (or polytheism –many gods).

With this in mind, let me now cover the “stupid statements” and why they don’t pass the test:

1. The Trinity is like 3-in-1 shampoo. This can only point to modalism or tritheism. It is modalistic if you are saying the shampoo performs three functions, yet is one substance. But you can also break down the various elements that perform each function and see them separately. That is tritheism since all of the elements are not the same. They may work together to perform a specific goal, but they are not really the same substance.

2. The Trinity is like an egg. This is most definitely tritheism. While the egg is one, each of the substances that makes up the parts (shell, white stuff, and yoke), are most definitely distinct. The yoke is completely separate in nature from the shell.

3. The Trinity is like water. This is a modalistic illustration. Ice, steam, and liquid are examples of the same nature which *at one time or another* has a particular mode of existence. Sometimes it is liquid, sometimes it is ice, and sometimes it is steam. God is not sometimes Son, sometimes Father, and sometimes Spirit. He is eternally each, always at the same time.

4. The Trinity is like a three leaf clover. This is a form of tritheism. Each leaf of the clover is a separate leaf. It does not share in the same nature as the other leaves, but only has a similar nature. In the Trinity, each member shares in the exact same nature.

5. The Trinity is like a man who is simultaneously a father, son, and husband. This is an often used illustration, but it only serves to present a modalistic understanding of God that is false. Father, son, and husband only describe various functions of one person. Each function cannot exist in a simultaneous relationship with each other, can't talk to each other, and cannot exist in an eternal relationship with each other.

6. The Trinity is like a person who is one, yet has a spirit, soul, and a body. This one, like the first, can commit either a tritheistic or modalistic error, but cannot be used to illustrate the orthodox definition of the Trinity. It is modalistic in that the spirit, soul, and body are three functions of one conscience or person. But it can also be tritheistic when one considers that the spirit is not the *exact same nature* as the body (or the soul if you are a trichotomist—another lesson).

In the end, I do not believe that there are any true to life illustrations that can or should be used to teach or describe the Trinity. The Trinity is not a contradiction (i.e. one God who eternally exists as three separate Gods), but it is most definitely a paradox (a truth that exists in tension).

This graph is helpful in describing the Trinity. It is called the “Shield of the Trinity.”

It is always best to remember that the Father is God, the Holy Spirit is God, and the Son is God, but they are not each other.

One more thing. I often tell my students that if they say, “I get it!” or “Now I understand!” that they are more than likely celebrating the fact that they are a heretic! When you understand the biblical principles and let the tensions remain without rebuttal, then you are orthodox. When you solve the tension, you have most certainly entered into one of the errors that we seek to avoid.

Confused? Good! That is just where you need to be.

Like this:



C Michael Patton

C. Michael Patton is the primary contributor to the Parchment and Pen/Credo House Blog. He has been in ministry for nearly twenty years as a pastor, author, speaker, and blogger. Th.M. Dallas Theological Seminary (2001), president of Credo House Ministries and *Credo Courses*, author of *Now that I'm a Christian* (Crossway, 2014) *Increase My Faith* (Credo House, 2011), and *The Theology Program* (Reclaiming the Mind Ministries, 2001-2006), host of Theology Unplugged, and primary blogger here at Parchment and Pen. But, most importantly, husband to a beautiful wife and father to four awesome children. Michael is available for speaking engagements. Find him everywhere: [Find him everywhere](#)

161 replies to ""The Trinity is Like 3-in-1 Shampoo"... And Other Stupid Statements"



Trish Campbell

2014-09-09

As I was reading many of the comments from 2009-2014, I suddenly realized that Job has the answer. God rebuked Job's three friends, "...because you have not spoken of Me what is right as my servant Job has..."

This judgment of God prompted me to look again at what Job had said, since God declares Job's final words as "right."

So I read in the 42nd chapter where Job had said, "I know that You can do all things, and that no purpose of Yours can be thwarted...therefore I have declared that which I did not understand...I retract, and I repent in dust and ashes." (Job 42:2, 3b, 6)

Basically after all the discussion and debate, Job declared that God is too wonderful to understand, and God said that this is the only right statement.

One day we will see His face, and live! At last will know fully as we have been fully known. Until that astonishing day however, let's conclude, "I know that I cannot understand such a wonderful God as You!"

[Reply](#)



Lynn

2015-05-20

I am curious if the water, ice, steam example is viable when we consider triple point. (triple point is the pressure and temperature at which all 3 exist at once and are still part of each other, ie not separate containers)

Thoughts?

Reply



Paulo

2015-10-13

Thank you for the concise, accurate information. I, from time to time, use the water analogy but always specify the limitations of that analogy. Regards and God bless.

Reply



John Piermont Montilla (The Pantheist)

2020-04-12

None of the illustration is nearer to what the doctrine of the trinity tries to convey. Nor the attempt to explain the Trinity as a “mystery” that has no explanation is worse than a believer believing it without reason. There is a theological explanation and the explanation is not scientific but rather metaphoric or abstract. The Holy Trinity is a belief system and not a knowledge system that tries to explain the Triune God that is believed all through out the ages.. The problem in the understanding of this dogma or doctrine which outside the domains of nature is to force it to be explained within the domains of nature which is governed by logic and human reason according to scientific terms. That’s the confusion.

My two cents with regards this Doctrine is as follows:

Review and compare the book of Genesis and the Book of John and then ponder.

The Book of Genesis is the most ancient narrative of creation among the three Abrahamic Religions. All through out the narration, it mentions that “God” created the heavens and the earth. In every process of creation, the narrative states that this God speaks an instruction for each, and the narration made mention that after speaking every instruction it narrates that “the Spirit of God” was hovering over the waters.

the instructions are as follows:

- “Let there be light”,
- “Let there be a vault between the waters to separate water from water”,
- “Let the water under the sky be gathered to one place, and let dry ground appear”,
- “Let the land produce vegetation: seed-bearing plants and trees on the land that bear fruit with seed in it, according to their various kinds”,
- “Let there be lights in the vault of the sky to separate the day from the night, and let them serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years, and let them be lights in the vault of the sky to give light on the earth.”
- “Let the water teem with living creatures, and let birds fly above the earth across the vault of the sky”,
- “Let the land produce living creatures according to their kinds: the livestock, the creatures that move along the ground, and the wild animals, each according to its kind”
- “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals,[a] and over all the creatures that move along the ground”
- and so forth

Now, lets go to the New Testament in John 1:1. It restates the Genesis creation process and introduces another Christian doctrine known as the “Incarnation of the Word”.

The first five verses states:

- 1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.
- 2 The same was in the beginning with God.
- 3 All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.
- 4 In him was life; and the life was the light of men.
- 5 And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

So it is very clear that the Word spoken by God to create during creation in the book of Genesis was the Word not yet in flesh and became flesh in the new testament and that is Jesus known as the Son of God And the Spirit that hovers after each Word spoken completes the creation process and

the same spirit that breath life to the first man, Adam (He breathed the breath of life into the man's nostrils, and the man became a living soul)

In Genesis, there is only one Being with three creative processes (God, his word, and the spirit). These three are inseparable in the creation process.

In the new testament, specifically in the Book of John started the Christian Doctrine that holds that God is one God all three coeternal and consubstantial but with three earthly manifestations. In short, one God in three Divine persons.

The Triune God was debated and finalised during the time of Athanasius the Chief defender of the Trinity against Arianism and forms the basis of the Athanasian Creed adopted by the Council of Nicaea in 325.

Okay, since there are people that really wants to laymanize this doctrine for their own understanding, the illustrations regarding water, three leaves clover, three in one shampoo, and etc. are ridiculous analogies that does not come any nearer to what the doctrine is all about.

However, If there is an analogy that I can offer is this analogy:

The Fire:

God is the flame, the heat that comes out of it is Jesus, and light that emanates from the flame and the heat is Jesus. Each are coexistent. If you take one, the other cannot exist. The Science of Physics can prove this.

Thank you.

[Reply](#)



gary

2021-11-18

I would bet good money that if Jesus were still alive today he would be horrified that his modern followers believe that he was claiming to be God. One only has to look at Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin in Mark chapter 14 to see that NO ONE, not even the high priest, accused Jesus of claiming or even inferring to be God. The divinity of Jesus and the Trinity are later inventions of Gentile Christians.

<https://lutherwasnotbornagaincom.wordpress.com/2021/11/18/why-didnt-the-chief-priest-accuse-jesus-of-claiming-to-be-god/>

[Reply](#)



Fuck jesus

2022-04-21

Religion is bullshit.

[Reply](#)



Belle

2022-06-20

Ok but the triple point isn't SOMETIMES liquid, gas, or solid. It's ALL those things coexisting simultaneously in a very exact temperature/pressure. Solid, liquid, and gas are all present within the solution. No different than how the father, the son, and the Holy Spirit are. All those states exist simultaneously as ONE. At least do research before babbling about how wrong people are.

[Reply](#)
