

# The great Trinity debate

Foundations

Dave Burke & Chris Kelly

**“IF** YOU CONSIDER yourself a non-Trinitarian believer in Jesus, do I have a challenge for you!” wrote evangelical Trinitarian Rob Bowman Jr. in 2010, on the theological website, [www.reclaimingthemind.org](http://www.reclaimingthemind.org).

Bowman was offering a debate on the Trinity, to be conducted by written blog over a six-week period,<sup>1</sup> consisting of a positive argument at the start of each week followed by rebuttal. At the debate's conclusion a poll would determine how skilfully Rob Bowman and his opponent had defended their positions and who had won the debate. Bowman's non-Trinitarian challenger would be selected via popular vote.

News of this debate spread quickly through Christadelphian circles, and Brother Dave Burke from Australia was voted to defend the non-Trinitarian viewpoint. This short article attempts to summarise the key points arising from the debate. At this time of writing, the full debate text is still available at Bowman's website<sup>2</sup> or by typing 'great trinity debate' into

Google. Individual url's for each week can be found at Brother Dave Burke's online forum.<sup>3</sup>

The debate was followed by a number of non-Christadelphian bloggers, including Scott Lencke, a pastor at Cornerstone International Church and Dr Dale Tuggy, Associate Professor of Philosophy at State University New York Fredonia. Lencke offered an evangelical critique of Brother Burke's arguments while Tuggy, a Unitarian, provided a weekly commentary on both sides of the debate and concluded with an analysis of the outcome.<sup>4</sup>

## Bowman's defence of the Trinity

Bowman prefaced his remarks by explaining that his view of 'sola scriptura' – the Protestant Reformation concept that the Bible is the sole doctrinal authority – could include the usage of non-Biblical terminology. Therefore while agreeing that the word 'Trinity' does not appear anywhere in the Bible, Bowman argued that the concept of the Trinity was derived from Biblical ideas about

God. He defined the Trinity in six propositions which he claimed to be consistent with logic and scripture. Having initially insisted they were valid, Bowman revised them substantially under pressure from Brother Burke and entered Week Six with a list of seven propositions different from the first.

Bowman explained Deuteronomy 6:4, which he referred to as the Shema, as being consistent with Trinitarianism. In his own words: "The fact is that Deuteronomy 6:4 does not address the issue of whether Jehovah is a 'unipersonal' or 'triune' being ... monotheism is fundamental and essential to the doctrine of the Trinity." To Bowman, God's singularity is more complex than the Shema might suggest at face value. But he did not elaborate on the nature of that complexity and struggled to explain what he believes "one" is intended to mean in Deuteronomy 6:4, eventually describing two different options and falling somewhere between them.

Bowman argued that the Trinity is 'implicit' in the New Testament and was 'implicitly understood' in the first century AD. Despite repeated requests he failed to explain what this means, though he did say that evidence for an 'implicit Trinity' in the New Testament includes

<sup>1</sup> Due to the extent of rebuttal, counter-rebuttal and comments from readers, the debate continued until at least three weeks after its original six-week deadline.

<sup>2</sup> Here: [www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/category/the-great-trinity-debate](http://www.reclaimingthemind.org/blog/category/the-great-trinity-debate)

<sup>3</sup> Here: [www.btdf.org/forums/topic/15036-week-i-god/page\\_\\_p\\_409704#entry409704](http://www.btdf.org/forums/topic/15036-week-i-god/page__p_409704#entry409704)

<sup>4</sup> Dale Tuggy's articles on the debate can be found here: [www.trinities.org/blog/archives/2046](http://www.trinities.org/blog/archives/2046)

numerous ‘triadic statements’ such as Matthew 28:19.<sup>5</sup> He also cited other passages in which the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are all mentioned together. He did not assert that these verses prove or explain the Trinity, but merely that they support an ‘implicit Trinitarianism.’<sup>6</sup>

Unsurprisingly John’s Gospel provided most support for Bowman’s views that Jesus pre-existed his own birth, that he is one with God, and that the Holy Spirit is a personal being. When challenged on difficulties arising from the Trinitarian understanding of Jesus’ temptation, Bowman claimed Jesus was capable of temptation yet incapable of sin.<sup>7</sup> He was unable to

explain the logic behind this and offered no scriptural justification. When asked to address the atonement from a Trinitarian perspective, Bowman declined to answer specific questions.<sup>8</sup>

In a final blog, Bowman defined his scriptural argument in support of the Trinity as follows:

- “The Father and the Son stand in personal relation to each other.”
- “The Father and the Holy Spirit stand in personal relation to each other.”
- “The Son and the Holy Spirit stand in personal relation to each other.”
- Citing Biblical passages purported to support each of the above propositions, Bowman rested his case that the Trinity was the most faithful to all that the Bible teaches.

Bowman’s defence of the Trinity was particularly disappointing in the following respects:

- He committed numerous logical fallacies<sup>9</sup> and resorted to misrepresentation, unfounded

attacks on Brother Burke’s credibility, and quibbling over minor details of a rebuttal while avoiding the substance. He repeatedly dismissed arguments on spurious grounds so that he would not need to address them.

- He was reliant on statements framed in the negative, such as “Jesus never denied that he was God” in an attempt to reduce the burden of evidence for his side.
- He did not positively explain the Trinity. Readers were left unclear as to whether or not Bowman’s personal definition of the Trinity was consistent with the traditional definition.<sup>10</sup>
- He explicitly denied that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are separate beings, but this was not clear from the formula he presented in Week One. By Week Six he had changed the formula in an attempt to escape the logical and theological problems emerging from his conclusions. Commenting on this, Dr Dale Tuggy observed that Bowman had failed to enlighten readers as to what the Trinity actually is.

argument from ignorance, argument from silence, straw man, and special pleading.

<sup>10</sup> Some Trinitarian readers challenged him openly on this point.

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<sup>5</sup> “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.”

<sup>6</sup> This begs the question of why the Trinity is merely ‘implicit’ in a book inspired by divine revelation, spanning almost 4,000 years of history, throughout which God claimed to be providing humanity with a complete picture of His identity and purpose. Bowman had no answer for this, nor could he explain why the Trinity was not revealed in the Old Testament.

<sup>7</sup> Trinitarians are divided on this issue. Jonathan Edwards, Wayne Grudem, William G. T. Shedd and others have argued that Jesus was capable of sin. Yet E. F. Harrison, Charles Hodge, John W. McCormick and others have argued he was incapable of sin.

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<sup>8</sup> These included, What was achieved, and how? What was it about Jesus that made him a perfect sacrifice for our sins? Did he need to be God in order to save us? If so, why? Above all, what died on the cross? Was it God who died, or simply a mortal human body?

<sup>9</sup> Including, but not limited to: affirming the consequent, false dichotomy, affirmative conclusion from negative premise,

### Brother Burke's challenge to the Trinity

Bowman had attempted to change the rules of the debate two days before it was due to begin, stating that arguments from logic and history would not be allowed on the grounds that they were 'irrelevant'<sup>11</sup> and claiming that Brother Burke had agreed to this condition. When Brother Burke corrected him, Bowman conceded that logical and historical arguments would be permitted on the understanding that he reserved the right to ignore them.<sup>12</sup>

In focusing on Biblical revelation about God and the Lord Jesus Christ, Brother Burke pointed out that the New Testament does not reveal anything fundamentally different about God's nature that had not already been revealed in the Jewish Old Testament. We would require good reason to depart from Jewish monotheism, and no such strong reason is supplied by the New Testament. On the contrary, the New Testament presents God and Jesus as distinct beings (1 Corinthians 8:6 being one of many examples).

Turning to what was revealed about Jesus: he was the promised Jewish Messiah but he never claimed to be God or 'God the

Son', nor did any such accusation arise at his trial. This is critical, considering the Jews had previously attempted to stone him for statements such as, "Before Abraham was, I am" and "I and the Father are one". Whatever the Jewish rulers understood by these statements, they could not be presented as evidence of a claim to deity.

The records of Mary's pregnancy in Matthew and Luke, Jesus' humble birth, his childhood, the fact that he got hungry (Matthew 4:2), weary (John 4:6), thirsty (John 19:28), he bled and died, all suggest that the inspired Biblical writers conveyed Jesus as human, not deity. In notable contrast, God is presented throughout the Bible as independently self-existent, omniscient and omnipresent.

Trinitarians attempt to resolve this by claiming Jesus possessed both human and divine nature united in one body (a concept called the "hypostatic union") and that he is variously described as acting or speaking "from his humanity" or "from his deity" depending on the context. This, like so many other concepts surrounding Trinitarianism, is merely an ad hoc work-around which Trinitarians are forced to use as scaffolding to uphold their doctrine.

As to the small number of verses in John's Gospel suggesting a profound connection between God and a pre-existent Jesus, Brother Burke pointed out that these texts – which must be interpreted within the socio-historic context

of Second Temple Judaism and first century Christianity – do not provide the weight of scriptural evidence required for the radical reconceptualization of God as a triune being. John's stated purpose both at the beginning and end of his Gospel was to proclaim Jesus' identity, but not as



Trinitarianism requires:

- In the first chapter Jesus is twice called the "Son of God" (verses 34,49).
- At the end of John's Gospel: "these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God" (John 20:31).

John's Gospel describes a purposeful oneness between God and Jesus to which disciples can

<sup>11</sup> Having read Bowman's book and researched his methods, Brother Burke already knew that Bowman's knowledge of these subjects was poor, which explains why he was keen to exclude them.

<sup>12</sup> Bowman ended up addressing logical and historical arguments in the debate, presumably realising that ignoring them was not a viable option.

only aspire imperfectly (John 17). It is a huge leap to use these verses to construct a doctrine that God and Jesus (and also the Holy Spirit) are all the same being. As Brother Burke wrote, “Extraordinary claims require extraordinary proof; this just isn’t it”.

Bible readers  
must avoid  
hasty



conclusions  
on the basis  
of personifying  
language in passages such as John 14:16,17. This is merely a useful linguistic device.<sup>13</sup> For the main part – including Pentecost – the Holy Spirit is spoken of as God’s

<sup>13</sup> This even extends to miracles: notice that signs from God can have a “voice” (Exodus 4:8; the Hebrew refers to ‘the voice of the latter sign’).

inanimate power, a view consistent with the portrayal of God’s Spirit in the Old Testament, and in pre-Christian rabbinic literature. Mainstream theologians – even Trinitarian ones<sup>14</sup> – agree this is the correct lens through which to read the New Testament.<sup>15</sup>

Neither in the Gospels, nor in the preaching of the apostles in Acts, nor the apostolic epistles, nor the first century writings of Clement, Polycarp or the Didache, nor even in most of the Christian writers up to the fourth century do we read a clear explication of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit as a Trinity.

Instead, we have increasing confusion as Christian philosophy – redolent with pre-Christian neo-Platonic concepts – blurred the identity and nature of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. The resulting political schism gave birth to the Nicene and Athanasian creeds. This strange, convoluted, and occasionally violent path does not reflect the calm theological maturity of the early church,

<sup>14</sup> Examples include Max Turner, Richard Bauckham, and GWH Lampe. Turner examined a wide range of passages from Luke and Acts, concluding they do not prove literal personhood but merely reflect the language of personification that was common within the first century Jewish theological milieu (see “Power from on High”, Sheffield Academic Press, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> We know the New Testament writers shared this understanding, as Luke writes in a characteristic Hebraic parallelism: ‘the Holy Spirit shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee’ (Luke 1:35).

guided into all wisdom by the Holy Spirit.

## Conclusion

God is undoubtedly more profound than our mortal minds can grasp, but the Trinity is at best an illogical and flawed theory, unfortunately held by the majority of Christians who have neither critically examined their Bibles nor the dogma inherited from their creeds. Bowman’s initial challenge was bursting with confidence. Yet the reader poll included as a condition of the debate was not conducted when the debate concluded, suggesting private reservations on the outcome.

Despite this shortcoming, for as long as the text remains available online it provides an opportunity to reflect vigorously and critically on the weight of evidence on both sides. Bowman’s argument itself, and his early attempt to exclude logic and history from the debate, betray the necessity of the Trinity being defensible only within the artificial boundaries of inter-related propositions and ‘triadic statements’ about relations between each of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. Bowman demonstrated that defending the Trinity from the Bible is an excruciating task fraught with paradox.

By contrast, Christadelphians can show a consistent doctrinal arc from Genesis to Malachi supporting our understanding of God. We can demonstrate that Jesus and the apostles drew upon this material as the basis of their own theology. There was no new

revelation of God's nature and identity in the New Testament.

Christianity began as a Jewish religion, and that Jewish foundation is critical to our interpretation of scripture. The first Christians were Jews; they interpreted scripture from a Jewish perspective; they described God and Jesus using Old Testament language and Messianic typology. They were able to express every aspect of their faith by the use of

scripture alone, as we still do today. They affirmed a belief in the God of Israel and His human Son, the Jewish Messiah.

If God is three persons, Christianity loses its necessary connection with God's people – the Jews – and an essential aspect of the atonement: Jesus' humanity. scripture says it was essential for Jesus to be made like us in every way so that he could relate to us and act as our mediator to God.

He genuinely understands our pain and sympathises with our temptations. Although Son of God, he was truly human, and experienced the very sufferings we endure – and more! If he was never truly one of us, he cannot understand us in the way scripture describes and could not have died for our sins. To believe in Jesus and his atoning work we must reject the doctrine of the Trinity.

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# 100 years ago

## from *The Christadelphian*, August 1913

### Spiritual medicine

If you have the blues, read the twenty-seventh Psalm. If you are losing confidence in men, read the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. If people seem unkind, read the fifteenth chapter of John. If you are discouraged about your work, read the one hundred and twenty-sixth Psalm. If you find the world growing small and yourself great, read the nineteenth Psalm. If you cannot have your own way in everything, keep silent and read the third chapter of James. If you are all out of sorts, read the twelfth chapter of Hebrews.

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“The world is so large and we ourselves so small that everything cannot revolve around us.”

“If something damages us, hurts us, who can tell if that is not necessary to the welfare of creation?”

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## Readers' Q&A

There is no Readers' Q&A page this month. If anyone has any questions they would like other readers to consider and answer, this is the page to do it. Subjects range from exposition to general ecclesial matters. Readers' responses are invited to any of the questions raised in previous months.

**Editor**