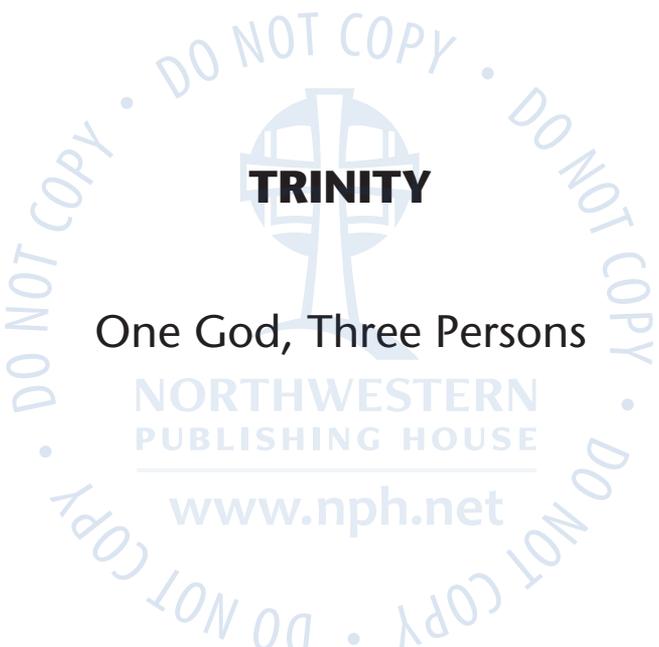


The People's Bible Teachings



TRINITY

One God, Three Persons

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Editor's Preface

The People's Bible Teachings is a series of books on all of the main doctrinal teachings of the Bible.

Following the pattern set by The People's Bible series, these books are written especially for laypeople. Theological terms, when used, are explained in everyday language so that people can understand them. The authors show how Christian doctrine is drawn directly from clear passages of Scripture and then how those doctrines apply to people's faith and life. Most importantly, these books show how every teaching of Scripture points to Christ, our only Savior.

The authors of The People's Bible Teachings are parish pastors and professors who have had years of experience teaching the Bible. They are men of scholarship and practical insight.

We take this opportunity to express our gratitude to Professor Leroy Dobberstein of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary, Mequon, Wisconsin, and Professor Thomas Nass of Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, for serving as consultants for this series. Their insights and assistance have been invaluable.

We pray that the Lord will use these volumes to help his people grow in their faith, knowledge, and understanding of his saving teachings, which he has revealed to us in the Bible. To God alone be the glory.

Curtis A. Jahn
Series Editor

Introduction

At Fountain Abbey in the north of England, medieval monks heard a sermon from their abbot on every Sunday of the year except one. On Trinity Sunday there was no sermon, “owing to the difficulty of the subject.”

The doctrine of the Trinity is difficult. It is an attempt to say about God what the Bible says about God, not more and not less. We cannot prove that God is three in one, but we can show that the Scriptures teach that he is. It is possible to show that a particular way of trying to express the truth about God is mistaken. It is certainly not possible to prove that the words *Trinity*, *being*, *person*, and *nature* are necessarily the only, or the best, ones to express the scriptural truths about God. So far, however, no one has found more useful language.

We cannot accurately define God because the Bible does not define him. We cannot fully comprehend him. God has revealed himself, but he has not told us the truth about himself to the extent that he knows it. A god who fits into my intelligence would be smaller than I am and therefore not God. We can only imperfectly express the truth concerning who God is.

We can, however, (though always imperfectly) describe God on the basis of what he tells us about himself in the Bible. Most important, we can read about what God has done to save every sinner. In his written Word, he tells us what we need to know for our salvation. From the Scriptures we can begin to comprehend what he has done, is doing, and will do for us.

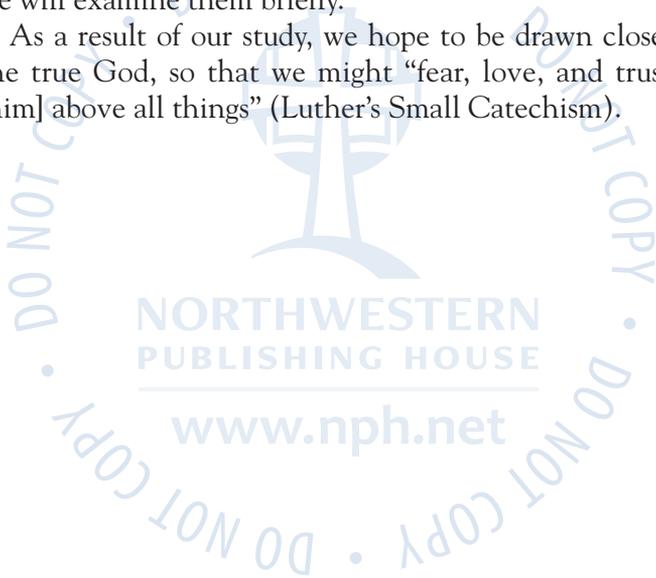
It is just in telling the story of the world's redemption that the Bible tells us that God is one *and* that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We cannot understand this in terms of arithmetic. We must simply set all mathematics aside and listen to what God says about himself in Scripture. We must use our reason to try to understand what Scripture says, not to decide whether what Scripture says is reasonable or true.

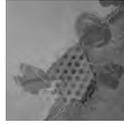
The doctrine of the Trinity is inseparably linked to the truth that Jesus Christ is our divine Savior. It is therefore a practical doctrine, not a marginal teaching on the “fringe” of what is important to our faith. Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) has been called “the father of modern theology” and “the founder of modern Protestant theology.” In his book of systematic theology *The Christian Faith*, this German rationalist treated the doctrine of the Trinity in an appendix! Since he did not believe that Christ is the eternal God who became fully human for our sake, and because he regarded the Holy Spirit as simply the church's “common spirit,”¹ he did not know what to do with the doctrine of the Trinity. Since Schleiermacher, “modern theology” has generally dismissed the doctrine as false, outdated, or irrelevant. It is not surprising that “modern theology” has also dismissed the Bible's teaching about Christ's incarnation and his atonement for sin. As we shall see, those doctrines are inseparably connected with the doctrine of the Trinity.

In this book we will answer the questions, “Can God be known?” and “How can God be known?” Then we will look at what the Bible teaches about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. We will trace the story of how teachers of the early church attempted to put these truths into words. We will see that even Bible-believing

Christians of considerable intelligence had great difficulty finding the right concepts and language. We will see that some more recent theologians, teaching and writing on this doctrine, have merely revived and restated ancient errors. With regret and sorrow, we will point out the ways in which various religions deny and oppose the Bible's teachings and how some Christian sects have erred in expressing the doctrine of the Trinity. Finally, we will see how the great trinitarian creeds came into existence, and we will examine them briefly.

As a result of our study, we hope to be drawn closer to the true God, so that we might “fear, love, and trust in [him] above all things” (Luther's Small Catechism).





1

Can God Be Known, and How?

Only God *really* knows God. No one has eyewitness information to offer regarding him. He “lives in unapproachable light,” and “no one has seen or can see” him (1 Timothy 6:16). The wisest philosopher has no advantage over the ordinary person in this matter. “For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the man’s spirit within him? In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God” (1 Corinthians 2:11). Just as you and I cannot know each other’s inmost thoughts (we often do not understand our own thoughts!), so we cannot, with our limited human intelligence, know God’s thoughts or comprehend who he really is.

Revealed in nature

The Bible was not written to prove that there is a God. In its very first words, it assumes his existence and his activity: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Genesis 1:1). There is no discussion of whether there is a God or what God is like. The author simply makes God the subject of the first sentence and begins to speak about what God has done. The Bible can do that because God has revealed himself in the natural world and in the inner nature of human beings.

Although he has not revealed his essential being or all his thoughts, God has made himself known in nature and continues to do so. True, he cannot be confined in a test tube or scrutinized under a microscope. He has, however, revealed a great deal about what he is like, what he has done, and what he is doing. He has revealed himself as the Creator and the judge in what we call natural law, in the human conscience, and in history. He has not, however, revealed himself in nature as the Savior.

Creation

Paul writes in Romans 1:19,20: “What may be known about God is plain to them [the Gentiles, or heathen], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” Since the first day of creation, the vastness of the universe, the marvels of the human body and mind, and the infinite variety of nature have cried out “God made us!” David declares in Psalm 19:1, “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”

The world that we can see, which fills us with awe, testifies that only an eternally powerful and wise divine being could be responsible for this amazing world. “It didn’t happen by itself” has always been man’s instinctive reaction, although we know that this natural knowledge can be suppressed by the incessant drumming of atheistic evolutionary theory as fact.

What God reveals about himself in creation does not depend on the insights of genius or even on the lifelong study of science. Without help from philosophers or scientists, ordinary people recognize that there must be a power behind the way this world came into being and underlying the ways in which it is preserved. Many who understand higher mathematics and science marvel at the evidence of a designer in nature. The most primitive tribes sense the presence of a divine power. God “has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:17). Knowing that there is a god, but not knowing who he is, they worship man-made gods or the spirits of creatures, hoping to gain their favor or appease their wrath. It is really more natural to believe in God’s existence than to disbelieve.

Natural law

Before Adam and Eve sinned, they had obeyed God’s law perfectly. Because their fall into sin affected every human being that would ever be born, our knowledge of right and wrong is blurred and imperfect. Still, though human beings are by nature utterly corrupted by sin, even the heathen “know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death” (Romans 1:32). “Such

things” are listed in the catalog of sins against God and our fellow human beings that Paul provides in Romans 1:18-31. That catalog includes gross idolatry, homosexuality, murder, and less spectacular sins that are not always recognized or acknowledged as sins—such as envy, gossip, arrogant boasting, and disobedience to parents.

How do sinners know about “God’s righteous decree” (Romans 1:32)? In a parenthetical comment at Romans 2:14,15, Paul speaks of God’s law written in the hearts of those who do not know the Ten Commandments: “Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them.” The apostle is not saying that the heathen (Gentiles) keep the law to God’s satisfaction. They are, however, doing some of the things required by the law. We might say they have some understanding that it is wrong to dishonor parents, murder, take a neighbor’s spouse, steal, or harm another person’s reputation. The natural corruption of sin and many generations of sinners have blurred this law written in people’s hearts. It is there, however, and it bears witness that we must answer to our Maker for how we live. People can have some of this knowledge brainwashed out of them by unbelieving teachers or by atheistic literature. Unless they are really perverse, however, they realize that they are accountable to God, the giver of the gift of life.

Conscience

The Gentiles, said Paul, who do not have the written law but do have the law written in their hearts, also have

consciences, “their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them” (Romans 2:15). Conscience is the “inner voice,” given by God to every human being, that reminds sinners of what is moral and what is immoral. Conscience testifies to the rightness or wrongness of what we have done. Conscience rightly accuses the wrongdoer, and it defends the person who does what is right. Unless it is smothered or cauterized or completely warped, conscience is there to tell even the non-Christian that right is right and wrong is wrong.

History

God has also revealed his preserving and governing presence in the history of the world—even in the lives of individuals. From the day he spoke the word of blessing to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28), to this day, God has directed and controlled the destinies of nations. He has determined how long any civilization will endure. He has set the boundaries for every nation and empire. “From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live” (Acts 17:26). Empires rise and fall according to his will. He orders the course of civilizations and cultures, the geography and history of nations. We cannot usually interpret his acts (especially while they are in progress) or explain why he orders events as he does, but history has demonstrated again and again that he is in charge.

Purpose of God's revelation in nature

For what purpose does God reveal himself in nature and in the testimony of conscience to natural law? As we see in Paul's address before the assembly of the Areopagus (Mars' Hill) in Athens, it is to move people to seek the true God: "God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us" (Acts 17:27). The fact of our existence and the resources for living that God provides should prompt us to seek the giver of all good gifts. God demonstrated his power and intelligence in creation and in the history of nations so that people would realize an intelligent and powerful being is in charge of the universe. In God's intention this should make them seek him, reach for him, and try to find him. The people who dedicated an altar "TO AN UNKNOWN GOD" in Athens (Acts 17:23) had sought and they were reaching, but they had not yet found.

God's revelation in nature leaves sinners "without excuse" (Romans 1:20). More important, it provides points of contact for the revelation of God in his Son, Jesus Christ, for the gospel that God has revealed in the Bible.

The folly of atheism

If God has revealed his power in creating the universe, his goodness in preserving it, and his wisdom in governing it, how can anyone deny that he exists? How can an unbelieving astronomer say, "The heavens do *not* declare the glory of God, and the skies do *not* show the work of his hands"? Only by stubbornly denying the evidence do they suppress the truth by their wickedness (Romans 1:18). Not intelligence but wickedness causes people to deny and disobey God. People cannot use the excuse that they don't know about God's existence. Atheists are not atheists by

nature but because they reject the testimony of nature. They do not deny God because they are more intelligent than other people are, but because of their own corruption. “The fool says in his heart, ‘There is no God.’ They are corrupt, their deeds are vile; there is no one who does good” (Psalm 14:1).

Atheistic theories of evolution have led many people to deny nature’s testimony of God. One Christian writer makes this observation:

In his *Descent of Man*, Darwin made clear that he did not believe that conscience or moral sense came from God. . . . Darwin denied that man has an instinctive belief in God. . . . It should not surprise us that Darwin’s followers would take his teachings to their inevitable conclusions. If evolution were true, there would be no need for an almighty, all-knowing God, no need for a supernatural Creator. And if there were no God, there would be no supernatural Being to whom we must answer. There would be no absolute right or wrong, since moral standards also would be a result of evolution, changeable and flexible. Sin would be an idea from which man must be liberated. The Savior himself would be unnecessary. Man would have no purpose on earth other than to live for himself and his own glory. In spite of the dreary picture just painted, most people today accept the theory of evolution as an accurate account of man’s origin.²

The trap of self-righteousness

Adherents of many world religions, even those who profess to believe in one god, seek to gain God’s acceptance and favor by what they do and how they live. We are thinking here of the work-righteousness of Judaism and Islam in particular. Both insist that God is one, but both also depend on their own deeds to gain God’s favor.

The number of Muslims (adherents of Islam, who worship Allah and do not want to be called Muhammadans) is rapidly increasing in North America. Buddhists venerate the Lord Buddha but do not believe in a personal god. Buddhism, especially Zen Buddhism, is growing in influence in the Western world.

Adherents of the New Age Movement quote the Bible when it suits their purposes, but they reject the God of the Bible and emphasize their own supposed inborn divinity.

More than natural knowledge is needed

The natural knowledge of God does not enable anyone to do what pleases God. The law written in human hearts makes it possible for families, communities, and civilizations to function in an orderly and relatively peaceful manner. The natural knowledge of God, however, does not make people love God or enable them to keep his law. On the one hand, sinners can suppress the natural law and conscience in order to do what they simply want to do. Their sinful nature can assert itself against God and his will. On the other hand, sinners can conform in an outward way to the Golden Rule, but without love for God or trust in him.

Most important, the natural knowledge of God does not show people their Savior. That leaves people, in their natural state, under God's wrath: "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness" (Romans 1:18). It makes them subject to "God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death" (Romans 1:32). Lacking the fear and love of God in their hearts, "they not only continue to do these

very things but also approve of those who practice them” (Romans 1:32).

God revealed in his Son, Jesus Christ

The evangelist John writes, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known” (John 1:18). Jesus, the Word of God who became flesh (John 1:14), has made God known. The Greek word used in John 1:18 for “has made him known” could also be translated as “interpreted,” “explained,” or “described.” What we need to know about God, we know in and from his Son, Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, “All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Matthew 11:27). What even Moses, who saw only God’s back (Exodus 33:18-23), could not do, the Son of God has done. Jesus has seen the Father, known the Father, and reveals the Father. As God’s Son, Jesus is witness to all the Father’s intentions toward the human race. As true man, he speaks in a language we can understand when he tells us what those intentions are.

God revealed in Scripture

The true God is known in Jesus Christ. All that we can know about Jesus Christ, we know from the Bible. The revelation of God in his Son and the revelation of God in the Scripture are not independent of each other or different from each other. Christ is the heart and core of Scripture, and Scripture bears witness to Christ. To those who challenged his claim to be the Son of God and his authority to teach as he did, Jesus said: “You diligently study the

Scriptures because you think that by them you possess eternal life. These are the Scriptures that testify about me. If you believed Moses, you would believe me, for he wrote about me” (John 5:39,46). The prophecies, the promises, the ceremonies and sacrifices—indeed, all Old Testament history—testified about Christ. His conception and birth, his life of service, his death and resurrection were all foretold and foreshadowed in the Old Testament. The New Testament was written to bear witness to him and what he did: “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (John 20:31).

The Bible does not answer every serious question we might ask or satisfy every curiosity we might have. It does, however, make us wise for salvation and equip us to serve our Savior-God. As Paul wrote to Timothy: “From infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work” (2 Timothy 3:15-17). “The man of God,” incidentally, does not mean the pastor. It means the Christian. Scripture equips every Christian “for every good work.”

The Holy Scriptures are the only reliable source from which we can learn who God is, what he does, and what he has in mind for us. It is fashionable in some circles to say, “I trust Christ, not the Bible. My faith is in the Savior, not in a book.” Fashionable, but deceptive. How can anyone trust Jesus without trusting the only authentic and reliable source of knowledge about him? On the other hand, what hope and comfort would the Scriptures give us if it were not for their message of Christ the Savior?