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November/December 2015

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For the first 300 years of Christianity, faithful followers of Christ focused their best theological thinking on one, single question: Who was Jesus? Of course, they knew He was the Lord, and they knew He was the Son of God. But what did those terms actually mean?

Now, 2000 years later, there still remains confusion—unwarranted confusion, I might add—on this critical question, even in the church. It's also the very first thing distorted with Christian look-alike pretenders like Mormonism and Jehovah's Witnesses.

In keeping with my own philosophy that Christians should first major in the majors before nit-picking on secondary issues, I have decided to tackle this question—along with the larger issue of the Trinity—in the next two issues of *Solid Ground*.

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Greg Kousser





November 1, 2015

Dear Friend,

For the first 300 years of Christianity, faithful followers of Christ focused their best theological thinking on one, single question: Who was Jesus? Of course, they knew He was the Lord, and they knew He was the Son of God. But what did those terms actually mean?

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In keeping with my own philosophy that Christians should first major in the majors before nit-picking on secondary issues, I have decided to tackle this question—along with the larger issue of the Trinity—in the next two issues of *Solid Ground*.

My broad goal is to make a clear, scriptural case for the Triune nature of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob with a particular focus on the deity of Jesus Christ. And also show why the doctrine is critical to a sound understanding of the Lord we serve and of His work in our salvation.

In this first installment, I aim to accomplish four things. First, I want you to understand the *significance* of the Trinity. Next, I want to look briefly at the alleged *problem* of the Trinity. Third, I want to offer a clear, concise, coherent *definition* of the Trinity. Finally, I want to address the alleged *contradiction* of the Trinity and silence that objection once and for all.

For many, the Trinity seems to be a mysterious, intractable difficulty. I think they're mistaken. I'm convinced the Trinity is not a problem, but a magnificent solution to a host of other problems. Most importantly, only the Trinity is consistent with God's own self-revelation in both Testaments.

When it comes the question of who Jesus is and what God is really like in His essential nature, we let God speak for Himself. That is always the safest route.

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Gregory Koukl

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THE TRINITY:

A SOLUTION, NOT A PROBLEM—PART I

By Gregory Koukl

I want to start by asking three questions I hope will alert you to problems I'm willing to bet you've never thought about as a Christian.

Three Questions, Three Problems

Here's the first question: What is the one thing that everyone who believes in God agrees on about what God is like? The answer, by common assent, is that God is love.

Further, we are convinced that God doesn't just *happen* to be loving, and could easily have been something else—nasty, mean, cruel, or evil. Rather, love is *essential* to God, vital to His nature, and without it God would be less than God. It's one of His moral perfections.

Good so far. Now I want you to imagine yourself completely alone on a remote island. Would really, really loving your solitary self be an example of perfect and profound love? Of course not. It would be an example of perfect and profound conceit.

Deep affection for yourself does not constitute a moral perfection.

Love by its very nature involves giving oneself away. When all the “loving” is merely self-loving, it's not love; it's narcissism.

Yet before God created anything, wasn't He all alone with only His solitary self to love? So how could God be truly loving, then, before anyone else existed to give Himself in love to? Do you see the problem?

It gets worse. I have a second question: What is the most famous verse in the Bible? Easy. “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life” ([Jn. 3:16](#)). This wonderful passage, though, raises a concern.

According to Christians, God takes a man who was not guilty and treats Him as if He were, by giving Him over to an unspeakably brutal death, so God could brag about His love in pardoning those who actually are guilty. Now, I can see how the cross would be evidence for *Jesus'* love in that scenario, but how is it evidence of *God's* love? How is savaging someone innocent on behalf of the guilty a loving thing to do?

This problem is not lost on Steve Chalke, an influential leader in UK emerging churches. In *The Lost Message of Jesus*, he characterizes substitutionary atonement—the classic “Jesus paid for your sins” view—as...

...a form of cosmic child abuse—a vengeful Father, punishing his Son for an offence he has not even committed. Understandably, both people inside and outside of the Church have found this twisted version of events morally dubious and a huge barrier to faith. Deeper than that, however, is that such a concept stands in total contradiction to the statement “God is love.” If the cross is a personal act of violence perpetrated by God towards humankind, but borne by his Son, then it makes a mockery of Jesus' own teaching to love your enemies and to refuse to repay evil with evil.¹

“Cosmic child abuse”? Indeed, that's what it sounds like. How will you answer him? Do you see the problem?



ONLY THE TRINITY CAN MAKE SENSE OF
THE LOVE OF GOD AS AN INTRINSIC
MORAL EXCELLENCE...

I have one last question. According to [John 3:16](#), *who* is rescued by Jesus' death? The verse says, "whoever believes." That means *anyone* who believes, and *everyone* who believes. And if someone doesn't believe for everlasting life, what is his fate instead? Everlasting death: punishment, banishment, and torment forever.

So here's the real question: How does a mere man, Jesus, in the short span of three hours on a cross, pay for an eternity of even *one person's* sin, much less the sins of *anyone* and *everyone* who believes? How is that mathematically possible? Do you see the problem?

I pose these three concerns to you for a reason. Many people think the Trinity is largely irrelevant. It's so much high theology best left to the doctrinal nitpickers and not imposed on ordinary folk of simple faith. Plus it's confusing. Like the infield fly rule, everybody believes it, but nobody understands it. Anyway, it usually only comes up when people knock on our front door and challenge it, and most of the time we hide when we see them coming.

Yet, when you think about it, only the Trinity can answer the challenge of our three questions. Only the Trinity can make sense of the love of God as an intrinsic moral excellence, a holy affection continuously given and received from

eternity past among the divine persons.² Only the Trinity can turn Jesus' sacrifice on a cross into a testament of God's love for the world, since it was *God's* blood, shed by Christ, that purchased Christ's church ([Acts 20:28](#)). And only with the Trinity can a man suffer a finite amount of time, yet cover an eternal debt for a countless multitude, since the man was Himself the God of infinite grace.

The Centrality of the Trinity

Put simply, the Trinity and the Gospel are inseparable. "The gospel is Trinitarian, and the Trinity is the gospel," theologian Fred Sanders writes. "Christian salvation comes from the Trinity, happens through the Trinity, and brings us home to the Trinity."³ The first-century church understood this.

True, the doctrine didn't fill out in a robust form until centuries later. The word "Trinity" wasn't used in Christian literature until the mid-second century by Theophilus,⁴ and the doctrine itself wasn't officially formulated until the early fourth century when it was directly attacked by Arius.

Still, the *elements* of the Trinity were all in place—understood, accepted, and taught—early in the history of the church having been handed down by apostolic witness. The most ancient testimony of Christ was, "Jesus is Lord"—Jesus the Messiah (the Savior) is God, that is. In the opening days of the church, Ananias and Sapphira dropped dead after lying to the Holy Spirit since they had "not lied to men, but to God" ([Acts 5:1-4](#)). Within 20 years of the cross, Paul confidently notes that Jesus had been "declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead" ([Rom. 1:4](#)). And within 30 years, the ancient *Didache* records, the Trinitarian formula of [Matt. 28:19](#) was in regular use at baptisms.⁵

These early Christians' understanding did not arise out of speculative, philosophical theology. Rather, it was the inevitable result of an encounter with the God who "showed up." It's what happened when the Jews met their Messiah face to face. Note Lewis:

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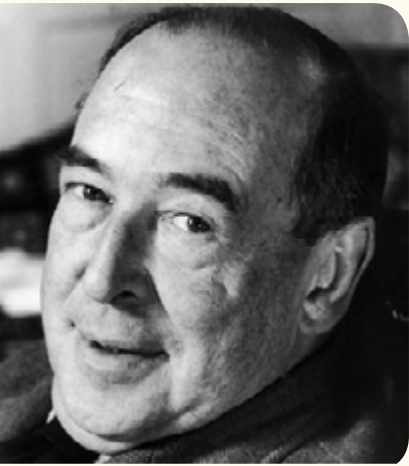


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People already knew about God in a vague way. Then came a man who claimed to be God, and yet he was not the sort of man you could dismiss as a lunatic. He made them believe him. They met him again

after they had seen him killed. And then, after they had been formed into a little society or community, they found God somehow inside them as well: directing them, making them able to do things they could not do before. And when they worked it all out, they found they had arrived at the Christian definition of the three-personal God.⁶



The deity of Christ meant everything to those first Christians, for a number of reasons. First, the centrality of Christ. The identity of Christ was the key issue of His life and the *sine qua non*—the absolutely indispensable and essential core—of Christianity.

The disciples had “insisted it is necessary to belong to Christ in order to have eternal life, and... that it is necessary to know and believe the right things about him in order to belong to him.”⁷ God, Jesus said, must be worshipped “in Spirit and in truth” (Jn. 4:24).

In the face of conflicting public reports, Jesus asked His disciples, “Who do *you* say that I am?” It’s the most important question anyone can answer, and clearly not any answer is adequate. Only Peter’s will do: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:15-16).

Indeed, the entire Gospel of John had the singular purpose of answering that question decisively, and John tied his answer directly to salvation: “These things have been written so that you may believe that *Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God*, and that believing *you may have life* in His name” (Jn. 20:31). This is the truth Jesus staked His own life on, since He was executed not for anything He *did*, but for who He said He *was* (Matt. 26:63-66).

Second, the testimony of Scripture. Paul said it plainly: “If you confess with your mouth Jesus as *Lord*, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, *you shall be saved*” (Rom. 10:9).

He also warned of “another Jesus” connected to “another Gospel” that believers were falling prey to (2 Cor. 11:4). Jesus, who warned of misleading “false Christ” imposters (Matt. 24:24), told the Pharisees bluntly, “Unless you believe that *I am*, you will die in your sins (Jn. 8:24) and, “Before Abraham was, *I Am*” (Jn. 8:58). Here in both cases Jesus used the Greek *ego eimi* to identify Himself with the ancient name of God given to Moses, “I am who I am” (Ex. 3:14).⁸ The Jews, understanding the point clearly, sought to stone Him (Jn. 8:59).

Third: the meaning of the cross. There is a reason the Word took on a human nature. The gap between man and God could only be bridged by the God-man. Beisner cites Ignatius (A.D. 110-120) saying, “The Lord our God” became man “that he might free our souls.” Beisner then adds, “In the New Testament we find the same teaching (Heb. 2:5-17; 9:14), the idea being that he only can mediate properly between God and man who is equal with both parties (1 Tim. 2:5).”⁹ Further, man was guilty, so man must pay. Yet what kind of man could make a boundless payment adequate to cover endless punishment due for the sins of the entire world? Only the God-man. Man was obliged to pay the price for sin, but only God could.

Fourth: persecution. In the first 300 years of the Christian faith, martyrdom was a real possibility for most believers. What motivated them to be willing to pay the supreme price for their faithfulness? “The early Christians...could trust Christ in the midst of persecution precisely because they were persuaded that certain very specific things about Him are true.”¹⁰ To them, the particulars mattered. Indeed, they were so important the first believers were willing to sacrifice their lives rather than deny them.

Simply put, a correct Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead matters to everything we do and everything we believe as Christians. To a true knowledge of God. To the intelligibility of God’s love expressed through Jesus’ sacrifice. To a proper understanding of the work of the cross. Indeed, to salvation itself. Note Sanders:

The good news of salvation is ultimately that God opens his Trinitarian life to us. Every other blessing is either a preparation for that or a result of it, but the thing itself is God’s graciously taking us into the fellowship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to be our salvation.¹¹





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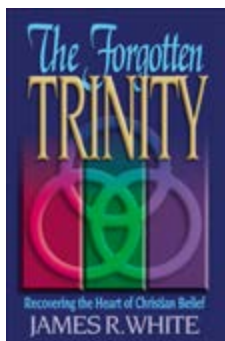
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The Trinity—Problem or Solution?

Immediately, though, we run into a problem. Maybe you can sympathize with Robert Ingersol who wrote this reflection on the Trinity in *The Classics of Free Thought*:

Christ, according to the faith, is the second person of the Trinity, the Father being the first, and the Holy Ghost the third. Each of these three persons is God. Christ is His own Father and His own Son. The Holy Ghost is neither Father nor Son, but both. The Son was begotten by the Father, but existed before He was begotten—just the same before as after.

Christ is just as old as His Father, and the Father is just as young as His Son. The Holy Ghost proceeded from the Father and Son, but was equal to the Father and Son before He proceeded, that is to say, before He existed, but He is of the same age as the other two.

So it is declared that the Father is God, and the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God, and that these three Gods make one God.

According to the celestial multiplication table, once one is three, and three times one is one, and according to heavenly subtraction if we take two from three, three are left. The addition is equally peculiar, if we add two to one we have but one. Each one is equal to Himself and the other two. Nothing ever was, nothing ever can be more perfectly idiotic and absurd than the dogma of the Trinity.

There are all kinds of inaccuracies and distortions in this statement, but we can understand Ingersol's frustration. The Trinity is so odd to the theologically

untutored it borders on contradiction. Lewis, though, finds a hidden virtue in the conundrum of the Trinity when he writes, "We cannot compete in simplicity with people who are inventing religions. How could we? We are dealing with fact. Of course, anyone can be simple if he has no facts to bother about."¹²

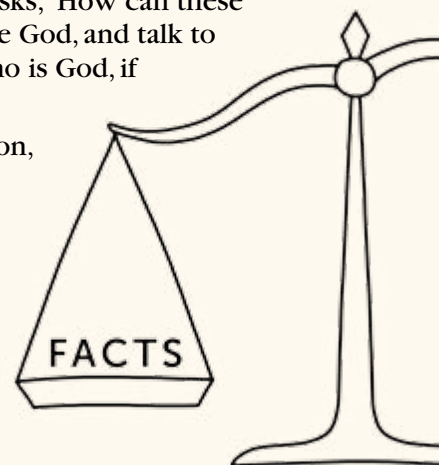
THE PROBLEM HAS A SOLUTION, THOUGH.
IT'S CALLED THE TRINITY.

His point is a good one. Invented religions ("God to me") have the luxury of being simple and relatively straightforward. Revealed religion is another thing entirely, since facts are stubborn things. And in our case the facts—at least initially—seem to create another intractable problem for Bible believers.

The Scripture teaches three different things that seem at odds with each other. First, there is only One who is God in His essential nature. Second, the Father is not the Son, and neither of them is the Holy Spirit; they are each somehow personally distinct. Three, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are each identified as God in numerous ways. The critic understandably asks, "How can these things be? How can Jesus be God, and talk to God, and send the Spirit who is God, if God is one Being?"

This problem has a solution, though. It's called the Trinity.

Here is my simple thesis: *The Trinity, properly understood, is a solution, not a problem. Why? Because if you believe in the Bible, yet reject the Trinity, you're faced with serious and unsolvable textual conflicts. There's only one solution that makes*



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sense of all the data. *The Trinity is the only way of understanding God's nature that holds all of the Scriptural data in tact.* That's why I say the Trinity is a solution, not a problem.

THERE ARE THREE DISTINCT CENTERS OF CONSCIOUSNESS WHO SHARE THE SAME, INDIVIDUAL ESSENTIAL NATURE.

What Kind of Three in One?

Since most of the objections against the Trinity are based on a misunderstanding of the orthodox view, the key to the solution is in the definition ("the Trinity, *properly understood*...").

The Athanasian Creed (A.D. 450), the classical creedal formulation, starts this way:



We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, neither confounding [blending, mixing together] their persons, nor dividing their essence. For the person of the Father is a distinct person, the person of the Son is another, and that of the Holy Spirit still another. But the divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one, their glory equal, their majesty coeternal.

James White's definition in *The Forgotten Trinity* is more compact and concise: "Within the one being that is God, there exists eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."¹³

Note, the persons are distinct, but the substance is one. The Trinity is, therefore, tri-personal, but monotheistic. There are three distinct centers of consciousness (three first-person points of view) who each share the same, individual essential nature—put simply, one "what" and three "whos."

Notice three essential elements in these definitions. First, there's only one God. Second, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct and separate persons. Third, each of these persons is fully God.

These three affirmations stand in contrast to the aberrant teachings of current popular groups often thought to be Christian, but are not.

Jehovah's Witnesses are thoroughgoing monotheists who also affirm that Jesus and the Father are different persons. Yet, in their view, *Jesus is a created being, not God.* In this they are kin to the ancient Arians who held that the Word was not God, but rather a lesser "semi-divine" being of who they said, "There was when the Word was not."

Oneness Pentecostals¹⁴ also believe in one God and affirm the deity of Christ. Yet, for them *Jesus is not a distinct person from the Father.* Instead, Jesus and the Spirit are the same person as the Father under a different guise or mode (e.g., "When Dad's at home he's a husband and a father; when he's at work he's a banker," or "Water can appear as a liquid, a solid, or a gas"). Called "modalism," this ancient heresy "is the most common theological error among people who think themselves orthodox."¹⁵

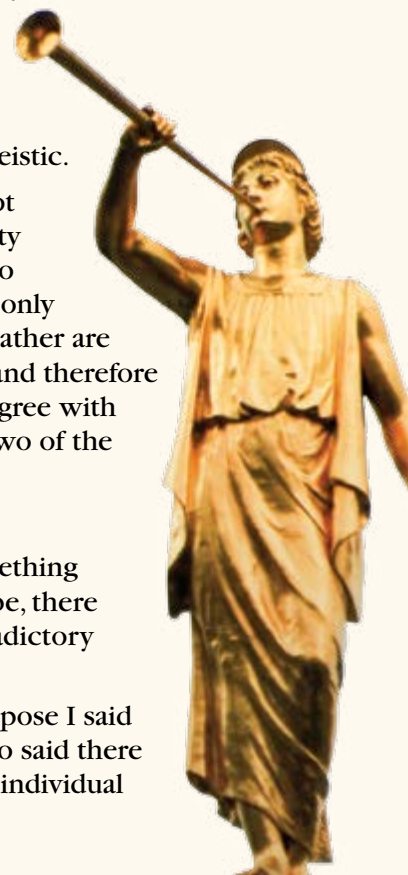
Mormons affirm a true distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and acknowledge they are each fully God. Yet, in their view *there are multiple gods, not one God.* They are united in purpose, plan, and perfection of attributes, but "are separate and distinct personages and beings."¹⁶ Mormonism is explicitly polytheistic.

Notice that an objector cannot properly argue against the Trinity (as they often do) by pointing to Scripture showing that there is only one God or that Jesus and the Father are distinguished from each other and therefore must be different persons. We agree with both points, which constitute two of the three legs of our definition.

Escaping the Contradiction

I hope you have noticed something else: As odd as the Trinity may be, there is nothing incoherent or contradictory about it.

Consider three scenarios. Suppose I said there is only one God, *and* I also said there are three separate, distinct, and individual



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HE IS ONE INDIVIDUAL DIVINE BEING
WITH THREE DISTINCT CENTERS
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gods. Would that be a contradiction? Yes, but it's not the Christian view. The first half is the Christian view, but the second half is the Mormon view.

Suppose I said God is three distinct persons, *and* I said God is a perfect unity of only one person with one nature. Would that be a contradiction? Yes, but it's not the Christian view. The first half is the Christian view, but the second half is the Jehovah's Witness, Oneness Pentecostal, and Muslim view.

What if I said there is only one who is God by nature, *and* I said the one God subsists in three distinct persons? He is one individual divine being with three distinct centers of consciousness. Would that be a contradiction? No, it is not.

A Piece of My Mind



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The first two scenarios describe a contradiction, but neither is the Christian view. Only the third captures the Christian Trinity, and only the third escapes contradiction.

Not all three-in-ones entail contradictions. One triangle can have three angles. One family can have three members. These are not illustrations of the Trinity, but they do show that not all three-in-ones are contradictions.

The Christian view is not contradictory, period, so let's put that complaint to bed right now. Anyone who says the Trinity is contradictory is not listening carefully to our view and has fallen prey to the "straw man" fallacy. That does not mean the doctrine is true. It does not mean the doctrine is biblical. It simply means the Trinity, properly understood, is not contradictory.

Demonstrating that the Trinity is truly biblical is another task, and that will be the focus of part II of "The Trinity: A Solution, Not a Problem."



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Putting This *Solid Ground* into Action

- Remember that the Trinity is a solution, not a problem. There is only one God, yet the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct and separate persons. Each person is fully God.
- As odd as the Trinity may be, there is nothing incoherent or contradictory about it.
- Keep in mind that illustrations used to describe the Trinity such as Dad is a husband, a father, and a banker; or water can appear as a liquid, a solid, or a gas are an ancient heresy called modalism.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Steve Chalke and Alan Mann, *The Lost Message of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 182-183.
- 2 This is a problem, by the way, for the Muslim conception of God.
- 3 Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 10.
- 4 Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975 rpg.), Vol. II, 100, 101, *Epistle to Autolycus*, II, XV.
- 5 J.B. Lightfoot, ed., *The Apostolic Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1976), 126.
- 6 C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1943), 143.
- 7 Harold O.J. Brown, *Heresies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1984), xxiii.
- 8 For a detailed treatment of this point see James White, *The Forgotten Trinity* (Minneapolis: Bethany, 1998), chap. 6.
- 9 E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1984), 49.
- 10 Brown, 21.
- 11 Sanders, 191.
- 12 Lewis, 145.
- 13 White, 26.
- 14 This specific group is not to be confused with Pentecostals in general who are characteristically Trinitarian.
- 15 Brown, 99.
- 16 "The Godhead consists of three personages: God the Eternal Father, Jesus Christ the Redeemer, and the Holy Ghost. [Joseph Smith] referred to these three as God the first, the Creator; God the second, the Redeemer; and God the third, the Witness or Testator." Millet, Olson, Skinner, and Top, *LDS Beliefs—A Doctrinal Reference* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Books, 2011), 263.

Where Should I Start?

Stand to Reason trains Christians to think clearly about their Christian convictions and make a credible defense when they evangelize. As a new visitor to the Stand to Reason website, these resources are a great starting point to begin your journey to becoming a more effective Ambassador.



THE TRINITY: UNIQUE, YET RATIONAL

By Melinda Penner

Is the doctrine of the Trinity an irrational idea? Does it discredit Christianity?

The ecumenical councils used Scripture as their authority, but sought to work out the doctrine of the Trinity in an intellectually rigorous way. The early theologians were philosophers and brought these categories of thought to bear on the debates. After all, if God is a rational being, His revelation must make logical sense, though this is different than being fully comprehensible to finite minds. Presumably, they also accepted the proposition that one cannot believe what one considers irrational and applied their knowledge and skills diligently to work out a rational explanation of the doctrine. So theology and philosophy must interact, in the tradition of the church, to express the most accurate and logical doctrines possible as we continue to understand the revelation of the Trinity.

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- **5** Truth Matters Conference, Ephrata, PA Time: 9 a.m.- 4:30 p.m.. Topic: TBD [Contact](#)



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- **1** Hillside Baptist Church, Dickinson, ND Topics: "Homosexuality: Truth & Compassion" [Contact](#)
- **8** Mission Hills Church, San Marcos, CA Time: 8, 9:30 & 11 a.m. Topic: TBD [Contact](#)
- **13** North Coast Calvary Church, Carlsbad, CA Time: 7-9 p.m. Topic: "Homosexuality: Truth & Compassion" [Contact](#)
- **30** Magnolia Baptist, Anaheim, CA Topics: "Making Abortion Unthinkable" [Contact](#): Private Event



Tim Barnett

November

- **5** Brampton Christian School, Caledon, Ontario, Canada Time: 8:30 a.m.- 4 p.m. Topic: TBD [Contact](#)
- **15** Bath Road Baptist Church, Kingston, Ontario, Canada Time: 9:30 a.m.- 7:45 p.m. Topic: "Is What They Have What We Have Now?", "Who Is Jesus?", "Why Are They Leaving?", "Has Science Buried Faith in God?", "The Heavens Declare the Glory of God", "Shattering Icons of Evolution" [Contact](#)

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TIM BARNETT is available to schedule to teach for your church service, youth group, or conference. Contact STR today for information about Tim and STR's other speakers.

To get information about inviting an STR speaker to your church, email Dawnielle@str.org for Alan, Tim or Brett, or Melinda@str.org for Greg.



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