

WHY FIVE CORE DOCTRINES?

***What Christians Should Know (#WCSK): Volume Zero* takes a step back and investigates basic ideas about God, the Bible, and the Christian faith. This series provides crucial answers to critical questions about belief.**

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Picking up from last week ...

A closer look at each of the five doctrines

Why the Trinity? The Trinity is a unique truth claim of Christianity. God is relational and was in a relationship with Himself before the appearance of humankind, and this relationality informs our relationship with THE LORD and with others. This especially defines the contours of interpersonal relations, to point to the striking fact that voluntary submission does not imply inequality. After all, if God can willingly submit, then what's stopping me?

The essence of the Trinity is love. As I John 4:8 says, "The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love." Hence, you and I and everyone, all made in the image of God, were made *from* love, *with* love, *to* love, and *to be* loved, but in order to properly understand and execute this, we need God, which is where our conception of love started. God is not some impersonal, isolated "guy in the sky" who made us and then commanded us to "love," unaware of what that actually means. God most clearly showed us exactly what love is through Jesus. If God needed humanity in order to demonstrate love (and thus was not relational), then God would need humanity for something. If this is the case, then God is not sovereign. If God is not sovereign, then God is not god. The good news is that the Bible teaches us that God *is* sovereign.¹

Without the Trinity, there is no love. Without love, there is no sacrificial giving. Without sacrificial giving, there is no Jesus. Without Jesus, there is no hope, and Christianity crumbles.

¹ See I Chronicles 29:11-12; II Chronicles 20:6; I Samuel 2:6; Isaiah 14:24, 45:7, 46:9-10, 55:8-11; Jeremiah 27:5, 32:27; Job 23:13, 42:2; Psalm 103:19, 115:3, 135:6; Proverbs 16:4, 16:9, 16:33, 19:21, 21:1, 21:30; Ecclesiastes 7:13-14; Lamentations 3:37; Daniel 4:35; Matthew 28:18; Romans 8:28, 9:18; Colossians 1:16-17; Ephesians 2:10; I Timothy 6:15

Why the God-man, Jesus? The full divinity and full humanity of Christ is a unique truth claim of Christianity. The classic treatise on why Jesus incarnated is *On the Incarnation* by Athanasius. This powerful and persuasive apologetic is a defense of the full divinity of Christ and was written against Arianism, an emerging theology of the time that suggested that Christ was subordinate to the Father and not fully God. Resultantly, Athanasius uses scriptures to resolve the paradox of how and why God is still God in human form.

Athanasius explains that in order to reconcile the fallen creation back to God, salvation had to occur through a wholly divine mediator, perfectly embodied in Christ. Had Christ not been wholly divine, Athanasius argues, then Christ would have needed a mediator Himself to bring us into fellowship with God, and that imperfect mediator would therein need another mediator, creating an endless succession of imperfect mediators without any resultant salvation. In short, if Jesus is not fully God, salvation is impossible. Athanasius beautifully and repeatedly argues that the entire process is motivated by the love of God for His creations, and to suggest that He would impart upon us a less-than-perfect mediator would in fact demote and diminish that love motivation to being less than steadfast, permanent, perpetual, and all-encompassing. Of course, that love motivation is grounded in the Trinity.

But why did Jesus also have to be fully human? Athanasius writes the following:

[Jesus] perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father's Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, and, itself, remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection.

Without the God-man, Jesus, there is no salvation, because someone temporal cannot pay an eternal debt, and someone eternal cannot die to satisfy the justice of God. Yet, someone who is both of these things can accomplish both tasks.

Why Atonement? The atonement is a unique truth claim of Christianity. The term "atonement" refers to making amends for a wrong. Basically, on the Cross, Jesus bore the penalty of sin in His death, He was a substitute sacrifice for us all, and that penal substitution atoned for humanity, thereby reconciling us back to God. The justice of God demands that a debt be paid because of sin. So, without the atonement, the eternal debt owed to God would not be paid, and salvation would be impossible. The atonement is only made possible by the love of God giving us the God-man, Jesus. So, before Christ's sacrifice atoned for our sins (and thus changed *our* relationship with God), the death of Christ had an effect on the relationship of God *with us*. That is, as a result of God deciding to save humanity, the sacrificial atonement of Jesus became absolutely necessary.

If we think of atonement in terms of economics, imagine that you owed someone an extraordinary sum, like 100 million billion trillion dollars. That is a debt that neither you nor anyone else can ever pay. When the debt collector comes to collect, you may try many different things to turn the angry collector away, but you will ultimately have to repay the monies owed. If you don't pay, you will be forever condemned to debtor's prison. Most human beings have a keen sense that they have done a number of things wrong in their life. The only thing that can

make amends for that sin debt is for someone to cut a check. Thankfully, in our case, God provides the person (Jesus) who does pay off the debt, forever, and atones for humanity. Yes, the crucifixion was detestably barbaric, and the Cross seems like an extreme sacrifice to facilitate debt payment, but God takes sins very seriously—so seriously that He sent His Son as a substitutionary sacrifice to pay for it. Atonement means that yes, even one small sin must be paid for, but even for a pile of sins that reaches to heaven, one drop of Christ’s atoning blood satisfies the debt.

Many other religious systems of belief disregard sin and atonement altogether. This paradigm forces us to reject the sense of wrong that we naturally have built into our conscience, enables a system of merit where “good works” can hopefully cover and outweigh the bad, and also tacitly admits that whatever is “out there” or “up there” is either indifferent or unjust because sin can simply be swiped away by saying, “Nevermind.”

Why the resurrection? The resurrection is a unique truth claim of Christianity. The resurrection establishes Jesus as the only religious figure in the history of existence to have ever died and then come back from the dead to tell us about it. The simple fact is that death is the great equalizer of all of humanity—all human beings *must* die. This is an absolute certainty of life. By God dying and rising from the dead, He proved that He is the one who has conquered humankind’s great enemy and therefore validated His promise for us to be born again and raised to new life. The resurrection shows believers what we all have to look forward to so that our labors on earth are not in vain.

In very plain and everyday terms, if someone were to ask, “Why should I bother with God?” one crucial response is, “So that you will not perish.” They may then say, “How do I know that this God is trustworthy?” Then you can say, “Because He already died and came back, and that’s what He wants to do for you. There’s a book full of eyewitness testimonies of all those who saw Him after He resurrected.” Compare this to other religious promises, for example, that may in fact be extraordinary but have never been validated in real life.

Without the resurrection, there is no point to Christianity, because the promises of God are void, hope is based on a fantasy, and there is no eternal existence beyond our temporal lives.

Why by grace through faith? By grace through faith is a unique truth claim of Christianity. As the first four core doctrines explain, redemption is made possible exclusively because of God. Of course, this must necessarily be the case, because if we could save ourselves, then we would. Then, we would raise from the dead and atone for sin. Then, we would have “fixed” so many of the problems that plague humanity. If salvation was *by merit through works*, then we wouldn’t need God at all. Here, god is not God, because god is not sovereign.

The good news is that the Bible teaches us that God is sovereign and that sovereign God has chosen to impart upon us *grace*. Grace not only entails getting what you *don’t* merit, it also entails *not* receiving what you *do* merit. The promises of God revealed in the Bible and evident in Jesus Christ are saturated in the deep message of grace. The same God demonstrates grace in salvation, knowing that left to our own devices, we would not choose THE LORD. Hence, it is by *God’s* grace that we are empowered to respond to Him in faith, because if my salvation was in my hands, all hope is lost.

I will conclude this point by referring to the Book of Job. There, a bunch of men tried to reason and rationalize existence itself, but they speculated from within that existence and as a part of that existence. God then asks Job a series of questions that he has no answer to:

Then the LORD spoke to Job out of the storm. He said: “Who is this that obscures my plans with words without knowledge? Brace yourself like a man; I will question you, and you shall answer me. “Where were you when I laid the earth’s foundation? Tell me, if you understand. Who marked off its dimensions? Surely you know! Who stretched a measuring line across it? On what were its footings set, or who laid its cornerstone—while the morning stars sang together and all the angels shouted for joy? Who shut up the sea behind doors when it burst forth from the womb, when I made the clouds its garment and wrapped it in thick darkness, when I fixed limits for it and set its doors and bars in place, when I said, ‘This far you may come and no farther; here is where your proud waves halt?’” (Job 38:1-11, NIV)

Indeed, that our salvation is by grace through faith is explicit in the Bible, the revelation from God Himself. Any other formulation “obscures His plans with words without knowledge.” No one can scientifically explain why God imparts His grace on us. It can’t be explained, because it doesn’t make sense. It defies logic and goes against what is reasonable. Thankfully, love transcends reason, and love is the only thing that can begin to explain the grace of God. So, as I hope I have made clear by now, a Christian’s understanding of what they believe and why they believe it certainly amounts to more than an intellectual study or an academic analysis. The five core doctrines illuminate the overriding reality that behind *everything* in the Christian faith is the love of God. If God did not truly love, He would have said “never mind” to us long, long ago.

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