

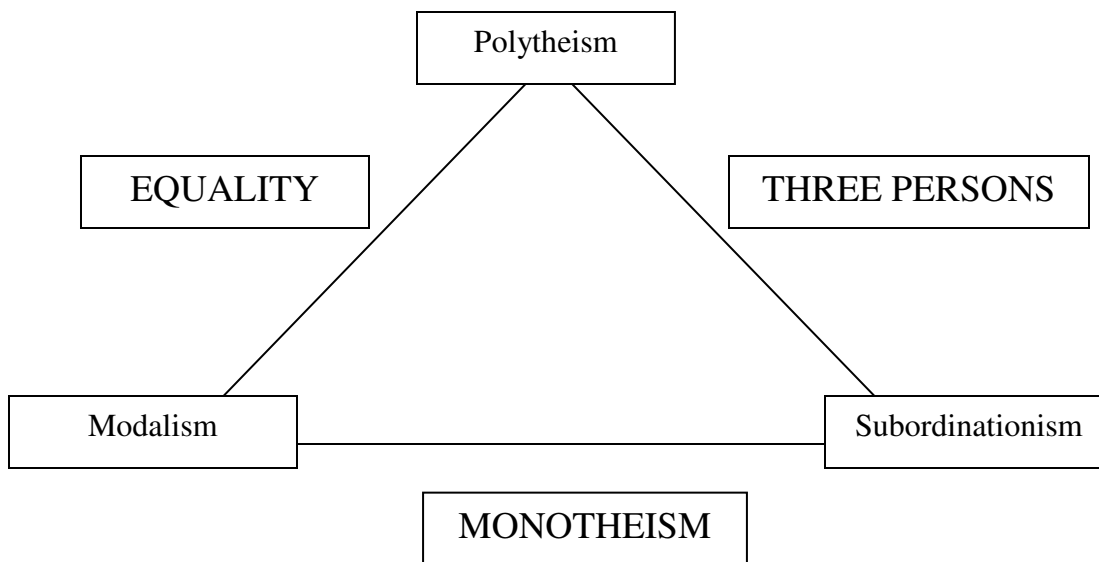
THE FORGOTTEN TRINITY: RECOVERING THE HEART OF CHRISTIAN BELIEF

by James R. White

A Review by Bradley R. Baggett

Although the doctrine of the Trinity is the most fundamental truth of the Christian faith, it is also the most misunderstood. This is the assertion of James R. White in his book, *The Forgotten Trinity: Recovering the Heart of Christian Belief*. White states, ‘The single greatest reason people struggle with the doctrine of the Trinity is miscommunication. It is *very* rare that anyone actually argues or debates about the *real* doctrine of the Trinity’ (p. 23). White, then, sets out to correct common misconceptions of the doctrine of the Trinity and to establish the biblical, theological, and historical basis for the ‘heart of Christian belief.’

White begins the book by delineating the three foundational truths of orthodox Trinitarianism: (1) Monotheism: There is Only One God; (2) There are Three Divine Persons; and (3) The Persons Are Coequal and Coeternal. To deny any of these three foundations is to embrace a theology that stands in direct conflict with both the pages of Scripture and the historic testimony of the universal church. White includes a chart that is most helpful in explaining this truth.



He explains, ‘Each of the three *sides* represents a foundational truth. When any of these truths is denied, the other two sides form an arrow that point to the resultant error. For example, if one denies *monotheism*, the other two sides of the triangle point to ‘polytheism.’’ Throughout the remainder of his book, White, expounds this chart, giving the biblical basis for each of the three ‘sides’ and revealing the origins of the most common historical Trinitarian heresies.

One of the greatest features of *The Forgotten Trinity* is how James White expounds several key Christological / Trinitarian passages in Scripture. His skill as a master exegete is evident as he appeals, not only to the grammatical structure of each respective text, but the original languages as well. Possibly the most powerful example of this is White's exegesis of the Prologue of the Gospel of John (John 1:1-18). He dedicates over ten pages to the first verse, demonstrating the clear revelation of Jesus Christ, the eternal *Logos*, as fully God in His essence ('and the Word *was* God'). White accomplishes this by demonstrating that, in John 1:1, the Evangelist reveals Jesus Christ as (1) eternal; (2) personal; and (3) deity [fully God]. Such an understanding of this key passage, he asserts, refutes the subordinationism (the belief that Jesus Christ is, *in His essence*, less than, or subordinate to, the Father) that still exists today in some heretical groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.

In another helpful section of his book, White examines the *ego eimi* [Greek for 'I AM'] statements of Christ, which are central to the theology of John's Gospel. He traces the *ego eimi* statements of John through the book of Isaiah (41:4; 43:10; and 46:4) to Exodus 3:14. It is here, in the second book of the Old Testament, that the eternal God reveals Himself to Moses in the burning bush. When God reveals His name to Moses, He simply says, 'I am that I am.' White correctly asserts that Jesus Christ, in His revelation of Himself, rightfully employs the 'I AM' statements in the Gospel of John to show that, in His essence, He is fully God, co-equal and co-eternal with the Father.

The final New Testament passage that White examines is Philippians 2:5-11, the *Carmen Christi*, or 'Song of Christ.' White proposes that, given the form of the passage, as well as its exalted Christology, it 'may well be a section, maybe a verse or two, of an ancient Christian hymn' (p. 119). He then explains Christ's eternal nature is central to a proper understanding of the 'Song.' Verse 6 states, '...who, although He existed in the *form* of God...' White writes, 'The Greek term 'form' (*morphe*) means 'outward display of the inner reality or substance. Here it refers to the outward display of the divine substance, i.e., divinity of the preexistent Christ in the display of his glory as being in the image of the Father.' Therefore, the great *Carmen Christi* asserts that, although Jesus Christ was fully God, equal in essence with the Father, He still humbled Himself, assuming human flesh, in order to obey the will of the Father. Thus, rather than refuting the deity of Christ as some have suggested, the *Carmen Christi* only adds further support to the biblical doctrine of the Trinity.

In one of the last chapters of his book, White examines the *Person* of the Holy Spirit, rightfully demonstrating that He is not an 'impersonal force,' an 'it'; but, rather, He is a Person (a 'He'), just like the Father and the Son. White effectively uses Scripture to explain how the Holy Spirit is not only a Person, but He is fully God. Although he only dedicates one chapter to the Person of the Holy Spirit, he begins it by stating, 'There is a reason why the Holy Spirit does not receive the same level and kind of attention that is focused upon the Father and the Son: it is not His purpose to attract that kind of attention to himself' (p. 139). Yet, as White explains, the role of the Holy Spirit in the salvation of God's people is no less necessary than the first two Persons of the Trinity.

The book concludes with a brief overview of the historical development of Trinitarian thought, as well as a short explanation as to the significance of this foundational doctrine. While the historical background was certainly helpful, the weakest part of the book is possibly the final Chapter, which offers an answer to the question, 'Does it Really Matter?' White offers several reasons as to why the Trinity is significant, including its place in proper worship, its centrality in the Gospel message, and the truth that it is the very essence of who God is. These are all most certainly true and significant, yet, it would have been helpful for White to explain the necessity of the Trinity in terms of our salvation. In other words, is the significance of the Trinity *necessary* for our salvation?

The Forgotten Trinity, by James White, is yet another excellent work by one of America's most skilled theologians and apologists. As with all of White's works, *The Forgotten Trinity*, reflects an exalted view of God rarely seen in modern Christian books. Although it is not an exhaustive volume on the subject of the Trinity, this was clearly not White's intent, given the relatively short length of the book (only 196 pages). Yet, *The Forgotten Trinity* offers the reader, whether a relatively new Christian or most seasoned saint, a solid foundation upon which to build in his understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity. Consequently, this book is an excellent resource for anyone seeking to more fully grasp this most basic of all biblical doctrines, one that White correctly asserts as 'the heart of Christian belief.'

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