

Yet Another Music City Miracle!

Must One Believe in the Doctrine of the Trinity to be Saved?

J. Dan Gill – 17th Theological Conference

It was a pleasant afternoon in June of 2000. Sitting high in the seats of the Adelphia Coliseum I was somewhat in awe as I viewed the Cumberland River to the west and the Nashville skyline just beyond. Though not a great sports enthusiast, as I sat in the coliseum I could not help but replay in my mind the last 16 seconds of a playoff game between the Buffalo Bills and the Tennessee Titans. That extraordinary final play had occurred on that very field only a few months before. Arguably in one of the most spectacular plays in NFL history, the Titans made a surprise lateral pass which resulted in an “impossible” last-second victory and propelled them to the 34th Super Bowl. The play came to be known as: “The Music City Miracle.”

On that day in June, however, my reason for being at the coliseum was quite different. This too would be an exciting week in Nashville. People were in anticipation! The Billy Graham Crusade was about to begin. Months of preparation had gone into that event. Multitudes would gather to worship and to hear Dr. Graham speak.

I recall having earlier watched a virtual army of workers and technicians preparing the coliseum for that extraordinary gathering. In my mind, I can still hear the beautiful singing of thousands of choir members as they practiced songs for the crusade. I remember counselors carefully preparing for their duties in assisting those who would respond to the call of the message each night.

When the crusade actually began, it was like watching a bit of history in the making. I can still remember George Beverly Shea singing. Though past 90 years of age, his voice still rang with a beautiful resonance that is so uniquely his. Cliff Barrows directed the crusade choir. Among those who attended were the Governor of Tennessee and the Mayor of Nashville. In addition there were many thousands from Nashville’s church going community. The crusade came to be dubbed: “Another Music City Miracle.”

The people, however, who most caught my attention at the crusade, were none of those that I have just mentioned. Rather, they were the hundreds - perhaps thousands - who were from among the “un-churched.” Unquestionably, there were a great number of people who seldom - if ever - had attended a Christian church. I could picture among those attending that some might be Jewish; Buddhists; those who were entirely non-religious - perhaps even skeptics or atheists. I recall being especially moved, when I observed those in the audience who were disenfranchised - some obviously homeless. There were those ravaged by the destruction of substance dependency and burdened by the unbearable strains of their lives.

From among such people came many responding to the call of Billy Graham each night. They were people desperately seeking hope. To the words of “Just as I Am” they streamed out of their various places in the coliseum and made their way onto the field. There, they were greeted by counselors and invited to receive Christ as their personal Savior.

Still One More Miracle!

As I left the crusade one evening, I was struck by a remarkable realization. Hundreds if not thousands were responding to the call of Billy Graham. Yet, it seemed likely to me that most of them did not possess even a rudimentary belief in the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. As I thought about it, I rather much believed that far more did not possess such faith than did! This seemed quite extraordinary to

think about being as many people insist that belief in those particular doctrines is necessary for one to be a Christian.

It is not reasonable to believe that so many people from such varied backgrounds and difficult states of life would have come to faith in the mystery of the Trinity in the course of an evening. Even had they attended each night it still remained very unlikely. This is particularly the case considering that we today have a generation which largely has grown up not even attending Sunday School. How shall we imagine that such church “mysteries” as the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ would at all be grasped or believed in by many coming forward at the crusade?

As I reflected on these things, I realized something further: the matter is not related only to the inability of many to come to faith in such mysteries. It is additionally because such teachings are typically not seriously entered into in crusade messages. I recall one evening in which there was no mention at all of the divinity of Christ. How would one newly coming to receive Christ possess a faith in the doctrine of his divinity if he or she had not even heard of it?

All of this was of particular interest to me. From a child I have trusted in Christ as my Savior and wholly in the cross for the forgiveness of sins. I have always believed that he alone is the only way to God. However, as a non-traditional Christian, while I did grow up believing in the divinity of Christ, I was never taught nor did I embrace the historical doctrine of the Trinity.

As a young man, I was determined to have an open mind in this matter. I read a variety of books devoted to the defense of the concept of the Trinity. I also attended various lectures by capable teachers in favor of the doctrine. However, all of this only resulted in my being persuaded that the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ were developments of post-biblical Christian tradition. That is they were “constructs” and not directly prescribed in the Bible itself. In particular, as I searched the Scriptures, I concluded that there were no examples of anyone actually coming to salvation on a confession of faith in the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ.

It was that last thought which was on my mind at the crusade. Must one come to faith in those doctrines to be saved? Yet, to me the activities of the crusade itself seemed to be very convincing that large numbers of people going forward would not have possessed even an elementary belief in those traditional doctrines.

It might be thought that conveying those concepts would fall to the many personal counselors who spoke with and assisted those who came forward. However, I learned that is not the case. Counselors were not instructed to discuss the doctrines of the Trinity or the divinity of Christ with those they counseled. I doubted that a typical counselor-volunteer could have made a coherent explanation of those doctrines.

Neither did the prayer printed for the benefit of those desiring to receive Christ contain any affirmation of those particular teachings. The prayer printed in crusade materials and distributed to the counselors reads simply as follows:

Prayer of Commitment

“Dear Lord Jesus, I know I am a sinner and I need Your forgiveness. I believe that You died for my sins. I want to turn from my sins. I now invite You to come into my heart and life. I want to trust and follow You as Lord and Savior. In Jesus’ name. Amen.”¹

All in all, by the end of the crusade, it seemed quite clear that large numbers - if not most - of those coming forward to receive Christ had no comprehension of the doctrines of the Trinity and divinity of Christ. The prayer of commitment often prayed by those coming forward further demonstrated that they were not relying on faith in those concepts. Even if it were to be argued that people were somehow being

saved by the Trinity it could not rightly be said that they were being saved through faith in the doctrine of the Trinity.

I did consider that some might later find faith in these doctrines as they would join local churches and receive baptism. But what of some who may never make it to a local church? What of the person who might die before the night is out? And, even if they did later come to believe in these doctrines, that would still do nothing to resolve the essential conundrum. By evangelical standards, there were people who were being saved before possessing belief in those traditional doctrines.

If indeed believing in those doctrines is a fundamental requirement for being a Christian, then truly during the crusade we were seeing a terribly failed effort in the birthing of new Christians. I came to believe something rather different. I concluded that we were witnessing: “Yet another Music City Miracle!” That “miracle” was that by every evangelical standard, multitudes were being saved without faith in the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ.

Christianity’s Two Approaches

We are saved by grace through faith, but faith in what? Traditional Christianity has historically gone to great lengths to assure that those desiring to become Christians are first educated in the mysteries of the church. Many catechisms have been written and duly studied by great numbers of people over the centuries. The process of such education often precedes adult baptism; expectation of eternal salvation, and entrance into the church.

Hence, in the traditional approach, the matter of coming to salvation has often required dedicated effort for weeks or even months.² A key benefit sought in such delays is that those individuals desiring to come to Christ are instructed in the church’s doctrines. Here, to the extent possible, those people will possess a faith in the doctrine of the Trinity and the mystery of the dual nature of Christ. The traditional churches are correct in recognizing that time and study is required for people to come to a faith in these difficult and often confusing doctrines.

The evangelical movement has taken a markedly different approach in this matter. In that view one need not be educated in, or even aware of, many church doctrines prior to coming forward to receive Christ. This approach largely finds its roots in the great revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries. Here, men such as Whitefield, Finney and Moody brought a new sense of urgency and simplicity to individual conversion. Now people are invited to receive Christ within days, hours or even minutes of having heard (or perhaps read) a message.

Who is right? Which approach is correct? It is not the purpose of this presentation to take up the matter of “how” people come to be in Christ. The concepts of baptism versus praying a “Sinner’s Prayer” as ways for coming to Christ are worthy of another presentation. With regard to the issues of pre-conversion time and instruction, however, those matters are immediately clear: the evangelical movement has happily recaptured the New Testament’s sense of urgency regarding people coming to Christ. A review of the proclaiming of the message as heralded in the Book of Acts indicates that extensive, methodic education of people in doctrine prior to conversion was not typical. The message found in Acts the second chapter reveals that after the preaching of the word, three thousand souls were added that day:

So those who welcomed his message were baptized, and that same day about three thousand persons were added. They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and prayers (Acts 2:41-42).

Instruction in the word largely came in the time following people receiving Christ - not during the time leading up to conversion. This approach is found in various examples in the Book of Acts. It includes cases involving conversion of Jews, proselytes, Samaritans and a wide range of Gentiles living throughout the Hellenistic world.^{3, 4}

However, with the non-traditional evangelical approach comes a problem. Being as saving faith depends on the preaching of the word,⁵ then what of the word must be conveyed to hearers so that they can possess such a faith? The traditional church has often insisted that people must attain to and express a faith in the doctrines of the Trinity and the divinity of Christ in order to be saved. Yet, those doctrines are widely admitted to be complex, often debated, and difficult for even the most devout church goers to grasp.

It is rightly recognized that to speak of the Father, and Jesus Christ, and of the Spirit of God - does not at all in itself constitute a declaration of the doctrine of the Trinity. I have met many Christians from various denominations and backgrounds whose understanding of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit is not actually Trinitarian. Orthodox Trinitarianism is a unique view or “configuration” regarding Father, Son and Holy Spirit. In that view, they are seen as three co-equal, co-powerful, co-eternal “persons” and yet one God. This has proven to be an especially difficult concept for people to grasp. That is also the case regarding the doctrine of the divinity of Christ which proposes that he has a “dual nature” being both God and man at the same time.

Evangelicals have spoken by their actions! Those actions have been to evangelize the unsaved without spending pre-conversion time sufficient to educate and assure that those coming forward do indeed embrace the historical doctrines of the Trinity and dual nature of Christ. If one did an exit poll of those having come forward at the Nashville crusade I think the results would have been rather illuminating. To speak to them of the divinity of Christ and a dual nature would have found many people staring back blankly. Again, it is likely that many were not only unfamiliar with the word Trinity but also not at all aware of the various concepts which uniquely define that doctrine and without which it does not rightly exist.

For example, Christians of various backgrounds are often surprised to learn that the historical doctrine of the Trinity is at odds with their personal faith regarding Christ as the Son of God. Orthodox Trinitarianism insists that Jesus has two natures (deity and human) and that the words “Son of God” are reserved for his “deity-nature.” Complicated to think about, both new and established Christians often find the concept of a dual nature simply confusing and not helpful to their faith. Many are unaware of the actual tenants of the doctrine. Yet others are aware – but do not embrace them.

In direct contrast to the dual nature doctrine, we find a common tendency among many mainstream Christians to take a very different view regarding Jesus as the Son of God. In that view, they see Christ as having only one nature – that of a true human being. Here, the “man” Jesus is the begotten “Son of God.” This makes ready sense to believers because the Bible is quite clear in saying that he was miraculously begotten in the virgin Mary. If this “man” was begotten by God then God is literally his Father and he is literally God’s Son. I am persuaded that “the man” Christ Jesus as God’s Son is in fact what Christians in the New Testament had in mind when they spoke the words “Son of God.”⁶

At the end of the day, must one believe in the complexities of the dual nature doctrine to be saved? Or, can a person be saved with faith in the understanding that the “man” Christ Jesus is God’s begotten Son? I am persuaded that the latter is in reality what is believed today by a great many church going Christians. It is in fact that exact faith in the Son of God upon which I stand.⁷

To not declare the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ to those seeking salvation is in harmony with the Scriptures. Again, Acts 2 provides an excellent example of the message as typically proclaimed by the disciples in the days after Christ was taken up into heaven.⁸ The word Trinity is not

used on that occasion and there is no exposition about Christ having a dual nature.^{9, 10} After quoting the prophet Joel, Peter begins his discourse with these words:

"Israelites, listen to what I have to say: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with deeds of power, wonders, and signs that God did through him among you, as you yourselves know" (Acts 2:22).

The apostle Peter declares Jesus as "a man attested by God." A reading of the balance of his message finds that Peter remains on that track. The "man" Christ Jesus was: killed by sinners (v. 23), raised from the dead by God (v. 24), then glorified and seated at the right of God (vv. 32-33). Peter's astonishing words at verse 36 then conclude his essential proclamation:

Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified."

Clearly by any fair reading, the three thousand people added on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 had not heard a declaration of the Trinity or of the dual nature of Christ.¹¹ If three thousand people could be saved that day without being taught those doctrines, then why would it be imagined that people today would not be as well? The evangelical approach of not insisting on faith in those particular doctrines is correct in light of the Scriptures.

In the Bible example of Acts 2, people were coming to salvation with the faith that God had *made* Jesus Lord and Christ. To receive him as the one made "Lord" and "Christ" by God was sufficient. Why would it not be the same today?

How Great Is Grace?

We today do have a generation in which many lack even a marginal grasp of the Bible much less post-biblical Christian teachings. It is not reasonable to think that the doctrine of the Trinity and the mystery of the divinity of Christ would be grasped by many of the thousands attending the crusade. Yet, this was I suppose, a rather typical crusade.

Further, the circumstances surrounding the crusade are played out again and again in great numbers of evangelical churches each week. People - often with no meaningful knowledge of these traditional doctrines - are invited to receive Christ. Some who come forward will not receive baptism or further instruction. Will evangelicals count them as lost if they did not possess a faith in the doctrine of the Trinity at the time they came forward? Or, will they count that the grace of God is such that they will be saved without faith in that doctrine?

What evangelical pastor or worker has viewed the eyes of a child or of a dear grandfather coming forward and will then believe that they were not saved because they had no concept of the Trinity or the dual nature of Christ? Do evangelicals have the conviction of their own beliefs? They have placed great significance on Paul's words in Ephesians 2:8: "By grace you are saved through faith...." Will they not also equally embrace his words in vs. 13? There Paul affirms: "But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near *by the blood of Christ.*"

Should the words of the song: "Nothing but the blood of Jesus," be changed to: "Nothing but the blood of Jesus plus your personal belief in the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ"? Shall the burden of believing complex doctrines be placed on those who would be saved? Should there be a return to the approach of the traditional churches? Should it be insisted that those desiring salvation first be

carefully educated regarding these church dogmas? To whom has God given permission to add faith in these particular doctrines to the requirements for acknowledging the salvation of a man?

If it is believed that many coming forward can and are being saved without faith in those doctrines, then an important recognition must be made: It is no longer acceptable that evangelicals would define who is and is not a Christian based on whether or not he or she has faith in those concepts. The Scriptures tell us that the Lord knows those who are His (2 Timothy 2:19). Has He given permission for some to supersede Him with regard to that matter? What a grave sin it would be to declare people as “not” Christians when Christ has indeed received them.

Again, do evangelicals believe that the man who picks up a gospel tract on a bus or train and sincerely prays the “Sinner’s Prayer” is not yet saved because he does not possess faith in the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ? Will evangelicals disavow the very people they say are being saved by the message they are bringing? Will they disavow much in the ministries of D. L. Moody and Billy Graham?¹² Will they call into question millions of people from varied nations, cultures, languages and religious backgrounds who they say came to Christ by way of such ministries? Will pastors tell their congregations that many of them were not truly born again because they did not possess faith in these doctrines? And, will those in traditional Christian churches disallow many of their evangelical friends? Oh, that Christians would spend half as much time seeking unity in the Scriptures as they do in disavowing one another over post-biblical church traditions!

Neither is this a matter that can be resolved by evangelical ministries paying “lip service” to these particular teachings. It does not help to have people who come forward “say” they believe them when in reality they may hardly know what is being talked about. And, very importantly, would not insistence on faith in these historical doctrines change the “center” of the evangelical message? Would it not shift that center from “the cross” to complex historical creeds?

There is no retreat on this matter! There is no going back! Will evangelicals say that the power of the cross is nullified unless people also embrace these difficult and often confusing traditional teachings? Will they say that people will be consigned to an eternity without God because - though they trusted in Christ - they did not grasp or have faith in the doctrine of his dual nature? The question all evangelicals must ask and answer is: Do they really believe in the grace of God as they say they do? Do they believe? Do they believe in the power of the cross and the blood of Christ as they say they do? Do they believe?

If the truth be known, it is likely that millions of ordinary Christians sitting in churches each week do not comprehend - and often do not have personal faith in the traditional doctrines of the Trinity and divinity of Christ.¹³ Such people have been living and dying in Christian churches for decades. Pastors have preached their funerals! Will some now say that many of them were not saved? Or will they rather say that the grace of God is forever greater than these particular doctrinal traditions? Christ will decide who is his. God forbid that we get in his way!

Conclusion

The question at the heart of this issue is: Through what faith are people saved? Are there people being saved before having faith in the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ? Or, are they saved only when they acquire such a faith? If indeed there are people being saved before such faith, then it cannot be had both ways! Will the evangelical view be that those who receive Christ without faith in those traditional doctrines are “less” saved than those who do believe them? This leads to a seemingly ludicrous – yet valid – question: Does the blood of Jesus Christ wash away fewer or lesser sins depending on faith in those particular historical teachings?

It is not possible that faith in those doctrines rightly defines who is and is not a Christian. These complex traditional doctrines do not represent God's line for his accepting human beings. I cannot ever remember a call for people to come to Christ in any evangelical church in which they were invited to receive the Trinity or trust in that doctrine. And, as we have seen, in light of Scriptural examples in the Book of Acts, evangelical churches are not wrong with regard to that approach. It is the traditional churches that are out of step with the Scriptures on this matter.

Many sincere Christians today have simply never given serious thought to these issues. Often they are propelled along in their attitudes by what is in reality church tradition. Many Christians historically insisted that faith in these particular doctrines is required for salvation. It is a long and painful chapter in Christian history that saw multitudes of people suffering, who - while clinging to Christ - did not perceive or agree with these complex post-biblical doctrines. Who caused them to suffer? Sorrowfully it was other Christians! It is time for this long history of arrogance and lack of love to come to a close.

At the end of the day, will evangelicals say that those who come to receive Christ will in fact be rejected by him because they have not attained faith in these particular doctrines? I recall the children who came forward at the crusade in Nashville. There were so many beautiful young lives with so much love and tenderness. I remember wondering how many of them believed in these historic - difficult - church doctrines at the time they came forward. Will Christians be so blindly devoted to church traditions that they will, in the name of those traditions, condemn and bring sorrow to other human beings who they judge to be "non-Christian" because they do not embrace these particular church dogmas?

An earlier point bears repeating: *The Lord indeed knows those who are his*. If it is judged that He accepts people who trust in Him without having faith in the doctrine of the Trinity - who are we to oppose Him? Who are we to reject those people? I myself once thought that a person must believe in the dual nature of Christ to be a Christian. But if it is judged that Christ receives children who have no concept of a dual nature - then who are we to reject anyone for not believing in that doctrine? Never Again! Other men may be wise enough - mighty enough that they can condemn and reject people because they do not believe in the deity of Christ. As for me...Never Again!!

¹ From the tract "My Commitment"

² The author is familiar with some where a waiting period of months or even a year is required. Some others do not specify a set amount of time, other than whatever is required for the catechumen to complete a course of study.

³ It is peculiar that while evangelicals have done a service for the benefit of Christianity in helping to restore the concept of urgency in coming to Christ, they oddly have followed the non-biblical pattern of not embracing the urgency of being baptized in water. That urgency is unmistakable in cases of conversion in the Book of Acts. (Acts 2:38-41; 8:12; 10:47-48; 16:33; 19:5; 22:16.)

⁴ It is interesting to note that I could not locate any examples of people being invited to pray a "Sinner's Prayer" in the scriptures. According to Viola, it appears that the concept was first developed by D. L. Moody (1837-1899) and made popular by Billy Graham in the 1950s. Those prayers are typically directed to or at least focused on Jesus Christ alone rather than the Trinity. In the Book of Acts, the focus for those coming to Christ was an invitation to receive water baptism in Jesus name - alone. (Note: Acts 2:38; 4:12; 8:12, 16; 10:43, 48; 19:5; 22:16.)

⁵ Romans 10:17

⁶ That of course is **not** to say that God had sexual relations with Mary! In Luke 1:35 the angel Gabriel explains the matter to her in this way: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore, the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."

⁷ It is notable that none of the Scriptures which tell us that Jesus is the "Son of God" speak of Him having a "dual-nature." The declaration in Mat.16:16 does not reveal him as the "God-Man" of post-biblical tradition. It is essential that people believe that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 4:15, etc.). Clearly that faith is realized, however, when evangelicals embrace the "man" Christ Jesus as having been begotten by God in the virgin Mary (Luke 1:35, John 3:16, etc.). Again, if God is this "man's" Father, then this "man" is literally God's Son!

⁸ Acts 1:11

⁹ In reality the word “Trinity” is of post-biblical origin and does not occur in the Bible itself.

¹⁰ It is interesting to note that many common words and phrases used to express the divinity of Christ are actually not in the Bible and are post-biblical in origin. Such phrases include: “God-man,” “Fully God and fully man,” “Two-Natures,” “Dual-Nature,” “God the Son,” and others. Many Christians who often refer to Christ as “fully God and fully man” are also surprised to learn that orthodox Trinitarianism holds that Jesus had an “impersonal” human nature – that he had no “human” personality as such. Hence, in orthodoxy, Christ can be referred to as “man” but never as “a man”: as “human” but never as “a human.” This concept terribly demeans the man Christ Jesus. That unfortunate doctrine is referred to as “anhypostasia.”

¹¹ While there are no declarations of the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ in the Book of Acts, there are other themes that are evident in the messages recorded there. Among those themes is the essential declaration of the kingdom of God which is markedly absent in much of modern day preaching. (Note Acts 1:3; 8:12; 14:22; 19:8; 20:25; 28:23, 31.) Paul’s message in Acts 13:33-38 also reveals that a theme of apostolic preaching was that the “man” Christ Jesus was the “begotten” Son of God.

¹² It must be recognized that there is often a difference between the evangelist’s personal beliefs in such traditional doctrines versus what people may believe in their hearts when coming forward in crusades.

¹³ One writer who would move Christians backwards by insisting on faith in these doctrines laments over what he describes as “The Forgotten Trinity.” (James R. White, *The Forgotten Trinity*, Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1998.) His lament is quite telling in that it tacitly acknowledges the extent to which that doctrine is not held by many mainline Christians today. White admits that “most Christians do not understand what the term [Trinity] means” and recognizes that Christians often find the doctrine of the Trinity “complicated, obtuse or just downright difficult.” Having provided those descriptions, he then fails to explain how that those who are uninitiated and entirely unfamiliar with this “complicated,” “obtuse” and “difficult” doctrine are being saved without faith in it! Or, will he say that such people coming forward in evangelical churches and crusades are not being saved? Will he say that those Christians today who do not possess faith in that doctrine have not really been born again? If so, then from an evangelical point of view, Mr. White’s lack of confidence in the grace of God and the cross of Christ is most unfortunate! On the other hand, if he acknowledges that they are being saved, then he must accept that faith in the doctrines of the Trinity and the dual nature of Christ are not requirements for salvation and do not define who is and is not a Christian.