

Ten Arguments for Unitarian Inclusivism

I speak here *only* for myself, and *not* for the Unitarian Christian Alliance or its Board. I acknowledge and respect the fact that the UCA takes no position on this matter, and that it includes both those who agree with and who disagree with the position I shall argue for.

By a “trinitarian” I mean a person who identifies as a Christian and who fellowships with a trinitarian church, one which officially professes¹ some version of the traditionally required Trinity language. Such a person may or may not have much understanding of what “the doctrine of the Trinity” is supposed to be (the norm is a *very* tenuous grasp).² “Unitarian Inclusivism” is the view that God can and does save people in non-unitarian Christian traditions, such as trinitarians, even ones who have not disavowed any triune-god doctrine. In other words, being trinitarian in the above sense doesn’t disqualify one from being born again.

Some will ask why this even needs to be argued for. The answer is that some of my unitarian brothers and sisters (OK, it’s mostly the brothers) are given to publicly asserting, or often just insinuating, that trinitarians are idolaters, members of a false religion, or that they worship a false god, and so they are never real sharers in the new covenant through Jesus and heirs of God’s Kingdom until such time as they repudiate trinitarianism.³ In this talk I will give ten brief arguments for Unitarian Inclusivism. These arguments are mostly independent of one another, so if you reject a few, still, you ought to consider the rest as making a strong case for Unitarian Inclusivism.

Argument 1: from catholic history

The unitarian who urges that no trinitarian can, while being a trinitarian, be saved, is in effect reversing and echoing back traditional catholic intolerance. This goes back to the second Christian century. As an expedient to exclude the gnostics then infesting mainstream churches, a coalition of leaders concocted and eventually enforced a one-bishop system. No church, they declared, was a real, saving church unless it was under a sort of religious governor, the unique catholic bishop over that city or region. And

¹ In other words, the church’s Statement of Faith includes a doctrine of the Trinity, whether or not such ideas play much role in its preaching, teaching, prayer, and worship.

² White, *Forgotten Trinity*, 9, 12–13.

³ For a recent example see Schlegel, “Trinitarians.”

propagandists spread the false claim that the New-Testament-era apostles had decreed that they should be replaced by this new ruling class of bishops.

If his letter to the Philadelphians is genuine, then we know that as early as Ignatius (the first portion of the second century) supporters of this new regime drew the conclusion that “if any follow a schismatic,” that is, the founder of a religious group outside of the bishop-ruled catholic mainstream, “they will not inherit the Kingdom of God.”⁴ This idea eventually manifested in the catholic slogan that “There is no salvation outside the Church.”⁵ On the face of it, this implies that all non-catholics (that is, anyone not baptized into a bishop-supervised church) will go to hell. Although one should recognize that in modern times Roman Catholic theologians have proposed a number of exceptions to this principle,⁶ the incoherent “Athanasian creed,” beloved by many a trinitarian theologian, still threatens that one either believes its paradoxes or goes to hell.⁷

In modern times there is a strong trend for both Catholics and Protestants to back off from such extreme positions; thus, most Protestants believe that one *can* be saved without getting into the supposed profundities of Trinity and Incarnation—more on this below. My point for now is that some of my unitarian Christian brethren seem to just mirror back this sort of harsh position onto trinitarians.

But where did our Lord Jesus Christ endorse only one salvific human institution or only one required theological system? Did he not say, “Whoever is not against us is for us”?⁸ In point of fact, *some* trinitarians *are* for us, in that they believe that we *are* born-again Christians, even though, they think, we’re very mistaken in our theology and christology. Even the Roman Catholic church, which crowed for centuries that all non-Roman-Catholics go to hell, has recently re-described Protestants as “separated brothers and sisters.”⁹ Have we not learned that man-made litmus tests for salvation are without justification, since Christians have not been authorized to make the Way more difficult than did Jesus and his apostles? But let’s dig deeper into their view.

⁴ Ignatius, *Philadelphians*, 239 (3.3).

⁵ Latin: *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*. Such declarations were common in late ancient and medieval catholic traditions (The Slaves of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, “Popes”).

⁶ See my “Theories,” sec. 3c.

⁷ “Whoever desires to be saved must above all things hold the Catholic faith. Unless a man keeps it in its entirety inviolate, he will assuredly perish eternally . . . This is the Catholic faith. Unless a man believes it faithfully and steadfastly, he will not be able to be saved” (“The Athanasian Creed,” secs. 1–2, 42.)

⁸ Mark 9:40. Unless otherwise noted all scriptural quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

⁹ Tanner, “Ecumenism,” 908.

Argument 2: from minimal essential beliefs

What, according to the New Testament, must one believe in order to be saved? The clear answer is that Jesus is God's Christ, his Messiah, the unique human Lord under God.¹⁰ I take it this is a sort of shorthand for a not fully precise grouping of beliefs, something like: there is one God, the God of Israel who is the creator, and that Jesus is his Christ, his specially chosen and empowered man who carried out God's mission of establishing a new covenant through his atoning death, and who has been vindicated by God's raising him from the dead and exalting him to his own right hand, putting him in charge of everything, except, of course, the God who is still in charge of him, and this now immortal Jesus will return to rule from the throne of David.¹¹ There is of course no required belief in later catholic speculations about Trinity and Incarnation. The gospel presentations in Acts are silent on such matters.¹² But notice too that neither is there a requirement to *disavow* such speculations.

Do trinitarians, generally speaking, believe that Jesus is God's Christ, and the closely associated claims just mentioned? Yes, they do. Thus, according to the New Testament they believe enough to be saved. Do they also believe things which clash with the above? Yes, most often they do. But there is no New Testament requirement that one's overall theology be coherent, that is, wholly self-consistent. If we add that requirement, we're adding to the terms of the new covenant, making it harder to enter, something we have no right to do.

Argument 3: from New Testament tolerance

The apostle Paul gives us an astonishing example of tolerating serious theological errors in his first letter to the Corinthians.¹³ Do you consider the future resurrection of all people to be a central, important, and essential doctrine? I do, and evidently so did the apostle Paul.¹⁴ And yet it is clear from his letter that some people in that assembly denied this, saying "there is no resurrection from the dead."¹⁵ As Paul argues, if that's so, then Christ hasn't been raised, which is contrary to the gospel he and the other apostles have been

¹⁰ Locke, *Reasonableness*. John 1:45, 49, 3:36, 4:25–42, 6:69, 11:27, 20:30–31; Matthew 16:16–18; Luke 2:11, 22:66–70; Acts 2:36–42, 4:10–12, 29–32, 8:5, 17:2–4, 18:4–6.

¹¹ See the texts in the previous note and 1 Corinthians 15:20–28.

¹² Acts 2:14–41, 3:12–26, 4:2, 8–22, 5:29–32, 42, 7:1–53, 8:12, 35; 9:19–22, 10:34–43, 11:20, 13:16–41, 14:15–18, 16:30–31, 17:2–3, 18–34, 18:4–5, 13, 24–28, 19:8–9, 20:21, 25, 28, 22:1–21, 24:10–21, 26:2–29, 28:31.

¹³ I owe this point to Eddy, "Reasons Offered," 13.

¹⁴ Romans 1:4, 6:5; 1 Corinthians 15; Philippians 3:10–11; 2 Timothy 2:18; Acts 17:18.

¹⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:12.

proclaiming, and it would be a mistake for us to look forward to the eternal bodily life Jesus promised.¹⁶

Yet Paul merely corrects them. He doesn't eject them as "heretics," demand that they sign a doctrinal statement affirming the resurrection, reject them as non-believers, or tell people to get ready to burn these miscreants at the stake. Paul comes at them hard, to be sure, wielding several arguments, and at last admonishing them with the command "do not let anyone lead you astray."¹⁷

Might he have excluded them from this assembly at some future point? I don't see how we could rule that out. But his first instinct was to argue, not to exclude or compel. This should be the approach of any Christian teacher. Paul is a better model than the brawling, fanatical bishops of the fourth century and beyond, or the blowhard Internet apologists of today.

If, as Paul shows us, one can reject the resurrection while being a disciple in need of correction, then I suggest that also, one can believe Trinity or Incarnation speculations while being a genuine Christian who needs further scriptural correction and instruction.

Argument 4: from preserved essentials

Denying Jesus' resurrection is a serious error. But what if one affirms his resurrection but also holds some opinions which in fact are incompatible with it, such as the claim of some nowadays that Jesus currently lacks any sort of body. This too is an error: it can't be true both that Christ has been raised and that he currently lacks any sort of body! But such a combination of beliefs is *less* bad than a simple *denial* of Jesus' resurrection, as it includes an affirmation of that important truth.

Catholic traditions are like this when it comes to many claims which we unitarian Christians think are true and important, and even essential and central to the gospel. Catholic traditions typically *include* most or all of these claims; it's just that they add to them other, later claims which, unbeknownst to them, are neither consistent with nor motivated by the original claims. But under that wet blanket of falsehoods and nonsense, they regularly believe and pass on the original truths.

¹⁶ 1 Corinthians 15:1–19. It's an interesting question how some of Paul's converts could have ended up thinking that resurrection is impossible. Further, where did they think Jesus is now? Did they think he was a disembodied spirit?

¹⁷ 1 Corinthians 15:34.

Consider the famous so-called “Apostles’ Creed.”¹⁸ My unitarian friend, don’t you *strongly agree* with most of it?¹⁹ There’s no doctrine of the Trinity here, nor any doctrine about Christ being divine. It doesn’t presuppose his pre-human existence, but it *does* seem to assume, correctly, his being a man! Nor need “the Holy Spirit” here be a distinct divine “Person.” In this creed, which scholars say reached this form around the seventh or eighth centuries (though it has roots in much earlier mainstream creeds) we see expressed *most* of what we want to say is the gospel, though most of us would suggest a few additions and subtractions.

Such statements are part of catholic history, and as with other conservative religious traditions, they continue to be affirmed even while the tradition now teaches things that conflict with them.²⁰ Thus, the simple “rules of faith” and baptismal creeds sit there in the writings of so-called “church fathers” (or those who at least were considered mainstream in their day), and the “Apostles’ Creed” is regularly recited in many trinitarian

¹⁸ “I believe in God,
the Father almighty,
Creator of heaven and earth,
and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Holy Spirit,
born of the Virgin Mary,
suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died and was buried;
he descended into hell;
on the third day he rose again from the dead;
he ascended into heaven,
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty;
from there he will come to judge the living and the dead.
I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic Church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and life everlasting.
Amen” (“Apostles’ Creed”).

¹⁹ At least, so long as we give our own meaning to “the catholic church” so that it means the universal church, that is, the group of all of those known to God to be born again.

²⁰ Here is another example. In a short work formerly attributed to Hippolytus which scholars now think is from the first third of the 200s, we have the following short baptismal creed in a question-and-answer format; the one being baptized is supposed to reply with: “I believe.”

“Do you believe in God the Father Almighty? . . . Do you believe in Christ Jesus, the son of God, who was born of the Holy Spirit and Mary the virgin and was crucified under Pontius Pilate and was dead and buried and rose on the third day alive from the dead and ascended to the heavens and sits at the right hand of the Father and will come to judge the living and the dead? . . . Do you believe in the Holy Spirit and the holy church and the resurrection of all flesh?” (Hippolytus, *Apostolic*, 134 [ch. 21].)

We could improve on this, but I think most will agree that someone who confesses these things has confessed all that is needed in order to be converted.

churches. These are all *unitarian* creeds, ones in which the one God is explicitly the Father, no tripersonal god is mentioned, and neither the “full deity” of the Son nor the “full deity of” the Spirit are asserted, implied, or assumed. In many cases one who is taught some version of catholic Christianity, with Trinity, Incarnation, and all, is taught these basic unitarian truths as well. In this way, creeds preserve the truth, even while other official statements transmit errors. Imagine the original truths as a cake, and the later speculative accretions as an added frosting. If you eat both, well, you’ve thereby eaten the cake, even though, let’s suppose, the cake would be better tasting and more nutritious *without* that frosting.

Further, Christian traditions which encourage Bible-reading by the laity thereby marinate their people in writings where the one true God is the Father and no Trinity is ever mentioned, implied, or presupposed. Such people habitually think like *unitarian* Christians, even if in apologetics and theological contexts they suddenly wheel around, mount their high horse, and become defenders of “the Trinity,” despite in most cases being quite confused about what that even means.

If you wonder why the Almighty has allowed mainstream Christianity to be muddled in Trinity and Incarnation speculations for so long, this is part of the reason: even while they include such later theories, these traditions also preserve and reliably transmit important and essential apostolic teachings.²¹ Destroying catholic traditions would thus destroy a large and longstanding witness to apostolic theology and christology. Removing the weeds would not be a good idea if a lot of the wheat would be torn up as well.²² Thus has God withheld his weed eater.

To summarize, a trinitarian in most cases will have been taught the “Apostles’ Creed” or some similar statement and/or will have habitually read the New Testament largely like a unitarian. Such a person will thereby believe what’s required for being saved. It’s just that they will also, depending on their level of theological education and indoctrination, layer on top of these essentials prestigious speculations which in fact don’t fit with them. But the following is not a part of any Christian tradition: believe the basics of the gospel, *and also*, don’t believe anything which is inconsistent with those teachings. This is as it should be, since we fallible humans frequently find ourselves with incoherent collections of beliefs.

²¹ The much-vaunted 325 Nicene creed says nothing about any triune God, even while it newly elevates the Son, or rather, the Logos, to full deity. It is only in 381 that we first see an official catholic trinitarian creed, as this presupposes that being the same in essence somehow makes there be one god between the Father, Son, and Spirit. On this see my Tuggy, *What Is the Trinity?*, chaps. 5–7; Tuggy, “When and How.”

²² Matthew 13:24–30.

Argument 5: from difficulty and mercy

Is it *obvious* that New Testament theology is unitarian rather than trinitarian? Yes, it is. The *unbiased* reader can just see there that the one God is the Father, not any unmentioned Trinity. And yet the matter has been made very difficult for the average educated trinitarian. We all, reasonably and unavoidably, trust experts when it comes to understanding the Bible, be they translators, commentators, Bible scholars, theologians, or seminary-educated pastors. When the average educated trinitarian looks in study Bible footnotes and mainstream commentaries, a herd of credentialed experts assure him that *of course* the doctrine of the Trinity “is all through the Bible,” whatever that means, or that it is *obviously implied* by a handful of New Testament texts.²³ Who are you, oh puny pew-dweller, to question this crowd of experts?

And if you’re a *very* educated Christian, let’s suppose, who graduated from a Christian college and/or from a trinitarian seminary, then you’ve been indoctrinated into a pantheon of bigshots, Great Theologians, for whom “the Trinity” was a central concern. You’ve been taught to revere such glamorized figures as Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin, or recent Big Names like Barth, Rahner, Wright, or Bauckham. How could *so many* illustrious Christian intellectuals be mistaken? In general, the more educated you are, the harder it will be for you to remove the distorting trinitarian goggles from your eyes, and the more your peers will enforce conformity. The simple believer who just reads any translation of the New Testament will find it much easier to leave behind post-scriptural Trinity speculations. But even this person probably has a seminary-graduate pastor who confidently assures his church that “the doctrine of the Trinity” is exactly what the Bible teaches.

My Protestant friends, consider that in the 1500s, you would have been in exactly the same situation with respect, for example, to the papacy. Practically all the experts available to you then would have assured you that it’s right there in Matthew 16.²⁴ Sometimes it turns out most of the experts are wrong! It’s part of the human race’s surprising ability to mess a good thing up, in this case, God-revealed theological knowledge.

But my point now is that it is *hard* for many trinitarians to make the change to a unitarian theology. The influence of contrary experts ties him to his current assumptions, and there is also a serious degree of practical difficulty. Longstanding traditions threaten that one can’t be saved if one is a non-trinitarian, and—generally speaking—trinitarians

²³ *NLT Study Bible*, 1641 (note on Mt. 28:19); Dennis, “The Trinity.”

²⁴ “Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.’ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah” (Matthew 16:16–20). Roman Catholics interpret this as teaching that Peter was the first Pope (“Peter.”).

roughly ostracize unitarians, muzzling and/or disfellowshipping them. Switching from trinitarian to unitarian can involve the loss of your job, your church, your family and friends—even, you may fear, your salvation.

And surely God, who knows all and is perfectly fair and merciful, takes all of this into account. We should not think that he is going to damn everyone who is mentally and socially stuck in trinitarianism. Those experts and pastors bear a heavier responsibility, as they know more.²⁵ Here's an analogy. Suppose you happen upon a senior citizen who has fallen and can't get up. No one else is nearby, and you are able-bodied. You are *obligated* to help that fallen elder, and you're blameworthy if you just stride on by. Now imagine instead that someone passes by who has a serious physical handicap, so they can only walk with great difficulty. And suppose also that their family will abuse them if they are late for the function they are headed to. Is such a person blameworthy if they pass by the fallen elder? Maybe, but if so, much less so than the first, able-bodied person. "From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required."²⁶

Now perhaps you know a ton about the Bible and the history of theology, and you are relatively untouched by the social chains that bind many trinitarians. You, my friend, will be blameworthy, if you look squarely at New Testament teachings and then choose to leave them aside in favor of later speculations. But I doubt that God is going to severely judge your grandma who never graduated from high school, and who's always been told that the Bible teaches God to be the Trinity. Given human ignorance, everyone God saves is confused about a lot of things, and this would seem to be a common area of confusion that nonetheless is not, for most people, a disqualification from the Kingdom.

Argument 6: from paper-only trinitarianism

Let's continue thinking for a moment about your trinitarian granny. In fact, how trinitarian is she? She has long sat in the pew of a church with a Trinity doctrine in its Statement of Faith. But also, she reads the Bible. If you talk to her, you'll find that generally she thinks of the one God as the Father, just like she reads in the gospels. And she thinks of Jesus as this wonderful man who served and obeyed God.

Does she also, sometimes or usually, add to this a layer of trinitarian speculations? Maybe! It depends. Granted, *some* trinitarians do think like trinitarians at least most of the time. But the more Bible-oriented a church is, the more it ignores those speculations and sticks to New Testament language and thought. Grandma may in fact think like a *unitarian* Christian most or even all of the time. She may be a "trinitarian" on paper only, in that she's a member of a church with a trinitarian creed, but in fact, such views play little to no role in

²⁵ "Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1, ESV).

²⁶ Luke 12:48a.

her spiritual life. Or she may be ambivalent; she may occasionally either recite or verbally salute the “Nicene Creed,” but she may *mostly* default to the New Testament picture of the one God the Father and his human Son Jesus.

Given this fact of paper-only trinitarians and ambivalent, *almost* paper-only trinitarians, then surely God does in fact save *some* trinitarians, when they are believing and persevering disciples of the Lord Jesus.

Argument 7: from accuracy

Some will object: “You sneaky rat—trying to play to our emotions with someone’s lovable, cute Grandma! As sweet as she is, she is still an idolater; she worships a false God, and so long as she does this, she can’t be saved. Further, she’s put her trust in a false Jesus. Even cute and sweet pagans go to hell.”

In reply, we need to be careful with these accusations, and we need to describe her situation soberly and accurately. Let’s start with the last charge. No, Granny is not a pagan, she is a Christian, a trinitarian one. If you think that’s an oxymoron like “Jewish pope” or “Atheist Christian,” I’ll address that argument shortly. But on the face of it she is not a pagan *at all*; that’s a reckless charge.

Is she an idolater? What *is* an idolater? Most strictly speaking, an idolater is someone who in a religious context treats some physical object like a statue or a painting, or sometimes even a human person, *as if* it were a deity. Idolators typically bow towards their idols, or kiss them, or leave them food offerings, etc. Does Granny do this? Not if she’s a Protestant! It is true that since the so-called seventh ecumenical council Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians have endorsed idolatry (though of course not by that name) so long as it is Christian, offering dodgy Incarnation-based arguments to defend it.²⁷ In my view such practices are against God’s will, and so are sins—of course, forgivable ones. But your Baptist, Church of Christ, or Anglican trinitarian Grandma has probably *not* committed that sin.

Perhaps you think I’m missing the point. Many Protestants ignore *literal* idolatry like I just described,²⁸ and only want to talk about *metaphorical* idolatry, like loving one’s possessions too much, or one’s spouse, or just anything but God. Is Granny worshiping something other than God? *Maybe*. Insofar as she worships “God the Trinity,” she is worshiping a fiction, a product of human imagination. But listen to her sing and pray. Most often, especially if she’s Protestant, she prays to and worships God the Father, in the name of Jesus. And she honors Jesus because of what he’s done for us, to the glory of God the

²⁷ Tanner, “Second Council.”

²⁸ I have long thought this odd, given the ubiquity of *literal* idolatry in the world’s religions. Any visitor to India or China can observe that literal idolatry is very much alive and well.

Father, like we read in Philippians 2 and Revelation 5. And by “the Trinity” she may often mean no more than: God, the Son of God, and God’s spirit, where these are not thought of as a triune god.²⁹ So she probably worships with some degree of confusion, and may sometimes pray to a fiction, but I doubt that our heavenly Father ignores her prayers because of that. Such ordinary believers are not “pagans,” nor are, many of them, idolaters. And so, they can be saved. Why? Because they have trusted in God and Christ and believe the things we mentioned above.

But have they not believed in “another Christ,” like Paul discusses in 2 Corinthians 11?³⁰ No. By “Christ,” they mean the same person we’re talking about, the Jesus of the New Testament, the real Jewish man who has now been raised to immortality. Our disagreement with them about Jesus’ divinity shows that we are in fact talking about one and the same Jesus.³¹ They will sometimes think that in some murky way he is also God or also divine and not only human. But most of them agree that he’s truly human and a man, a male human person, even if a few theologians in their tradition actually say that he’s “man” (that is, called that) but not a man (that is, not a human person).

It must be granted that some people carry on about “Jesus” and “Christ” and they are simply talking about someone else, such as a space alien, an aeon, a new age guru, or a cult leader.³² I take it that the apostles did denounce as pseudo-believers those who denied that Jesus had come in the flesh, i.e. that he was a real man.³³ But the vast majority of trinitarians do not do this. They just add to Jesus’ true humanity a set of qualities which actually imply the lack of true humanity, namely divinity, which involves having something like these essential qualities: all-knowing, all-powerful, eternal, immortal, immunity to

²⁹ On the use of “Trinity” as a plural referring term vs. its use as a singular referring term for the triune God see my “When and How.”

³⁰ I’m unsure what Paul means by that phrase. He surely does assert that his opponents’ message, their “gospel” is other than his, and that any power (“spirit”) they have is not from God, while Paul’s is (2 Corinthians 11:4; 1 Corinthians 2:4–5). But does he mean that they are literally talking about another “Jesus,” i.e. about someone else with that name, but not the Son of Mary? It’s possible—see what I say in the next paragraph—but I think it’s more likely that he means that his opponents are *teaching false doctrine about* the same Jesus Paul preaches about. We sometimes speak this way about a person who is different from how they usually are or should be. Suppose a husband named Hank gets extremely drunk and for the first time hits his wife. She may say later, “that was another Hank,” but this just means that Hank was very different from how he normally is on that occasion, not that someone other than her husband was the perpetrator. Similarly, suppose that someone spreads a false rumor about your wife Peg. You may say, “that’s not *my* Peg,” but the rumormongers are in fact speaking, falsely, about Peg.

³¹ If I say that Jesus#1 *isn’t* divine, you assert that Jesus#2 *is* divine (where these are two different ones, each called “Jesus”) then we have not actually disagreed about anything, but have only talked past one another! But unitarians and trinitarians do in fact *disagree* regarding Christ’s alleged deity, which implies that we’re each talking about the same guy, though differently understood.

³² Colavito, “Bizarre”; Groothuis, “Gnostic Jesus”; “Benjamin Creme”; Walker, “Cult Leader.”

³³ 1 John 4:2; 2 John 1:7.

temptation, being top level in authority, and being uncreated. Does this make sense? No!³⁴ But again, our merciful God commonly forgives the confused penitent.

To summarize, as to idolatry, it seems this is a sin which a Christian may unfortunately commit. But most trinitarians, accurately described, are neither pagans nor trusters of “another Jesus.” They trust *our* Jesus, the real one; it’s just that they have some false beliefs about him and sometimes confuse him together with God.

Argument 8 from concepts

Some trinitarians offer this simple argument against unitarian Christians:

The very phrase “unitarian Christian” is an oxymoron like “Jewish pope” or “married bachelor.” It’s a contradiction in terms, because a Christian is *by definition* trinitarian.

In response, some of my unitarian brethren mirror this argument back, saying:

The very phrase “trinitarian Christian” is an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms, because a Christian is *by definition* unitarian.

Both claims are false. Neither the term “trinitarian Christian” nor the term “unitarian Christian” implies a contradiction. And let me clarify that I’m not using the term “Christian” in a merely sociological sense, for someone who is part of a Christian community or social network. Nor am I using the term “Christian” in a merely psychological sense, that is, for someone who self-identifies as a member of some Christian tradition. Rather, I’m using “Christian” in a theological sense, for a person who has been born again and so is a part of what Paul calls “the body of Christ.”³⁵ Such a person must believe all that is required for being born again.

Most Protestants agree that even a kid as young as 7 to 10 years old may repent of his sins and accept the forgiveness bought by Christ. Such a one is often baptized after only the most rudimentary instruction, and often will have such vague beliefs as to count as neither trinitarian nor unitarian. He is a Christian according to New Testament criteria, and that shows that being a Christian doesn’t strictly require being in either theological camp.

Some trinitarians will agree with what I’ve said so far on this topic but will urge that such a kid will then be damned if, after being fully informed, he continues to not be a trinitarian and/or “denies the Trinity.” But this makes no sense. He has made the deal and entered into the new covenant. There’s no scriptural warrant for the idea that the terms of

³⁴ For discussion of the apparent incompatibilities between divinity and humanity see my “Contradictory.”

³⁵ 1 Corinthians 12:27.

staying in that covenant are stricter than the terms of admission. In fact, that would be a bait and switch. “Come, you can join my club if you agree to A, B, and C. OK, now that you’re in, you will be kicked out unless you also agree to D, E, and F (which I didn’t mention before).”³⁶ This unreasonable switcheroo is the result of conflicted Protestants applying both a simple, biblical belief-requirement for being saved together with the traditional demands of catholic traditions. But we should let the Bible trump contrary later traditions.

Argument 9 from practicality

Thus far my arguments have been about widely known truths and facts. But now for a moment I will turn to practical considerations. It is, frankly, obnoxious and counter-productive to brand your trinitarian neighbor a pagan, an idolator, or a pseudo-Christian, or to worry aloud that at the judgement Jesus will reject him for assuming trinitarian views. If you’re trying to win him over to a more scriptural way of understanding God and Jesus, this is not the way! Better you should establish a common ground between the two of you, such as the authority of the Scriptures. Having agreed on that, you can then, given time and patient, loving conversation and instruction, show him that the agreed-on sources support unitarian rather than trinitarian views about God and his Christ.³⁷

In my experience, and having talked to other unitarian activists about this, a full frontal assault on “the Trinity” often backfires, resulting in the recipient, who was barely trinitarian before in his thinking, becoming hyper-trinitarian in reaction against your attacks. It is better to invite your trinitarian friends into conversation, to educate them, and to hand them the tools they need to investigate the biblical, historical, and theological credentials of these longstanding catholic traditions about God and his Son. The facts, the Scriptures, and God’s spirit are on our side: we don’t need verbal violence any more than we need physical violence. Neither is the way of our Lord Jesus, whose brother advised us that

³⁶ I owe this point to the famous subordinationist unitarian Anglican minister, philosopher, and theologian Samuel Clarke, who wrote, “The baptismal creed, I say, must of necessity contain explicitly in it at least all the fundamentals of faith, because whatever is fundamental is necessary to salvation, and it’s a manifest absurdity that anything should be necessary to the salvation of a Christian and yet not be expressly required to be explicitly believed by him at his baptism or confirmation when he is admitted to the Christian Church. For to admit any person to be a member upon certain terms or conditions and afterwards to alter or add to those terms is what in other cases men never allow.” (Clark, *Scripture-Doctrine*, iii, modernized.)

³⁷ Further, if like trinitarian apologists and theologians you treat “the doctrine of the Trinity” as a uniquely all-important foundation of catholic traditions, you’re playing along with the false assumptions (1) that “the doctrine of the Trinity” is some *one* theology (2) which is shared by all trinitarians and (3) which is the guiding principle of all catholic thinking about God and Jesus. But these assumptions are false! Better you should help your trinitarian friend to perceive their own confusions as they try to hold together both scriptural teachings and clashing, later, catholic teachings. On the many competing Trinity theories see Tuggy, *What Is the Trinity?*, chaps. 6–9; Tuggy, “Trinity.” On the human Jesus vs. the godman of catholic orthodoxy see Tuggy and Date, *Is Jesus Human*.

the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. And the fruit of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.³⁸

Be that peacemaker, not an Internet hothead flailing away with inaccurate accusations.

Argument 10 from experience

I just appealed to my own experiences of talking with trinitarians. My tenth and final argument is another appeal to experiential evidence, and it involves kinds of experience which some of my unitarian brethren lack. I have noticed that some of the biggest opponents of Unitarian Inclusivism were never themselves trinitarians and have never known many trinitarians, and that they tend to assume that trinitarians generally are like trinitarian Internet apologists.³⁹ To such I say: please learn from my and others' relevant experiences.

I was born again not long before my eighth birthday. I prayed a "sinner's prayer" and was baptized by my trinitarian pastor shortly after. I've been trying to follow Christ ever since. It was only in full adulthood that I started to disentangle my thoughts from the Trinity and Incarnation confusions that had been passed on to me, and it took me around a decade. At no time was I aware of switching gods or Jesuses.

As a trinitarian I worshiped God and his Son while suffering from confusions. Post-biblical traditions led me to sometimes think that Jesus was God himself and sometimes to think that Jesus was someone else, and "the doctrine of the Trinity" was just words attached to amorphous ideas. Now, by God's grace, I worship the same God and his same Son unburdened by such confusions. My spiritual life dates back to before this theological growth, and that same life continues now. I've personally witnessed gifts of the spirit,⁴⁰ and more importantly *fruits* of the spirit,⁴¹ in both trinitarian and unitarian Christians. Thus, I know by experience of myself and of others around me that some trinitarians are indeed born-again servants of Christ, members of God's family through Jesus. I dare not judge them harshly, as my human Master and future, God-appointed judge,⁴² is also theirs.

A small minority of trinitarians are enthusiastic supporters of trinitarianism, but most are both confused about and habitually avoidant of such mind-melting speculations.

³⁸ James 3:17–18.

³⁹ That is, fanatical trinitarians who are contemptuous of any who dare question the coherence or truth or justification of their own cherished yet inchoate speculations.

⁴⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:1–11.

⁴¹ Galatians 5:22–23.

⁴² Acts 17:31; John 5:22–27.

They read the same Bible I do, and to various extents understand it as I do, at least some of the time. As best I can tell, God has accepted these trinitarians, even as he accepted me when I was one. So I dare not mirror traditional catholic intolerance by denouncing them *en masse* as non-Christians or non-disciples. Further, some of them, judging by their faith and other fruits of the spirit, seem to be better disciples than some of the unitarian Christians I know! I believe that we are judged more by our obedience than we are by our degree of theological precision.

Things I'm *Not* Saying, and Conclusion

In conclusion, I must address some ideas many will mis-hear in what I've said. Some will object, saying, "You don't think truth matters! Well, *I say it does*. And *I say* that anyone who rejects Jesus' theology and christology is *not* his disciple and will be disowned by him on judgement day."

In reply, I affirm that truth *does* matter when it comes to theology and christology. I am grateful that by God's grace, and honestly by the faithful scholarship of many unitarian and trinitarian Christians before me, I have been able, like so many others, to lay aside distorting Trinity and Incarnation speculations, so as to see what the New Testament authors are actually saying about God and his Christ.

To say that errors of the trinitarian sort don't automatically damn a person is *not* to say that such errors do no harm. Of course, they do; and also, knowledge is intrinsically good and confusion and false beliefs are intrinsically bad. What are the harms here? For starters, glory that should be given to God alone tends to be given to his Son too—or even instead, and trinitarian traditions always have one foot in docetic thinking about Jesus, where he is not a real human person who died for our sins, but was essentially God in disguise, pretending to be mortal, temptable, and limited in knowledge and power. Such a Christ is not someone we can imitate, whereas the real, human Jesus of the New Testament is, being a unique model of trust in and obedience to his and our God.⁴³

But do most trinitarians *intentionally reject* Jesus' teachings that the Father is the only true God, and that Jesus is God's human Messiah? No, they don't. Rather, they labor under the mistaken assumption that those truths are compatible with traditional teachings on Trinity and Incarnation.⁴⁴

"Are you saying no one is ever responsible for their false beliefs about God and his Son?"

No, I'm not. But we must keep in mind the moral principle that the more information you have available to you, the more responsible you are to believe important truths and to

⁴³ Tuggy, "Exemplar."

⁴⁴ Tuggy, "Podcast 248"; Tuggy, "Conflict."

avoid believing important falsehoods. Most trinitarians are stuck in a low-information state about the variety, history, and lateness of catholic speculations about Trinity and Incarnation. They are assured by a host of seemingly knowledgeable and credentialed people, sometimes in positions of authority, that all Christians everywhere have believed in the triunity of God and in Jesus being “God Incarnate,” and that such claims are *obviously implied by Scripture*. Such persons bear little responsibility for their confusions about God and Jesus, especially when they lack the abilities and opportunities for a thorough investigation. In contrast, seminary graduates who continue to prop up catholic theological traditions with unprincipled proof-texting are in a different position.⁴⁵

Change is in the air. In the Internet age any diligent lay person can do an end-run around traditional gatekeepers. Widely available books, podcasts, blogs, social media, and organizations like the Unitarian Christian Alliance and our conference partners, empower any trinitarian to learn how Trinity and Incarnation speculations clash with the New Testament, and how those traditions are confused, confusing, and without real scriptural support, despite the confident claims of mainstream theologians and apologists. When you’ve been empowered to “see” the clash between Jesus’ and his apostles’ teachings with those of catholic traditions, then you must make a choice, and you must answer to our Lord and to our God for your actions or inactions.

But to my unitarian brothers and sisters, I say that we should leave the judgments to our Master Jesus, and we should pray for our trinitarian brothers and sisters, that God will open their eyes to a clearer view of the New Testament. We should argue whenever appropriate, “speaking the truth in love,”⁴⁶ since truth on such important topics *does* matter. But we should withhold from carelessly damning people who in fact our Lord Jesus has accepted as his own. Our rule in theological debates must be “quick to listen, slow to speak, slow to anger.”⁴⁷ We should honor most trinitarians as fellow believers and acknowledge the work of God’s spirit in their lives. In fact, we *need* them, since we and they are so many members of the one body of Christ.⁴⁸ The Bible tells us that

the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kindly to everyone, an apt teacher, patient, correcting opponents with gentleness.⁴⁹

If *opponents* of Christianity are to be met with gentleness, all the more so for our fellow believers. As Paul writes in his letter to the Romans,

⁴⁵ James 3:1. On the loss of traditional Trinity proof-texts because of the grammatical-historical method of interpretation see Sanders, *The Triune God*, 161–66, 179–80.

⁴⁶ Ephesians 4:15.

⁴⁷ James 1:19.

⁴⁸ Romans 12:4–5; Ephesians 4:11–16.

⁴⁹ 2 Timothy 2:24–25.

Who are you to pass judgment on slaves of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall. And they will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make them stand.⁵⁰

In context he's addressing differences of conscience about food choices, but there are differences of conscience about theological and christological matters too.

Many trinitarian Christians are *afraid* to re-open these issues of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. They've been taught that such thinking may imperil their eternal destiny, and also humility may compel them to stay with the trinitarian mainstream, at least initially. Nonetheless, they belong to our mighty Lord Jesus; he will lead them, and eventually he will hold them accountable in all fairness. Let us leave that to him, even while we teach and argue with kindness and humility added to our zeal. Let us work out our own salvation "with fear and trembling,"⁵¹ show a love which "casts out fear,"⁵² and "Honor everyone," specifically, loving "the family of believers"⁵³—*all of them*.⁵⁴

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⁵⁰ Romans 14:4.

⁵¹ Philippians 2:12.

⁵² John 4:18.

⁵³ 1 Peter 2:17.

⁵⁴ My thanks to Anna Shoffner Brown and Mark Cain for their helpful feedback on drafts of this paper.

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