

Dear Christian Friends,

A religious weight loss program called *Weigh Down* created in 1992 by a woman named Gwen Shamblin grew from a small business conducted out of a home garage to a multimillion-dollar Nashville corporation with over 30,000 churches and organizations participating. But not so long ago the whole movement was threatened and her business placed in jeopardy when Shamblin made comments regarding her beliefs in the Trinity. Here is what she said, "*As a ministry, we believe in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit. However, the Bible does not use the word "trinity," and our feeling is that the word "trinity" implies equality in leadership, or shared Lordship. It is clear that the scriptures teach that Jesus is the Son of God and that God sends the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit does not send God anywhere. God is clearly the Head.*"

Her comments sent shockwaves through her community of followers and business partners. She was removed from the *Women of Faith* Web site, influential evangelical churches dropped her program, even some key employees left. Thomas Nelson, her publisher, quickly canceled the publication of her book that was soon to be released. All of this, not because of her approach to weight loss, but because she trifled with the Trinity.¹

If you are confused as to why her words got her into so much trouble, that's quite understandable. The church has always struggled to explain how God can be both One God and three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Where Ms. Shamblin went wrong was in her statement that God and Jesus and the Holy Spirit were not equal in leadership. In an interview, she agreed that Jesus was both Lord and God but she maintained that Jesus held only a secondary and unequal relationship to the Father.

Now if you're still confused, let me ask you this: What is the conclusion of such a statement? It is this: Jesus is not fully God. This cuts at the heart of the church's historic teaching that Jesus Christ, in his very nature, is both fully God and fully man. It's a mystery, for sure, which we accept through faith. Yet Shamblin tries to argue her point by saying that Christians grieve Jesus if they adhere to doctrines

not found in Scripture. She says, "*If God wanted us to refer to Himself, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit as the 'trinity,' He would not have left this word completely out of the Bible.*"

We must tread carefully when these kinds of claims are made. Just because a word is not in the Bible doesn't mean that it is unbiblical. Although the word *trinity* is not found in the Bible, the teaching, or idea, certainly is. And to describe the fact that there is one God yet three distinct persons, Christians have coined the words "trinity" and "triune," both of which mean "three in one."

Just look at our text for today. All three persons of the trinity are mentioned not only individually, but collectively. ***I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony.***¹² ***I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things?***¹³ ***No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven-- the Son of Man.***

Rationally, the doctrine of the Trinity is a difficult subject. It is difficult because it transcends our understanding. The concept of three persons yet one God and one God yet three persons doesn't make mathematical sense to our way of thinking. It is beyond our comprehension. It's a mystery.

However, far more important than contemplating the *mystery* of the Trinity, is reflecting on the *comfort* of the Trinity. We might say that while the teaching of the Trinity is not meant to be understood, it *is* meant to be enjoyed. Recognizing that we will always have difficulty in neatly dividing up the work of Trinity, Scripture does reveal to us that each person of the Godhead has a certain primary work or "area of responsibility" attributed to him. And this information brings us a great deal of comfort. Today we confessed our faith in a selection from the Athanasian Creed because of its connection with the doctrine of the trinity. But let's look at the trinity through the more familiar words of the Apostles' Creed.

I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth. I believe that God made me and every creature and that he gave me my body and soul, eyes, ears and all my members, my mind and all my abilities. It can be a scary thought can't it? I mean meeting your Maker. It's one thing to meet him, to present yourself to him in the exact condition that he made you. It's quite

¹ <http://www.sbclife.net/Articles/2000/11/sla7>

another to present yourself to him broken, dirty, and dressed in rags. God created you perfect, pure, holy, without flaw or defect. And then to show our thanks we went and rolled around in the dirt of sin, dressed ourselves in shirts of gossip, pants of laziness, hats of lust, and shoes of greed, not to mention the jewelry we wear: anger, impatience, disrespect, apathy. Do you think your Maker is happy with your appearance? Do you think he's going to welcome you home with open arms dressed like that? Me neither. But for some unfathomable reason...

He still preserves me by richly and daily providing clothing and shoes, food and drink, house and home, wife and children, land, cattle and all I own, and all that I need to keep my body and life, and by defending me against all danger and guarding and protecting me from all evil. Most importantly, he guards us from spiritual evil, without which we would be lost and condemned forever. And meeting that need is the work of God the Son. That's why...

I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord...I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver, but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness, just as he has risen from death and lives and rules eternally.

We call this work redemption. To redeem means to buy back; and Christ has bought us back from the damning consequences of sin. In a most amazing way, 2000 years ago God broke into our time and space and became one of us. God the Son took on our flesh and blood and rendered what God asks of us, but what we couldn't give him: perfection. For 33 years Jesus lived perfectly as our substitute, never sinning. After that perfect life, Christ then offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice, taking upon himself the punishment our sins deserve: dying on the cross. Three days later he rose again, thus proclaiming to the world that his mission of redeeming us was complete.

And because he lives, we too shall live, eternally in heaven. Because he has removed your guilt before God, you are in a right relationship with

God. Because he has dismantled the barrier of sin between God and you, nothing bars you from an eternity of glory. Because of Jesus Christ there is a "get into heaven free" pass waiting for you. And that's where God the Holy Spirit comes in.

I believe in the Holy Spirit...I believe that I cannot by my own thinking or choosing believe in Jesus Christ, my Lord, or come to him. But the Holy Spirit has called me by the gospel, enlightened me with his gifts, sanctified and kept me in the true faith. In the same way he calls, gathers, enlightens, and sanctifies the whole Christian church on earth, and keeps it with Jesus Christ in the one true faith. In this Christian church he daily and fully forgives all sins to me and all believers. On the Last Day he will raise me and all the dead; And he will give eternal life to me and all believers in Christ.

We call this work sanctification. In the widest sense this means that God the Holy Spirit brings you to faith and puts into your hands that "get into heaven free" pass. He makes it yours, your personal possession. And working through the Word of God and the Sacraments, he also preserves you in the faith so that you don't lose that pass.

Take away one person of the Trinity and your salvation is gone. But as you have seen, all three persons of the Trinity are working perfectly together for your salvation. Think of their working together like a stream. In a stream, water rises from an unseen source that sends forth visible water flowing into the stream bed from which farmers can channel tributaries to water their plants. God the Father is like the source of that stream, unseen, but sending forth his visible Son to fill the riverbed with your salvation. And it is the Holy Spirit who channels a tributary right to you so that you may drink from the waters of salvation and live forever. Praise be to God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our salvation. **AMEN.**