

Why Are We Named Trinity?

By Neil C. Olsen, *Historian, Trinity Episcopal Church on the Green, New Haven, June 2012*



The convention in naming Anglican churches in Colonial America was that all parishes that were not self-supporting were named “Christ Church”, and had a missionary “priest in charge” instead of a Rector: this convention would suggest that all the churches in Connecticut would become Christ Church as they were all funded by the missionary Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts. In the nineteenth century many parishes would rename themselves after saints to provide some useful branding, or else Connecticut would have a lot more than the two dozen or so Episcopal churches named Christ Church.

The first exception in naming came about with the second church built in Connecticut in 1727 with the founding of what is now Trinity Episcopal Church, Southport, Connecticut by the Rev. Dr. Samuel Johnson in the Mill Plains section of Fairfield, Connecticut — the small church building depicted in the sketch. The second exception was the expected launch of a third in Connecticut church that same year of 1727/8 in New Haven when 10 members of the Anglican community there pledged 100 pounds to build a church. Johnson’s own Church in Stratford was conventionally named Christ Church as were so many others. It seems the Trinity was much on Johnson’s mind. Why?

It may have been a defiant answer to a brilliant, powerful, and well-connected Royal Governor.

[Governor William Burnet of New York](#) (1688 – 1729) was the royally appointed Governor of New York and New Jersey from 1720 to 1728, and of Massachusetts in 1728: he is usually considered an above average administrator when compared with other crony appointed colonial governors, promoting trade with the Indians in upstate New York and thus giving the British an advantage over the French.

He was certainly above average in his connections and education. He was the son of the brilliant Scottish theologian and historian [Gilbert Burnet](#), the Bishop of Salisbury. He was the godson of William, Prince of Orange (later [King William III of England](#)) and his wife [Queen Mary](#). He was a brilliant student himself, entering Oxford at age 13, but was dismissed for disciplinary reasons. He was privately tutored at one point by Isaac Newton. After becoming a member of the bar, and like his father, a Whig party member, he used his connections to make his way up the ladder of power, position, and wealth in the fashion of the Whig oligarchy of the day using family connections for political leverage: he was appointed the lucrative job of Comptroller of Customs in England, then swapped jobs to become New York’s colonial governor. He was also elected a [Fellow of the Royal Society](#) in 1706 at age 18, apparently only because of his connections.

Burnet was also was a lover of books, and a considerable scholar, if highly unorthodox in his religious views. If not quite a Deist, he was certainly on the far end of a rationalist Unitarian view of religion as you could be at that time in the British Empire. He was the sort of intellectual that liked to read and talk about the latest intellectual fad, and expect you to listen as he was, after all, the godson of the King and Queen, the son of a Bishop, the student of Newton, and the Governor of New York. In all things Burnet was the perfect Enlightenment English Gentleman.

Save in one thing. While in New York, the Governor wrote and published – against the sage advice of his friends – the embarrassing *An Essay on Scripture Prophecy, Wherein it is Endeavoured to Explain the three periods Contain'd in the Xii Chapter of the Prophet Daniel With some Arguments to make it Probable that the FIRST of the PERIODS did Expire in the Year 1715*, which he published anonymously in 1724. His brother-in-law told him it were better he had spent his time playing Backgammon than writing it. Few note that he shared this affection for scholarly analysis of prophesy with his tutor, Isaac Newton. Newton wrote *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel, and the Apocalypse of St. John*, (published posthumously) and predicted the world would end in 2060.

The Governor had met and befriended Rev. Samuel Johnson on Johnson's frequent visits to New York City in the 1720s, a place where Johnson had relatives, and where he could find the soothing company of other Anglicans amid his troubling life among openly resentful Puritans, and the conversion of intellectual peers such a Rev. Vasey of Trinity Church, Dr. Cadwallader Colden, and Governor William Burnet. Burnet loved to debate and to push his views. He tried to convince the young minister of the correctness of then fashionable principles of Clarke, Whiston, Hoadly, Jackson, Sykes and others trendy philosophers of the day of the impossibility of the Holy Trinity. Johnson read them all, and discussed them with the Governor.

Johnson's disciple and first biographer Dr. Thomas Bradbury Chandler, in his *The life of Samuel Johnson, D.D., the first president of King's College, in New York: Containing many interesting anecdotes; a general view of the state of religion and learning in Connecticut during the former part of the last century; and an account of the institution and rise of Yale College* – written about 1790 but published in 1805 – wrote about his mentor's next steps in the debate.

"In order to do justice to the cause of truth, in these cases of no small importance, Mr. Johnson, having read the before-mentioned [anti-Trinitarian] authors, with his usual impartiality set himself down to examine, with great care and exactness, what had been offered on the other side, in the Trinitarian controversy, by Bishop Bull, Bishop Pearson, Dr. Waterland, and others ; and in the Bangorian controversy, by Dr. Rogers, Bishop Sherlock, Bishop Hare, Bishop Potter, Dr. Snape, and Mr. Law. He was sensible that this examination required the prudent exertion of all his abilities, which he bestowed upon it very seriously and conscientiously.

In the process of his inquiries under the first head, he was convinced, more than he ever had been, **that the only way of coming at the truth, was to lay aside all preconceived schemes, and every hypothesis for accounting philosophically for the *modus* of the Trinity, which is beyond the reach of our faculties; and to have recourse to the Scriptures themselves in the original languages**, in order to find what they really teach; and then to consider the sublime doctrines of revealed religion, not as subjects of philosophical disquisition, but as truths or facts which the Scriptures, assert.

He therefore went on, in this manner, to inform himself whether the sacred writings do or do not, in fact, teach the doctrine of a co-essential Trinity in the one essence of the Deity; and whether they do or do not assert, that Christ and the Holy Ghost are God, in the same sense of the word as when it is applied to the Father. He then proceeded to inquire into the sense of the Primitive Church, with regard to these points, reading the original writers that are still extant. Consulting the fathers only as witnesses of the fact, he was anxious to discover, with certainty, not so much the opinion of individuals, as whether or not the doctrine of the Trinity, or of the proper divinity of Christ and the Holy Ghost, was generally taught and believed in the Church, for several ages immediately succeeding that of the Apostles. The result of this laborious examination was, a full conviction both of the truth and importance of the doctrine of the Trinity; in the firm belief of which he afterwards continued to the last, without wavering.

It was indeed no small instance of self-denial in a man of his turn of mind, to submit his understanding to the obedience of faith. He was desirous of seeing to the bottom of things, and, consequently, disposed to reduce the doctrines of Revelation to the standard of his own reason. He was naturally disposed to invent hypotheses for explaining the manner of divine things, and the grounds on which they are thus represented to us in Scripture; and to use the same liberty in speculating on the articles of faith as on the phenomena of nature. But at length by a serious and close application of thought, he was convinced of the folly of thus speculating on subjects which are beyond the reach of our faculties. Thus, for instance, it appeared to him, that it is really beyond our abilities to conceive how the Unity Man can consist of Spirit, Soul, and Body, as how the Unity God can consist of Father, Son, and Spirit. And that God and man should be so united as to constitute one person, actuated by the divinity, was, in his opinion, as clearly intelligible, as that the spirit of a man should be so united to his body, as to move the whole or any part of it, by the bare act of volition.

Upon the whole, he came to the following conclusions, which were ever after his fixed principles: viz. "That we must be content chiefly, if not only, both in nature and revelation, with the knowledge of facts, together with their designs and connections, without speculating much further: and, that one great end of all God's discoveries, both in nature and grace, is to mortify our pride and self-sufficiency—to make us duly sensible of our entire dependency—**and chiefly to engage us to live by faith and not by sight, and in the practice of every grace and virtue, in which our true perfection and happiness altogether consist.**"

Johnson read about a book a week for most of his life – serious books of religion and philosophy as well as the journals of the day – and had read and taught the latest books found in the advanced and large Yale library from 1714 on: if not tutored by Newton, Johnson learned calculus on his own and taught it from a book donated by Newton himself, and was the first man to introduce it to a college curriculum in the colonies. He would soon go on to study with the great Dean George Berkeley when the great philosopher came to stay for three years in America.

In late 1727 after giving a well-received sermon, he received a pledge of 100 pounds towards building a church in New Haven. It seems that the naming of 40 person parish in the tiny plain wooden church at Mill Plains in Fairfield, Connecticut, and the pledging by 10 families in New Haven, the home of Yale, the School of the Prophets, was Johnson's final and almost defiant answer to the Deistic Governor Burnet, the well-connected wealthy man of the world and inheritor of an empire of great piled palaces, churches, and homes. His answer was the tiny church depicted in the sketch above. He indeed established a community that lived *by faith and not by sight*.

In some sense it was as radical a rejection of the authority of connection, manners, heredity, power, and influence as would happen a half century later in Philadelphia – though quite a bit more polite. It was all part of his great achievement in philosophy, defined by the core tenant, “I perceive and act, therefore I am”, and defining philosophy or wisdom as “the pursuit of true Happiness by the universal practice of virtue”. His philosophy demanded a change in perception be followed by action: Johnson was not interested in the monetary glories of the Whig-Oligarchy or the social approval of the Royal House of Hanover of the British Empire, but in teaching one soul at a time the logic and mystery of God, how to pursue Happiness by practice, and how to perceive and act in an moral way. His theology demanded the Trinity, so he named his churches to remind his people how to live by faith, and not by sight.