
The Trinity and Scripture

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On February 4, 1962 I was baptized by immersion by Brethren assembly elder, Cecil Batstone, at Bethany Gospel Chapel in Worcester, Massachusetts. About seventeen years earlier, in Sydney, Nova Scotia, Canada, the venerable Archdeacon A. F. Arnold poured water three times over my tiny bald head in the baptismal ritual of the Church of England. The spiritual history of my family that led to these two baptisms is beyond the scope of this article. What is of importance is that in each case the officiant spoke these words, “David John MacLeod, I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.” Echoing the words of the Lord Jesus Christ at the time of the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19), they believed that Christians were to be baptized in the “Great Name” of our God, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”

Both of these men were Trinitarians, that is, they believed the historic Christian doctrine that God is one in essence and three in persons. That they believed the doctrine was true does not imply that they found it easy to comprehend. The witty Dr. Robert South (1634–1716) said, in a sermon on the Trinity, “As he that denies it may lose his soul; so he that too much strives to understand it may lose his wits.” A student once approached his professor, the German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and asked him to interpret a difficult passage in one of the latter’s books. The philosopher examined it and replied, “When that passage was written, there were two who knew its meaning—God and myself. Now, alas! There is but one, and that is God.”

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That all true Christians defend the doctrine of the Trinity does not mean that it has not been challenged. Our Lord’s observation (John 15:18–19) that the world hated Him and would hate His followers seems to have been especially confirmed in its attitude toward the Triune God. Some challenge the doctrine of the Trinity as a relic of the traditional past. Others, says German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, view the doctrine as “mere speculation, a kind of higher theological mathematics for the initiated.” Many Protestants and Catholics hold to a generic monotheism, he says, quite happy to quote the young Philip Melancthon, “We adore the mysteries of the Godhead. That is better than to investigate them.”

Others challenge the doctrine as meaningless and impractical. Immanuel Kant wrote, “The doctrine of the Trinity provides nothing, absolutely nothing, of practical value, even if one claims to understand it; still less when one is convinced that it far surpasses our understanding. It costs the student nothing to accept that we adore three or ten persons in the divinity.... Furthermore, this distinction offers absolutely no guidance for his conduct.”

Still others reject the doctrine as contradictory nonsense. Thomas Jefferson was irritated by the complexities of “Trinitarian arithmetic” which blurred our vision of who Jesus truly was. He wrote, “When we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial

scaffolding, reared to mask from view the very simple structure of Jesus; when, in short, we shall have unlearned everything which has been taught since his day, and got back to the sure and simple doctrines he inculcated, we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples.”

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There are also the challenges of various cultic groups, many of which take the name “Christian.” The Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, reject the doctrine and proclaim a form of the ancient heresy of Arianism that denies the eternality and full deity of Christ. The Mormon Church rejects the monotheism of the Bible and the doctrine of the Trinity. “Mormon theology is polytheistic, teaching in effect that the universe is inhabited by different gods....” Christian Science also rejects the doctrine of the Trinity and the deity of Christ. According to Mary Baker Eddy, “God is impersonal, devoid of any personality at all.” “Oneness Pentecostalism,” taught by the United Pentecostal Church, is a form of ancient Sabellianism that denies the Trinity. There are not three real, distinct, coequal persons in the eternal Godhead. Rather, the three are “only different roles that one divine person temporarily assumes.” Likewise, various New Age cults

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oppose the Trinity. Shortly before his death, Walter Martin, the premier evangelical authority on the cults, noted that despite its lip service to tolerance and compatibility with Christianity, the New Age movement is “pointedly anti-Christian and particularly hostile to the unique claim of deity by the Lord Jesus Christ and confirmed by apostolic witness.”

There are new challenges as well, chief among them radical feminism. This movement is engaged in a frontal assault upon “the Name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” The historic biblical faith is looked upon as “patriarchal,” “androcentric,” and “sexist.” Gone are God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Now we have the more impersonal or more feminine, Goddess as Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier.

Along with the new challenges there are old challenges, chiefly from the other “monotheistic” religions of the world, Judaism and Islam. Judaism, which has historically revered the Scriptures of the Old Testament, finds the idea of a Triune God abhorrent. It rejects the doctrine of original sin and the need for Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Jews do not believe in the Messiahship of Jesus, and they reject His deity as well.

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Muhammad, the founder of Islam, and author of its holy book, the Koran or Qur’an, spoke of Jesus as a prophet of God on a par with Noah, Abraham, and Moses. He rejected the doctrine of the Trinity as a monstrous falsehood¹⁹ —“Say not, ‘Three.’ Refrain; better is it for you. God is only One God.” It is clear that he misunderstood the doctrine, believing the Christian Trinity to consist of three gods, the Father, the Virgin, and their Child. God could not have a Son when “He has no consort.”²² God is a solitary God—“They are unbelievers who say, ‘God is the Third of Three.’ No god is there but One God.”

And before I move on to the argument of my essay, I must bring the subject closer to home. Sadly, our own Brethren churches have not been free from Trinitarian error. In the early years of our movement there was major division over Christological teaching. At least one party of the Exclusive wing of the Brethren has known serious heretical teaching on the Trinity. In our own time

I am aware of at least two assemblies of Open Brethren in the North American Midwest that have suffered great damage due to false teaching on the Trinity, and I have seen docetic, Eutychian, and Sabellian views expressed in written materials produced by men from the Brethren assemblies.

In light of the current situation with its indifference, hostility, cultic thought, and religious pluralism, it is imperative that true believers be clear on the teaching of Christ and His Apostles as it pertains to the Godhead.

A Brief Introduction to the Doctrine

For evangelical Christians the Trinity is a central doctrine. It is, says Grudem, “one of the most important doctrines of the Christian faith.” “What greater joy can a theologian have,” said Peter Toon, “than to contemplate the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ, His Son, by the illumination and inspiration of the Holy Spirit!” Karl Barth, perhaps the most influential theologian of the twentieth century, agreed, “The doctrine of the Trinity is what basically

distinguishes the Christian doctrine of God as Christian.” John Feinberg says that it is “a ‘showcase’ for Christianity’s distinctiveness.”³¹ These four authors are but a sample. As Calvin observed, “All acknowledged doctors [i.e., teachers of theology] of the church confirm the doctrine of the Trinity.” In light of the importance attached to the doctrine by the “acknowledged doctors,” it is most appropriate that we give our attention to it. As we do, it will be helpful if I set forth some definitions and explain my approach.

Terminology

Trinity

The word, “Trinity” does not appear in Scripture, but it “summarizes everything which God has revealed in Scripture concerning Himself.” The word, as it is used in theology, means that in the one God (1 Cor. 8:4) there are three co-eternal and coequal Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is well to remember, as Eric Mascall, observed, “The Trinity is not primarily a doctrine.... There is a doctrine *about* the Trinity...but if Christianity is true, the Trinity is not a doctrine; the Trinity is God.”

Immanent/Ontological/Essential Trinity

The “immanent,” “ontological,” or “essential” Trinity is a theological expression meaning Father, Son and Holy Spirit considered from the standpoint of God’s internal relationships within Himself. It is “God-as-God-is-in-and-unto-Himself.”³⁶ The term *immanent* means, “near, close to, actively involved with,”

and the term *ontological* is from the Greek participle (ὄντος, *ontos*) meaning “being.” Jewett speaks of the ontological Trinity as “The Trinity of Being.”

Economic Trinity

“Economic Trinity” is a theological expression that is used in two ways: First, it considers the Father, Son and Holy Spirit from the standpoint of their work in the world for human

salvation. It is “God-as-God-is-toward-us.”³⁹ The term *economic* is from the Greek word (οἰκονομία, *oikonomia*) meaning “the arrangement or order of things.” When theologians speak of the economic Trinity, they are speaking of God’s work in the world, and they include in their discussion the different functions of each person. Jewett speaks of the economic Trinity as “the Trinity of Revelation.”

Second, the expression “economic Trinity” also includes the different ways the three persons have functioned and acted toward each other from all eternity. The functions that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have performed in time are “simply the outworkings of an eternal relationship between the three persons. The functions performed by each member in time were not arbitrary or accidental. It was appropriate, for example, that the Son should come into this world and not the Father because it is the function of a Father to command, direct, and send. And it was appropriate for the Son to become incarnate and reveal God because He is the eternal Word of God. In this sense the “economic Trinity” can also be called “the Trinity of Function” or “the Trinity of Role.”

Person

The history of debate over the meaning of the term “person” must be left for another article in this series. In modern times some of the ancient tensions are

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with us as scholars debate whether it is the oneness or the threeness of God that should be stressed. At one end of the spectrum is Karl Barth who emphasizes God’s oneness and expresses his unhappiness with the word *person*. He advises caution and warns that the term “person” should not be understood in a human sense as an individual being or individual personality. “By Father, Son and Spirit we do not mean what is commonly suggested to us by the word ‘persons.’” He prefers to speak of God’s “three modes of being”⁴⁶

At the other end of the spectrum are the “social trinitarians” who stress the threeness of God. The biblical view, wrote Leonard Hodgson, is that God is not three modes of being but rather three “distinct Person[s] in the full sense of that word. Each is a He, none is an it.” Contrary to Barth’s stress on a single personal subject who loves, and otherwise relates to, Himself in a couple of ways, the Bible sets before us three “intelligent, purposive centers of consciousness.” The NT evidence, especially in John, Paul, and Hebrews does point to three persons who can commune with one another, love one another, and engage in distinctly personal activities, viz., sending, praying, glorifying, etc.

Evangelical Approaches

Evangelical theologians have approached the doctrine in two ways. Some of the older writers have treated the doctrine of the Trinity as one of the

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fundamental truths revealed in the Bible. There is an assumption that the doctrine is there in perfect clarity. God is one in essence and three in person, and the inspired Word says so. It is important because it is part of our orthodox faith. They assume that the doctrine is clearly and formally articulated in the Bible.

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Others have adopted a more sophisticated, though no less devout, approach to the doctrine. They recognize that the word “Trinity” does not appear in the Bible, and they recognize that the shaping of the doctrine took place in the patristic age. Feinberg notes that the Bible nowhere says that God is “one as to essence and three as to persons.” Plantinga writes that the doctrine is “a classic case of a premier doctrine that is also a problem doctrine,” the major problem being the problem of threeness and oneness.

This is not to say that these evangelicals do not think the doctrine is biblical. They do. They recognize that the writers of the NT had a sense, conviction, or consciousness “of a wonderful and mysterious plurality within the unity of God.” However, “they did not explore or develop their convictions concerning the plurality within unity in a full intellectual sense.” Nevertheless, if “the Trinity is God,” as Mascall said,⁵⁶ then we do believe He revealed Himself as such to the Apostles, even if it was left to later writers to formulate a theological definition of the doctrine. As Warfield explained, “The Trinity lies in Scripture in solution; when it is crystallized from its solvent [i.e., by post-biblical theologians] it does not cease to be Scriptural.”

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Methodology

This essay is an exercise in biblical doctrine, i.e., it is a study of what was taught by the writers of the books of the Bible. It is necessary that I state at this point in my discussion that I believe that the Bible (Old and New Testaments) is a collection of inspired, authoritative books. The writers of Scripture were guided by the Holy Spirit as they wrote so that what is written is the Word of God.

My method of approach is both inductive and deductive. It is inductive in that I have read the NT asking what it says about God, Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit. I then set out my findings in what I felt to be a logical way. Theology, however, does not end with induction. The student of Scripture must make inferences from what he has found. This is true of many subjects of theology (e.g., the nature of inerrancy, the hypostatic union of Christ, the chronology of end-time events, the time of the church’s beginning, etc.). It is a methodology encouraged by apostolic exegesis, used by our Lord in His teaching, and approved by historical precedent.⁶⁰

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I say this because of the common refrain, “The word Trinity is not in the Bible,” or: “There is not one verse in the Bible that says there are three persons in the one God of the Bible.” When this conference was first advertised, we received a number of letters expressing interest in our topic. One woman in particular has written to us several times. Her problem is one of methodology. She is so inductivistic that she is unable to see what may be deduced by good and necessary inference. When we do the work of systematic theology, we do not rely solely on the inductive approach. Understanding the teaching of Scripture requires as well the work of deduction. We do not end our study with the question, “What does it say?” We must go on and ask, “What does it mean, and how does it all fit together?”

The Biblical Foundations of the Doctrine

The doctrine of the Trinity, says Frame, is not “an abstruse philosophical speculation.” Rather, it is an attempt “to describe and account for something

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biblically obvious and quite fundamental to the gospel.” The doctrine is inferred from the following things that are taught in the Bible:

In Scripture there is only one God

In Scripture three persons are recognized as God

In Scripture three persons are associated on an equal footing as God

In Scripture the three persons are distinguished from each other

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In Scripture the tri-personality of the Godhead is eternal and not merely temporal

In Scripture (i.e., the OT) there are other indications that point to the doctrine of the Trinity

In Scripture There is Only One God

The Bible, both the Old and New Testaments, teaches that God is one. This *monotheism* is contrasted with *animism* (worship of nature spirits), *fetishism* (worship of spirit-indwelt objects), *idolatry* (worship of an artistically fashioned object regarded as the habitation of a deity), *polytheism* (belief in many gods), *henotheism/monolatry* (an exclusive commitment to one’s deity while recognizing there are other deities), *pantheism* (the belief that the deity is the totality of things [God is all] and that the totality of things is deity [all is God]), and *gnosticism* (the belief that emanating from God are lesser deities). The Scriptures may be called “a mighty protest” against such views. From Genesis 1, where God’s creative activity is described in absolute terms, He is distinguished from nature and cosmos, and leaves no room for the existence of lesser deities. Elsewhere the OT affirms that He is “unoriginate and eternal” (Ex. 3:13–15; Isa. 40:28). That the heathen world believed in spirits and various deities the Bible does not deny. What it does say is that they are not real. They were “**not gods**” (Jer. 2:11); they were “godlings” or “weaklings” (Lev. 19:4; 26:1). Jeremiah portrays them as lifeless, man-made things with “**no breath in them.**” They can do a person neither harm nor good (Jer. 10:5, 14–15). Indeed the apostles say, “**there is no such thing**” (1 Cor. 8:4) and that they are “**vain things**” (Acts 14:15). Scripture therefore demands that people worship the one true God and that they put away false gods (Ex. 20:3; Mark 12:29–30).

The *sedes doctrinae* (“seat of doctrine”) or *locus classicus* (“classic passage”) of the doctrine of monotheism is Deuteronomy 6:4, “**Hear, O Israel! The Lord**

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is our God, the Lord is one!” Known in Jewish tradition as the Shema because of the first word in the verse (שמע [šema’], “hear”), this text is “the essential creed and duty of Israel.” For many centuries this has been the first bit of the Bible learned by Jewish children. The prayer or confession of faith is said twice a day by every adult Jewish male. The much debated command probably has two nuances.⁷⁰ First, the command stresses the *uniqueness* of Yahweh. There is only one true God, and He is Yahweh. No other god can be compared to Him. He is the only God to whom the attributes of deity really belong. He is therefore worthy of His people’s love (v. 5). Second, as a corollary to the first nuance of the term, the command also focuses on the *unity* of Yahweh, i.e., He is numerically one. He is not merely the first among the gods, as Baal in the

Canaanite pantheon. Rather, He is the only God there is! In short, He alone is God, and there is only one of Him. This command is “the death knell to all views lesser than monotheism.”

Other OT texts affirm that there is only one true God. Moses asks, **“Who is like You among the gods, O Lord? Who is like You, majestic in holiness?”** (Ex. 15:11). The question is rhetorical; there is no one like Yahweh. Deuteronomy 4:35 and 39 state that there is no other God besides Yahweh. 1 Kings 8:60 says the same thing: **“the Lord is God; there is no one else”** (cf. Ps. 86:10). In Isaiah 43:10 Yahweh says, **“Before Me there was no God formed, and there will be none after Me.”** Speaking to Cyrus, Yahweh says, **“I am the Lord, and there is no other; besides Me there is no God”** (Isa. 45:5, 6; cf. 46:9).

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The NT reaffirms the monotheism of the OT. The Lord Jesus, for example, placed His stamp of approval upon the Shema when one of the scribes asked, **“What commandment is the foremost of all?”** (Mark. 12:28–30). Jesus then quoted Deuteronomy 6:4. When praying to the Father, He called Him **“the only true God”** (John 17:3). The apostles, too, claimed that there is only one God. Paul argues that there can be only one method of justification for both Jews and Gentiles because there is only one God (Rom. 3:29–30). In responding to Corinthian questions about Christian liberty, specifically the matter of meat offered to idols, Paul notes that while there are many false gods, Christians know **“there is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things”** (1 Cor. 8:5–6). In an exhortation to unity to the believers in Ephesus, he stresses that there is **“one God and Father of all”** (Eph. 4:6). Telling Timothy that God desires all to be saved, he adds, **“For there is one God, and one mediator also between God and men, the man Christ Jesus”** (1 Tim. 2:5). Finally, in his admonition against lifeless faith, James says, **“You believe that God is one. You do well; the demons also believe, and shudder”** (James 2:19). James does not disparage the intellectual belief that there is one God. He disparages faith that is not accompanied by works.

In Scripture Three Persons are Recognized as God

When we turn to the NT, the “problem” of the Trinity emerges. We must remember, however, that while it is a problem for the readers of Scripture it was not a problem for the inspired authors. As we have noted, the NT writers were monotheistic, i.e., they worshipped and proclaimed the one true God, the God of Israel. They did not, furthermore, place two new Gods by the side of Yahweh to be worshipped and served. They did speak of Yahweh as Father, Son and Spirit, yet there is no indication that they felt they were being innovative.

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Their writings are “Trinitarian to the core,” i.e., they view God as Father, Son and Spirit, yet they “betray no sense of novelty in so speaking of Him.” They saw no breach between their teaching and that of the OT, and “they saw the Triune God whom they worshipped in the God of the Old Testament revelation.” The doctrine, which is so difficult to us, “took its place without struggle—and without controversy—among accepted Christian truths.” This is not to say that the NT gives us the doctrine of the Trinity in the formal sense found in the creeds and later theology. The revelation, says Warfield, “was made not in word but in deed. It was made in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit.” It was left to later Christians to put down in words what God had done in deed.⁷⁸

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Three Persons are Called God

The Father is God

In the OT Yahweh is viewed as the Father of the nation Israel (Deut. 32:6, 9, 18). This is a fatherhood by election; by sovereign choice God made this people His people. This is vividly seen, for example, in the book of Hosea (11:1–4). God is also portrayed as the Father of the king, i.e., of David and his house (2 Sam. 7:12–14). The king is made “son of God” when he is crowned. Just as the people were made “Yahweh’s firstborn son by election (Ex. 4:22–24), so the king, who represents the people, is adopted son of God by election (Ps. 2:7; 89:26–27).”

In the NT Jesus repeatedly addressed God as “Father” (e.g., Mark 14:36) and spoke of Him to others as His Father (e.g., Matt. 16:17). This is picked up in the epistles where God is commonly spoken of as the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ (e.g., Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; 11:31). The early Christians knew God as their Father by adoption through grace (Gal. 4:6–7; Rom. 8:14–17).

For our present investigation we need only point out that the Father is recognized as God and called God throughout the NT. In fact, He is the principal referent of the word *God* (ὁ θεός, ho theos), and when the word is used, “we are to assume that the NT writers have ὁ πατήρ [ho patēr, the Father] in mind unless the context makes this sense of (ὁ) θεός impossible.”

Although extended proof is not needed, the following examples of the Father being called God are offered. In Matthew 6:25–34 Jesus counsels His disciples against worry using the expressions “heavenly Father” and “God” interchangeably. As He anticipated His return to heaven, He addressed God as

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“Father” and spoke of Him as **“the only true God”** (John 17:1–3). In His last words from the cross He addresses God as both “God” (Matt. 27:46) and “Father” (Luke 23:34, 46). In the salutations of his letters Paul will regularly speak of God the Father (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; Gal. 1:1). In 1 Corinthians 8:6 he says, **“there is but one God, the Father,”** and in Ephesians 4:6 he repeats the idea. Likewise the apostle Peter spoke of **“the foreknowledge of God the Father”** (1 Pet. 1:2).

The Son is God

As Warfield notes, “It was in the coming of the Son of God in the likeness of sinful flesh to offer Himself a sacrifice for sin; and in the coming of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, that the Trinity of Persons in the Unity of the Godhead was once for all revealed to men.”

That the NT ascribes deity of Jesus Christ is evident for a number of reasons, chief among them that He is called God.⁸³ In John 1:1, John writes,

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“the Word was God.” The construction used by John gives the word θεός (theos, “God”) a qualitative force. Harner’s paraphrase is to the point, “the Word had the same nature as God.” In John 1:18 Christ is called μονογενής θεός (monogenēs theos), which is rendered by the NASB as **“the only begotten God.”** This reading may seem strange to ears used to the AV’s “the only begotten Son.” The King James translation reflects the reading of a large number of Greek manuscripts, but not the oldest manuscripts. The oldest manuscripts favor something close to the reading of the NASB. Yet the NASB is not quite right because the word translated “only

begotten” has a filial quality, i.e., it connotes sonship—whether or not the term *son* (υἰός) is used. The reading of the NIV

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is a bit better, i.e., “God the only Son.” Perhaps the best we can do is, “the only Son, God,”⁸⁸ or “the only begotten Son, (Himself) God.”

After His resurrection Jesus invited Thomas to examine His wounds, and the startled disciple responded, “**My Lord and my God!**” (John 20:28). Most scholars agree that the expression is vocative and addressed directly to Jesus. In uttering this cry Thomas recognized the lordship of Jesus over his life “and the essential oneness of Jesus with the Father.” It is a straightforward ascription of deity to Jesus. Nobody, says Morris, had “previously addressed Jesus like this.”

In Romans 9:5 Paul speaks of Christ as “**God blessed forever.**” After expressing his sorrow over Israel’s rejection of Messiah, Paul affirms that Christ has been exalted over the whole universe, “including the Jews who reject Him in that He is God by nature, eternally the object of worship.” Christians, says Paul to Titus (2:13), are to be “**looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus.**” The grammar indicates that the two expressions, “**great God**” and “**Savior**” describe Jesus Christ. This, says Simpson, is “a studied assertion of the Redeemer’s Deity.”

Contrasting the Son with angels, the author of Hebrews cites Psalm 45:6 to show that Christ’s reign will be eternal, unlike the transitory angels. The Father addresses the Son, “**Your throne, O God, is forever and ever**” (Heb. 1:8). The author’s recognition of Christ’s deity, says Attridge, is “explicit.” The apostle

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Peter opens his second epistle with a reference to Jesus Christ as “**our God and Savior**” (2 Pet. 1:1). The apostle believed his readers needed to advance in their knowledge of Jesus Christ as the best protection against “the specious arguments and ethical libertinism of the false teachers who were harassing them.” In light of this need “an early reminder of the deity and saving power” of the Lord was “totally apt.”

Excursus # 1: The Holy Spirit is a Person

In discussions of the Holy Spirit in the early church two important questions emerged. First, is the Spirit a person, and, second, is the Spirit God? The question of the Spirit’s personhood is still widely debated. Some scholars have arrived at a unitarian position, arguing that the Spirit is the Father in His activity within the world and that Jesus was merely a man in whom God was uniquely active. Others have adopted a binitarian conception of God, arguing that while Christ is distinguishable from the Father as an eternal person, the Spirit is the presence of God, but not “a third eternal ‘Person.’” Evangelical Christians, however, have always held that God is a Trinity and that the Holy Spirit is a distinct person in the Godhead.

The evidence in favor of the personhood of the Holy Spirit is sixfold. *First*, the Spirit has the attributes of personality: intellect (1 Cor. 2:10–11, 13),

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emotions or sensibility (Eph. 4:30), and will (1 Cor. 12:11; Acts 16:6–12). *Second*, the Spirit performs the actions of personality: He teaches (John 14:26), He bears witness (John 15:26; Rom. 8:16), He guides (Rom. 8:14), He convinces (John 16:7–8), He restrains (Gen. 6:3), He commands (Acts 8:29), He calls to service (Acts 13:2), He sends into service (Acts 13:4), and He

intercedes (Rom. 8:26). *Third*, the Spirit receives the ascriptions of personality: He can be obeyed (Acts 10:19–21a), He can be lied to (Acts 5:3), He can be resisted (Acts 7:51), He can be grieved (Eph. 4:30), and He can be outraged (Heb. 10:29). *Fourth*, normal Greek usage is contradicted when speaking of the Spirit. The word for “Spirit” (πνεῦμα, pneuma) is neuter in Greek, which might lead one to conclude that the Spirit is an “it,” i.e., a force, influence, power, or presence. Significantly, however, Jesus refers to the Spirit as “Him” or “who,” i.e., as a person. Greek usage would dictate that neuter pronouns be used in agreement with the neuter πνεῦμα, but Jesus used masculine pronouns instead (John 15:26; 16:13–14), and Paul followed His example (Eph. 1:14, “who”). *Fifth*, there is “the appearance of the Spirit’s name in bi- and triadic formulas.” In Romans 8:26 and 34 an intercessory function is attributed to both Christ and the Spirit. “If intercession is a personal function, and if Christ is a person, then a reasonable inference is that the Spirit is a person too.” The same is true of Jesus’ promise of “**another Helper**” (John 14:16). Jesus has been their Helper, and now the Father is going to send another of the same kind. If Jesus is a person, the Holy Spirit is also. *Finally*, the Holy Spirit is related to His own power yet distinguished from it, so one may conclude that He is not merely power, but a person. For example, He is distinguished from His gifts in

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1 Corinthians 12:4, 8. And Luke records that early in His ministry Jesus “**returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit,**” i.e., power received from the Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is God

In Acts 5 Ananias is accused by Peter of lying to the Holy Spirit. When the Apostle repeats the charge, he says, “**You have not lied to men but to God**” (vv. 3, 4). This is the only passage where the Spirit is explicitly called God. That the NT writers identified the Spirit as God is seen in a passage like Acts 7:51, where Stephen says to his Jewish listeners that their “fathers” resisted the

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Holy Spirit. In the OT it is clear that the Israelites were resisting God. Also, in 1 Corinthians 3:16–17, collectively, and 6:19–20, individually, believers are called the “temple of God/temple of the Holy Spirit.” Paul’s clear assumption is that to be indwelt by the Holy Spirit is to be indwelt by God.

Three Persons Possess the Attributes of God

The Father Possesses the Attributes of God

That the Father possesses the attributes of God is not debated. In the majestic scene described by John in Revelation, God the Father is described as holy, all powerful, and eternal (4:8). When the Lord Jesus instructs His disciples to pray He assures them that they will be heard. That He hears and answers prayer implies that He is omniscient and omnipresent. The prayer itself says that He is holy and sovereign over the affairs of heaven and earth. That He knows all their needs and cares for them assures the disciples of His goodness (Matt. 6:6–9, 13, 32).

The Son Possesses the Attributes of God

Further evidence that Christ is recognized as God in the NT stems from the fact that divine attributes are ascribed to Him. For example, He is assumed to be eternal. John writes, “**In the beginning was the Word**” (John 1:1). The phrase, “**in the beginning,**” echoes the opening verse of Genesis. It takes the reader back to the beginning of history. The imperfect verb “**was**”

(ἦν, ēn) suggests continuous action in past time. At the time of the creation, the Word already existed. “There never was a time when the Word was not.”

Unlike His creatures, He is immutable (Heb. 1:10–12). He is omnipotent in that He has the power “**to subject all things to Himself**” (Phil. 3:21) and can do “**something He sees the Father doing**” (John 5:19). Furthermore, He created all things (Col. 1:15–17). He is omniscient, assuring the church of Thyatira that with His “**eyes like a flame of fire**” He knows all her deeds both good and bad (Rev. 2:18–20; cf. John 2:24–25; 6:64; 21:17). Finally, He is omnipresent,

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promising His disciples after His resurrection, “**Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age**” (Matt. 28:20; cf. 18:20). To sum up, Christ is said to possess attributes that belong to God, something possible only if He is deity.

The Spirit Possesses the Attributes of God

The Holy Spirit is omniscient, knowing the very thoughts of God (1 Cor. 2:10–11) and able to communicate this truth to the disciples (John 16:13). He is omnipresent. David wrote, “**Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?**” (Ps. 139:7). His possession of omnipotence is seen in His creative power. “**The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life**” (Job 33:4). His very name, “**the Holy Spirit of God,**” indicates that He possesses the divine attribute of holiness (Eph. 4:30). Also, the Spirit is said to be an agent in the resurrection of God’s people in the future (Rom. 8:11). “Only Deity can impart this kind of life.” These attributes, like the attributes of Christ, point to the deity of the One who possesses them.

Three Persons Do the Works of God

The Father Does the Works of God

As Paul wrote, He is the creator, “**There is but one God, the Father, from whom are all things**” (1 Cor. 8:6). Furthermore, the Father is the One who providentially “**causes all things to work together for good**” (Rom 8:28). In Matthew 11:25 Jesus calls Him “**Father, Lord of heaven and earth,**” and thanks Him for His work of revelation. In John 6:44 Jesus attributes the believer’s coming to Christ as the work of the Father in “drawing” him. He further attributes the

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eternal security of the believer to the Father from whose hand no one can snatch him (John 10:29). Finally, the authority to execute judgment is the Father’s, and He delegates that responsibility to the Son.

The Son Does the Works of God

Most dramatically, the creation of the universe is attributed to Christ. The classic texts on Christ’s role in creation link His creative work to His redemptive work, i.e., to the great events of His incarnation, life, death, resurrection and ascension. In John 1, Christ is the *means* of creation, and His creative work is linked to His incarnation, life, and redemptive work (vv. 3, 10, 12, 14). In Hebrews 1, the Son’s work of creation is linked to His death, ascension, and eschatological inheritance (vv. 2–3). In Colossians 1, He is the *means* of creation but also its *reason or purpose*; He is the creator of the universe and also its sustainer. He is the One who in the beginning created the universe, and He is the one who in the end will reconcile the universe (vv. 16–20). As Jensen well says, Jesus Christ is “creation’s past, present, and future.”

Not only did He create the universe, but He providentially sustains it—**“in Him all things hold together”** (Col. 1:17). He is the One who shares such intimacy with the Father that He can perfectly reveal Him (John 1:18; cf. Heb. 1:2). And He is the One who shall judge the world (John 5:27–29; Matt. 25:31–32). These are all the actions of One who can be nothing less than God.

The Spirit Does the Works of God

The Holy Spirit is said to have been in some way involved in the creation of the world (Gen. 1:2; cf. Job 26:13; 27:3; Pss. 33:6; 104:30). While Paul

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attributes the work of the inspiration of Scripture to God (2 Tim. 3:16), Peter attributes the same work to the Holy Spirit. **“Men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God”** (2 Pet. 1:21). The Holy Spirit played a part in the birth of Christ, according to Luke 1:35: **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you.”** In the divine work of salvation (Jonah 2:9), the Lord Jesus says that it is the Holy Spirit who convicts people of sin (John 16:8) and imparts new life to them in the work of regeneration (John 3:8; cf. Titus 3:5). It is the Spirit who pours out the love of God (Rom. 5:5), gives joy (Rom. 14:17), hope (Rom. 8:17–25), peace (Rom. 8:6), and faith (2 Cor. 12:9). Finally, the Apostle Paul attributes the divine work of sanctification (1 Thess. 5:23) to the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13).

Three Persons Receive the Honor Due Only to God

The Father Receives the Honor Due to God

In some of the most memorable passages of Scripture God the Father is honored and worshipped. In Daniel’s great courtroom scene, for example, He is attended by thousands and thousands of angelic beings (Dan. 7:9–10). In the parallel passage, Revelation 4:8, the four living creatures ceaselessly say, **“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God, the Almighty”** (cf. Isa. 6:3). The twenty-four elders add, **“Worthy are You, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power”** (Rev. 4:11). One chapter later the whole order of created beings honors **“Him who sits on the throne”** (Rev. 5:13). The “Lord’s Prayer” begins with the words, **“Our Father who is in heaven”** (Matt. 6:9). Jesus speaks of His Father as the One to whom divine honor is due (John 5:23). In fact, He says that His work on earth was to glorify the Father (John 17:1–4).

The Son Receives the Honor Due to God

“In the NT,” says Plantinga, “Jesus Christ becomes a center of sacrament (Matt. 28:19; John 6:54), doxology (2 Pet. 3:18; Rev. 1:5), and prayer (Acts 7:59–60;

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1 Cor. 16:22).” People are baptized in His name (Acts 2:38), and they gather in worship around the emblems of bread and wine in remembrance of Him (1 Cor. 11:23–26). Just before the judgments of the Book of Revelation He is worshipped on a par with the Father, **“To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever”** (Rev. 5:13). And finally, the author of Hebrews reports that when the Son of God returns to the earth in the future God the Father will give the command to the angels, **“Worship Him”** (Heb. 1:6). “He deserves alone, or with the Father, the reverence one reserves for God (John 14:1; Rev. 7:10).”

The Spirit Receives the Honor Due to God

The evidence for worship of the Spirit is not as full as it is for the worship of the Father and the Son. One reason for this is because He is, as Bruner puts it, “the shy member of the Trinity.” **“When the Helper comes,”** Jesus had said, **“He will testify about Me”** (John 15:26); **“He will glorify me”** (John 16:14).” “The work of the Holy Spirit is the honoring of Jesus Christ.” That is not to say

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that the Holy Spirit is not honored as God in the NT. The very words of Jesus as He promises the Spirit’s coming are honorific. He is **“the Spirit of truth”** (John 16:13) who comes **“from the Father”** (John 15:26), and it is to the disciples’ advantage that He come (John 16:7). Also, as noted earlier, believers collectively (1 Cor. 3:16–17) and individually (1 Cor. 6:19) are the **“temple of the Holy Spirit.”** As Strong noted, “He who inhabits the temple is the object of worship there.”

In Scripture Three Persons are Associated on an Equal Footing as God

The Baptismal Command

If the Deity of Christ was the “determining impulse” for the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, then the “guiding principle” was the baptismal formula announced by Jesus after His resurrection. He commanded His disciples to baptize believers **“in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit”** (Matt. 28:19). The new follower of Christ is to be baptized **“in the name,”** or more literally, “into the name” (εἰς τὸ ὄνομα, eis to onoma). The phrase

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states the goal of baptism, the preposition “into” meaning “in order that they may enter into a relationship with” or “in order that they may belong to.” It suggests a “coming-into-relationship-with” or a “coming under-the-Lordship-of-the Triune God.” It is “a sign both of entrance into Messiah’s community and of pledged submission to His lordship.”

What is significant for the study under investigation is the singular “name.” Jesus does not say εἰς τὰ ὀνόματα (“into the names,” eis ta onomata, plural). Nor does He say, “Into the name of the Father, and into the name of the Son, and into the name of the Holy Spirit,” as if He were speaking of three different Beings. “With stately impressiveness [He] asserts the unity of the three by combining them all within the bounds of the single Name; and then throws up into emphasis the distinctness of each by introducing them in turn with the repeated article: ‘Into the name of *the* Father, and of *the* Son, and of *the* Holy Spirit.’”

These three, Warfield notes, “each stand in some clear sense over against the others in distinct personality,” yet they “all unite in some profound sense in the common participation of the one Name.” This has tremendous implications, he goes on, when one bears in mind the Hebrew understanding of “the Name.” For modern people a name is no more than a tag or label. In biblical thought a name represents “the innermost being of its bearer.” Thus in the OT we find that the Name of God expresses His very Being (Deut. 28:58;

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Isa. 30:27; 59:19). It was generally combined with other words, as in **“name of the Lord,”** or **“Your name, O Lord God of hosts”** (Jer. 15:16). So pregnant with meaning was the “Name,” however, that it was possible for the term to stand absolutely as in Leviticus 24:11, **“The son of the Israelite woman blasphemed the Name and cursed.”**

When the Lord Jesus commanded His disciples to baptize new converts **“into the name,”** He was using language charged with profound meaning. He was obviously substituting for the great Name of Yahweh this other Name, **“of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”** This could not mean anything else to the disciples than that Yahweh was now to be known to them by the new great Name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The only alternative explanation was that Jesus was supplanting Yahweh by a new god; and this alternative would be “monstrous.” For His church there would be a new great Name for Yahweh, and that new Name was to be the threefold Name of “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Warfield concluded:

This is a direct ascription to [Yahweh] the God of Israel, of a threefold personality, and is therewith the direct enunciation of the doctrine of the Trinity. We are not witnessing here the birth of the doctrine of the Trinity; that is presupposed. What we are witnessing is the authoritative announcement of the Trinity as the God of Christianity by its Founder, in one of the most solemn of His recorded declarations. Israel had worshiped the one only true God under the Name of [Yahweh]; Christians are to worship the same one only true God under the Name of “the Father, and the Son, and the Holy [Spirit].” This is the distinguishing characteristic of Christians.

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The Apostolic Benediction

At the close of his Second Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul prays for “a continuation and deepening of what has already been done and given in Corinth.” He wrote, **“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all”** (2 Cor. 13:14). In this famous benediction the Apostle attaches three blessings of redemption (“grace,” “love,” and “fellowship”) distributively to the three Persons of the Triune God.¹⁴² It is evident from this sentence that he “thinks of the one God as in some sense triune.” That is not to say that Paul sets forth the kind of formal definition of the Trinity (one essence, three persons) that is found in later Trinitarian orthodoxy, but he does provide a “starting-point” for such thinking.

Other Threefold Formulas

In addition to Matthew 28:19 and 2 Corinthians 13:14 there are several other passages that offer trinitarian formulas or “triadic patterns” in referring to the work of God. Paul the Apostle, whose monotheism was “intense” (Rom. 3:30; 1 Cor. 8:4; Gal. 3:20; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5) habitually speaks of the blessings of redemption in “a trinal fashion.” In 2 Thessalonians 2:13 he thanks God for **“the brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith**

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in the truth.” In addressing the question of spiritual gifts he uses three descriptions of them and connects each with a different Divine Person. **“There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God”** (1 Cor. 12:4–6). As he defends justification by faith alone, Paul includes these expressions: **“before God,” “Christ redeemed us,”** and **“the promise of the Spirit”** (Gal. 3:11–14). To the Corinthians he wrote, **“Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave us the Spirit in our hearts as a**

pledge” (2 Cor. 1:21–22). He also said, **“You are a letter of Christ, cared for by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God”** (2 Cor. 3:3). To the Ephesians he wrote, **“For through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father”** (Eph. 2:18). In encouraging unity in the church he spoke of **“one Spirit...one Lord...one God and Father of all”** (Eph. 4:4–6). Several other passages would have to be included to make the list complete (Rom. 14:17–18; 15:16, 30; Phil. 3:3; Col. 1:6–8; Eph. 2:20–22; 3:14–16; Titus 3:4–6). In all these texts three persons—God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit—are “brought together, in the most incidental manner, as co-sources of all the saving blessings which come to believers in Christ.”

Paul is not alone in His “trinal” thinking. Other NT writers seem to assume that “the redemptive activities of God rest on a threefold source.” Peter tells his readers they were **“chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the Spirit, to obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood”** (1 Pet. 1:2). The author of Hebrews, in his first warning passage, speaks of the salvation **“first spoken through the Lord,”** the testimony of **“God,”** and the **“gifts of the Holy Spirit”** (Heb. 2:3–4). He later speaks of apostates who have **“trampled under foot the Son of God”** and have **“insulted the Spirit of grace”** (Heb. 10:29). Although the Father is not mentioned in this text the warning in chapter two indicates that he was “aware

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of the triadic pattern.” Jude lays out the following three parallel clauses, **“praying in the Holy Spirit,” “keep yourselves in the love of God,”** and **“waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ”** (Jude 20, 21). John’s “Trinitarian consciousness” is seen in the opening lines of the Revelation (1:4–5), **“from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne, and from Jesus Christ, the faithful witness.”**

The triadic pattern is rather pervasive, being found in Matthew, Paul, Hebrews, 1 Peter, Jude, and the Revelation. As F. H. Chase noted, “The writers speak without hesitation or misgiving. They assume that their friends to whom they write will at once understand their words about the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” Kelly concluded, “The Trinitarian pattern which was to dominate all later creeds was already part and parcel of the Christian tradition of doctrine.”

In Scripture Three Persons are Distinguished From Each Other

One possible way to explain the evidence so far is to claim that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not really distinct persons. One might argue that “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit” are only three names given to the one God to describe different roles He plays in relation to the world. This might solve the “problem of the Trinity,” viz., the alleged contradiction that one God = three persons, but the

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solution must be rejected because of passages in the Bible that show that the three persons are truly distinct.

Shedd points to twelve actions that, he says, prove they are distinct from each other: (1) One divine person loves another, John 3:35. (2) One person dwells in another, John 14:10, 11. (3) One person inflicts suffering on another, Zech. 13:7. (4) One person knows another, Matt. 11:27. (5) One person addresses another, Heb. 1:8. (6) One person is the way to another, John 14:6. (7) One person speaks of another, Luke 3:22. (8) One person glorifies another, John 17:5. (9) One

person confers with another, Gen. 1:26; 11:7. (10) One person plans with another, Isa. 9:6. (11) One person sends another, John 14:26. (12) One person rewards another, Phil. 2:5–11; Heb. 2:9. These twelve actions, he argues, “demonstrate that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not one and the same person.”

The Father and Son are Distinct Persons

A number of examples can be cited to show that the Father and the Son are distinct. In the second line of his “Logos Hymn” John went beyond the truth of the preexistence and eternity of the Word and described Him in eternity past with the clause **“the Word was with God”** (ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, *ho logos ēn pros ton theon*, John 1:1). The preposition **“with”** (πρός, *pros*) carries the two ideas of accompaniment and relationship. The literal idea, says grammarian A. T. Robertson, is “face to face with God.” It expresses personal

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companionship, i.e., the presence of one person with another. And, of course, it implies distinction from that person.

That the Father and the Son are distinct persons is also demonstrated at the baptism of Jesus, which took place at the beginning of His public ministry (Matt. 3:13–17). As Jesus emerged from the water the Holy Spirit descended upon Him, and the Father voiced His approval, **“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased.”** “If Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not distinct persons,” Feinberg wryly observes, “this is quite a feat of ventriloquism and optical illusion!” The same kind of distinction between the Father and the Son is manifested on the Mount of Transfiguration when the Father again expresses His approval, **“This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!”** (Matt. 17:5). And the distinction is demonstrated in the prayers of Jesus, e.g., in His Gethsemane petition, **“yet not as I will, but as You will”** (Matt. 26:39).

The distinction between the Father and the Son is also seen in the Father’s testimony to Christ. **“There is another who testifies of Me, and I know that the testimony which He gives about Me is true.... And the Father who sent Me, He has testified of Me”** (John 5:32, 37). The classic “sending passages” also demonstrate that the Father and the Son are distinct persons (John 3:16–17; Rom. 8:3–4; Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:9–10). These texts all imply the preexistence of the Son, the eternity of His Sonship, and His distinct personhood. A final

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example is found in the “High Priestly Prayer” of John 17. In that passage the Son says, **“I glorified You on the earth, having accomplished the work which You have given Me to do”** (v. 4). The pronouns “I” and “You” (ἐγώ and σε) distinguish the two persons. It should be noted that what the Son accomplished on earth He was commissioned to do in eternity past (**“the work which you have given me”**).

The Father and Son are Distinct from the Spirit

Just as the Bible distinguishes between the Father and the Son, it also distinguishes the Father and the Son from the Holy Spirit. This is clearly demonstrated in the Upper Room Discourse, as Jesus prepared His disciples for His departure. He told them that He was going away, but He was not going to leave them alone. Rather, He was going to ask the Father, and the Father would send them **“another Helper”** to be with them forever. The Helper is identified as the Holy Spirit

“whom I will send to you from the Father” (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 8). John’s use of the pronouns “I” and “Him” (ἐγώ and αὐτόν) clearly distinguish the Son from the Spirit and from the Father. A *prima facie* reading of these texts with the Son asking the Father and the Father giving the Spirit suggests a distinction between the persons. “Moreover, it makes no sense to promise *another* Helper, for unless Jesus, the Father, and the Spirit are distinct, there is no *other* Helper.”

Another evidence of the distinction of persons is offered by Berkhof, who draws attention to the so-called *praepositiones distinctionales*, i.e., distinction in prepositions. In describing the work of the Father (**“from whom are all things”**) Paul uses ἐκ (ek), but when describing the work of Christ (**“by whom are all things”**) he uses διά (dia), 1 Corinthians 8:6. The Father is the *source* of all things, and the Son is the *agent* through whom creation was accomplished. John writes, **“All things came into being through (διά) Him”** (John 1:3). He adds that the Son came **“that the world might be saved through (διά) Him”** (John 3:17). On the other hand, the Son says, **“I can do nothing on My own initiative (ἀπ’ ἑμαυτοῦ),”** John 5:30. In a text like 1 Corinthians 12:13 (**“For**

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by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body”) the preposition ἐν (en) is used to denote the *sphere* or the means by which the divine work was accomplished.

In Scripture the Tri-Personality of the Godhead is Eternal and Not Merely Temporal

One could argue that the distinction of three persons merely refers to manifestations of God in time. Scripture, however, compels us “to maintain that there are personal relations between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit [independent] of creation and time.... Scripture reveals to us a social Trinity and [a communion] of love apart from and before the existence of the universe.” The evidence is fivefold. Much of it has already been discussed, is overlapping, and need only be briefly reviewed here.

The Existence of the Word from Eternity with the Father

John 1:1 (**“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”**) takes the reader to the moment of creation and clearly indicates that the Word already existed. He is eternal, He is distinct from the Father, and He is Himself deity. In a similar fashion the Apostle Paul ascribes deity to Christ and places Him in the eternal past. In Philippians 2:6 he says that He **“existed in the form of God”** (ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων, en morphē theou hyparchōn). Of these four words in the Greek text Sabatier said, They “form the most exalted metaphysical definition ever given by Paul to the Person of Christ.” Almost every word of the entire section must be examined carefully. At this point we shall consider only one. Lightfoot argued that the word *existed*

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(ὑπάρχων, hyparchōn, NASB; “being” in AV) denotes “prior existence.” In the present context it “clearly implies a state existing prior to the point in time at which our Lord *took upon Him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men.*” Not only does Paul place Christ in the eternal past, but the expression **“equality with God”** also implies that He was with God the

Father. In heaven He enjoyed the prerogatives of deity. Subsequent to His earthly ministry God the Father **“highly exalted Him”** (Phil. 2:9).

The Pre-Existence of Christ

Without any allusion to fellowship with the Father Jesus claims to preexist the created world. **“Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was born, I am”** (John 8:58). “A mode of being that has a definite beginning is contrasted with one that is eternal.” This, says Haenchen, is “a reference to His eternal being.”¹⁷² The absolute, “I AM” comes straight from the LXX of Exodus 3:14 and Moses’ encounter with Yahweh. As Morris notes, He does not say, “I was.” “It is eternity

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of being and not simply being that has lasted through several centuries that the expression indicates.”

The Pre-Temporal Relationship of Father and Son

The “High Priestly Prayer” indicates that there was communion between the Father and the Son **“before the world was.”** In His preincarnate state Christ enjoyed a “unique glory with the Father in [His] preexistent state” (John 17:5). He asks to be returned to the splendor of heaven and what He had left in coming to earth.¹⁷⁴ The Son says to the Father, **“You loved Me before the foundation of the world”** (John 17:24). In context Jesus is praying that the disciples will be with Him in heaven that they might see the glory that the Father has given Him.

The Creation of the World by Christ

“All things came into being through (διὰ) Him” (John 1:3). He was with God in eternity past, and He was the Father’s agent in creating the universe. Paul makes a similar point in Colossians 1:16. He says, **“By Him all things were created.”** Christ existed before every created thing, material or immaterial. He was in existence before this universe, the human race, and the entire angelic realm. In fact, He created all of these things. The author of Hebrews also stresses that the Son was the Father’s agent in creation **“through whom also He made the world”** (Heb. 1:2). The point to be made in all these texts is that they presuppose that the persons of the Godhead are not merely temporal manifestations; rather, they are eternal.

The Eternality of the Holy Spirit

At the time of the creation, the Holy Spirit, too, was already in existence. The opening verses of the Bible portray **“the Spirit of God...moving over the surface of the waters”** (Gen. 1:2). That He is an eternal person is more clearly indicated in Hebrews 9:14. At His baptism Jesus was anointed by the Holy Spirit (cf. Isa. 42:1), and it was in the power of the Spirit that the Servant accomplished every phase of His ministry. This is especially true of “the crowning phase in which He

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accepts death for the transgression of His people.” It was, says the author of Hebrews, **“through the eternal Spirit”** that Jesus **“offered Himself without blemish to God.”**

Excursus # 2: The Eternal Sonship of Christ

Charles Hodge expressed the conviction of historic Christianity when he said that Christ was the Eternal Son of God, i.e., “that He is from eternity the Son of God.” The title “Son of God”

he argued is not a term of office, but of nature. He did not become the Son at His birth, transfiguration, resurrection or ascension. The eternity of Christ's Sonship was taught by orthodox Christians for centuries, and it is found in the works of our most eminent, evangelical systematic theologians (e.g., Calvin, Shedd, Strong, Warfield, Murray, Buswell, Chafer, Walvoord, and Grudem). It has also been taught by our most respected Brethren Bible teachers (e.g., Darby, Kelly, Mackintosh, Hoste, Hocking, Vine, Ironside, and Bruce).

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The eternity of Christ's Sonship has periodically been denied by evangelical men of high standing. Two examples from the past are Adam Clarke¹⁸⁰ and Albert Barnes, who taught Sonship by means of incarnation. More recently similar views have been espoused by Walter Martin, Colin Brown,¹⁸³ and John MacArthur. Happily, MacArthur has abandoned the position and now defends the Eternal Sonship of Christ. Those who have denied the eternity of Christ's Sonship have usually pointed to texts such as Luke 1:35; Acts 13:33; Romans 1:4; and Hebrews 1:5 where He seems to be invested with Sonship in time or as a result of what He accomplished during His earthly ministry. I shall say more below, but for now I shall say that the men

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mentioned here were all guilty of a methodological fault. They tried to force all the verses on Christ's sonship into one mold, and in doing so they missed the fact that many texts do support the eternal Sonship of Christ.

The arguments favoring the eternity of Christ's Sonship are seven-fold: (1) The NT teaches the true deity of Christ. (2) The NT teaches the preexistence of Christ. (3) The NT teaches that Christ enjoyed a pre-temporal relationship with the Father. (4) The term *μονογενής* ("only begotten," *monogenēs*) is used of Christ and has a filial quality to it, i.e., it implies that He is His Father's Son. (5) The NT teaches that the "only begotten" came from the Father [John 1:14]. In the context of John 1 this implies that the Father is eternal [cf. John 1:1]. Likewise, John 16:28 says, "**I came forth from the Father,**" which suggests Jesus was with the Father before He came into the world. The work of election in eternity past ("**before the foundation of the world,**" Eph. 1:4) is attributed to the Father. Likewise Peter speaks of the "**foreknowledge of God the Father**" (1 Pet. 1:2). Other NT texts imply that the Father is eternal [John 17:1–5; Rev. 1:4; 4:8], and "an eternal Father cannot exist before an eternal Son." (6) The NT teaches that the Son created the world [Heb. 1:2]; this would seem to imply that He was the Son when He did this—at a time long before His birth or resurrection. (7) The NT teaches that the Father "sent" the Son into the world [John 3:16–17; Rom. 8:3–4; Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:9–10]. This would suggest that He was the Son before He was sent. Darby writes that if we abandon this "vital truth... we lose the Father sending the Son, and the Son creating, and we have no Father if we have no Son, so that it lies at the basis of all truth."

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Excursus # 3: Other Nuances of the Title "Son of God"

Our defense of the eternal Sonship of Christ must not lead to ignoring other nuances of the title "Son of God" in the NT. We must not assume that because some texts speak of Eternal Sonship then all the texts which speak of Christ's Sonship speak of Eternal Sonship.

If we are completely true to the biblical record, we must concede that the title "Son of God" is used of our Lord in more than one way. C. F. D. Moule has observed that from the days of

Jesus and the disciples the title *Son* has been invested “with a highly complex, multivalent set of associations.” As Vos and others have noted, the title is used in at least three ways:¹⁹¹

(1) Eternal Sonship. Christ shares the very nature of God. He has been the Son of God in His essence from eternity. In history He was sent into the world to redeem men. John Murray says this is the preponderant usage. This has also been called ontological Sonship,¹⁹³ divine Sonship, and essential Sonship.¹⁹⁵ The title “Son of God” speaks, first of all, of Christ’s essential deity. “The designation ‘Son of God’ is a metaphysical designation and tells us what He is in His being of being.” He is the One who was one with the Father and has been sent into the world.

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(2) Incarnational or Nativity Sonship. In Luke’s gospel (1:35) “the origin of Christ’s human nature is ascribed to [His mother Mary and] to the direct, supernatural paternity of God.” **“For that reason,”** the angel says, He is called **“Son of God.”**

(3) Messianic Sonship. Other texts describe Him as the descendent of David who is appointed as Messiah and installed as God’s Son. Here the title describes our Lord’s function or office as Messiah. It does not refer to His divine nature [see 2 Sam. 7:14; Rom. 1:4; Heb. 1:5]. This has also been called official Sonship, incarnate Sonship,¹⁹⁹ and acquired Sonship. As David’s son, Jesus, viewed in His manhood, was “adopted”²⁰¹ or “appointed” as God’s Son (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12–16). In this third sense Christ becomes God’s Son at His resurrection-ascension (cf. Rom. 1:4; Heb. 1:5–6; Psalm 2:7). Marcus Dods well observed, “The Messianic Sonship no doubt rests upon the Eternal Sonship,” and, I would add, the Incarnational Sonship rests on the Eternal Sonship as well. To sum up, Christ is called “Son of God” in three distinct ways in the NT, and we must take note of all three if our doctrine of the Sonship of Christ is to be complete.

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Excursus # 4: The Interrelations of the Three Persons

The “Trinity of Being,” or the Ontological Trinity

The Trinitarian Name. As I noted in my introduction, Christians are baptized into the Trinitarian name, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.” Evangelical theology has generally held that the eternal relations of the members of the Godhead account for the universally recognized order of Father, Son, and Spirit. Jewett calls these relations “unique and mysterious,” and so they are, for the Bible tells us little about them.

What is the “distinguishing property” or “characteristic” of each person? Standard evangelical texts use the classical distinctions based on the relationships implied in the names *Father, Son, and Spirit*. The Father is characterized as Father due to His relation to the second person; the Son is characterized as Son in His relation to the first person; the Spirit is characterized as Spirit in relation to the first and second persons.

The Father is uniquely the Father in that He is “of none.” He is begotten of none and proceeds from none. He is the Father, primarily, because He is the Father of the Son, and, secondarily, because He is the source of all created reality. His distinguishing property is “paternity.”

The Son is the Son because He is begotten of the Father. This language is traditional, and I believe it is biblical for three reasons: First, while the traditional

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translation of μονογενής (monogenēs), viz., “only begotten” (John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18) is presently out of favor, it is not without support and “implies a relationship that may be described as an eternal begetting.” Second, even if the translation “only Son” is preferred, to say that Jesus was God’s “only Son” and that God is His own Father, who shared His glory with His Son (John 17:5) and to use an expression like **“the only Son from the Father”** (John 1:14) implies the notions of kinship and derivation. The Son is equally divine with the Father, but He is the Father’s Son. He is “the Father all over again.” They are not “just members of the class of divine persons, but also members of the same family.” Third, John’s statement that the Son was “begotten” (γεγεννημένος, gegennēmenos) of God (1 John 5:18, NASB mg.) also supports the traditional doctrine. The distinguishing property or characteristic of the Son, therefore, is filiation, and most evangelicals still speak of the eternal generation of the Son.

The Holy Spirit, too, subsists as a distinct and eternal person in the Godhead. His distinguishing characteristic has been historically defined as

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“procession.” It is a term that was used originally to assert that He is not a creature and that He is distinct from the Son and the Father. By way of explanation, theologians have suggested that “procession is a divine ‘breathing’” (Latin *spiratio*). So the Father (and Son) eternally “spirate” the Spirit, whose very name means “breath” or “wind.” If most of our knowledge of the *eternal* relationships comes by way of analogy from what Scripture says about the way the persons relate in *time*, the terms “procession” and “spiration” are appropriate. The Holy Spirit does come from God as “the life-giving breath of God.” He is the *Creator Spiritus*, who renews the face of the ground (Ps. 104:30), the regenerating Spirit who brings new life to the hearts of people (Jn. 3:5; Titus 3:5), and the inspiring Spirit who produced the “God-breathed” Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16).

God’s Oneness-in-Threeness and His Threeness-in-Oneness. God is One, i.e., He is unique—there is no God like Him, and He is numerically one—there is

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only one God. In light of the NT evidence that there are three distinct and eternal persons who are God, theologians have wrestled over this mystery of a God who is one, yet who is also three. The solution they have offered is that God is one in *essence* and three in *person*.

This led to a further question, one that is with us still in the twenty-first century: How is this oneness of essence to be explained? Using language from the early church, many evangelical theologians have spoken of numerical oneness of God’s essence. There are not three essences, but only one. It is “the substance, or essence...—that very thing, which is God.” Each of the persons is identical with that thing.²²² This is a common understanding of the unity of the Godhead among evangelicals, i.e., an identity of nature. “The divine essence is not divided among the three persons, but is wholly with all its perfection in each one of the persons, so that they have numerical unity of essence.”

Picking up on another emphasis of the ancient church, some evangelicals have tended to emphasize the threeness of God. These “Social Trinitarians” speak of the Trinity as “a divine, transcendent society or community of three fully

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personal and fully divine entities: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” They prefer to speak of a “generic oneness” of the three persons, rather than of a numerical oneness—which, they suggest, could lead to modalism. The terms “Father” and “Son” suggest that these persons are related in some way. The Social Trinitarians suggest “a derivation or origin of relation that amounts to a personal essence.” The Son is the Father’s Son. They are not members of a class of divine persons; they are “members of the same family.” They have “generic equality” and are “related by quasi-genetic derivation. As a stream from a source, or a twig from a branch, or a child from a parent.” The same generic essence assures that each person is fully and equally divine.

How are the three persons one in such an understanding? Proponents point to Scripture which suggests “a mutual indwelling of the persons, an eternal coinherence.” Jesus says to Philip, “**Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works**” (John 14:10). In John 10:38 He says, “**the Father is in Me, and I in the Father**” and in John 1:18 the Son is described as being “**in the bosom of the Father.**” Paul describes the Holy Spirit as One atuned to the very thoughts of God—He knows God’s thoughts (1 Cor. 2:11). John of Damascus (ad 675–749) described this as a περιχώρησις

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(perichōrēsis), meaning “a circulating” or “going about.” The Father, Son, and Spirit are not eternally “with” or alongside each other, but eternally “in” one another. “The three persons are in one another and reciprocally interpenetrate, interpermeate, each other.” “There is an eternal intercommunion and interaction of being in the Godhead, so that each person coinheres in the others, and the others in each.” This describes an intimacy far beyond anything we can know, an indwelling “beyond all human experience and reality.” “This mysterious in-ness or oneness relation in the divine life, says Plantinga, is short of personal identity [modalism], but much closer than mere common membership in a class [tritheism].” “There is in the divine life a mysterious, primordial in-ness or oneness relation.”²³²

Both of these tendencies (overemphasis on the oneness or the threeness) were found in the early church, and both are in play today. The danger of one is that it will stray into modalism, and the danger of the other is that it will wander into tritheism. We must remember, says Paul Jewett, that all of our human analogies are broken. We must go on using them, he says, “until faith becomes sight; but we should not chafe under such limitations, for it is common to the human situation.”

The “Trinity of Revelation,” or the Economic Trinity

Because God is one there is a sense in which we must say that all His works are the work of the one God. Classical Christian theology, going back to Augustine, speaks of the works of God as indivisible. Yet at the same time we affirm that the one God subsists as three persons, and each of the persons has distinct roles.

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This “ordering of activities” into distinct roles is where the expression “economic Trinity” comes from (“economy” = “ordering of activities”).

In considering the roles of the three persons we can say that God reveals Himself to us as our Father, our Savior, and our Sanctifier. This is important because we believe that “God is in Himself who He has revealed Himself to be in His relationship to us.”

The Father Who Becomes Our Father. The Father is God, the creator of all things (Ps. 100:3). We acknowledge Him as the Father of **“whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name”** (Eph. 3:14–15). He is the One who made the world (Acts 17:24), the **“Father of lights,”** the giver of **“every perfect gift”** (James 1:17). It is true that the Son was His agent (John 1:3), but the Father was the “originator” of the creation. From the biblical perspective, the most significant aspect of God’s Fatherhood is that He becomes our Father through adoption when we receive Christ (John 1:12–13; Rom. 8:15).

The Son Who Becomes Our Savior. Our salvation is attributed to God without distinction of persons (Jonah 2:9; Ps. 3:8). And it is spoken of with distinction of persons, i.e., from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:4–6). Having said this, we must observe that in the NT salvation is always regarded as the peculiar and distinctive work of our Lord Jesus Christ (Matt. 1:21; Luke 2:11; 2:28–30; 19:9; John 10:9–10; Acts 4:12; Rom. 5:10;

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2 Cor. 5:18; Col. 1:14; Heb. 5:9). The Father, for example, did not come and die for us on the cross. It was the Son who **“became flesh and dwelt among us”** (John 1:14). It was His distinct work to die for us and be our Savior (1 Cor. 15:3).

The Spirit Who Becomes Our Sanctifier. The distinction of persons is seen when the other Helper comes to the earth (John 14:6; 15:7). “The Spirit who comes is not the Son coming back.” The Spirit convicts people of their sins (John 16:8–9). He empowered the disciples in their preaching (1 Cor. 2:4) and guided them in the writing of the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). It is the Spirit who regenerates people and gives them life (John 3:5–8; Titus 3:5), who sanctifies them (Rom. 8:13;), and who empowers them for service (Acts 1:8; 1 Cor. 12:7–11). In short, it is the Holy Spirit who applies the benefits of the work of the Son to people.

Excursus # 5: The Question of Subordination

Theologians today still grapple with the nature of the relations of the members of the Trinity. Both devout Catholics and biblical Evangelicals reject any notion that the Son or Spirit is subordinate in essence to the Father. Orthodox believers of all denominations and fellowships of churches affirm that all three persons are perfectly equal as to substance or essence.

At the same time, evangelical teachers will speak of “ontological equality but economic subordination,” i.e., while each member of the Trinity is fully God and equal in essence, there is a subordination of the Son and Spirit in role and

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function. The Son and Spirit are equal in being but subordinate in role.²⁴² “This subordination,” Hodge adds, “does not imply inferiority” in the infinite perfections of deity that the three persons share.

There is some difference of opinion about the time frame of this subordination. Some argue that the subordination was of limited duration, i.e., it lasted only for the period of the Son’s ministry on earth. Others have concluded that the Son is eternally subordinate in role to the Father and that the Spirit is eternally subordinate to the Father and the Son. That there is a subordination in the economy of redemption is clearly taught in the New

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Testament (e.g., Phil. 2:5–8; John 15:26–27). That there is also an order in the eternal relations of the persons of the Trinity seems to be a valid inference from the evidence. God has revealed

Himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These are not just temporary labels adopted for the era of redemptive history. They tell us who God is “eternally and antecedently in Himself... If God’s self-revelation in human history was simply a convention designed only for our salvation we could not know Him truly.” “The revelation of the economic Trinity truly indicates the ontological Trinity.” If there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to each other, if there is no eternal “Father,” eternal “Son,” and eternal “Spirit,” then the relations are only temporary, and we are left with modalism.

Excursus # 6: The Question of Masculine Language and the Trinity

Mention needs to be made of a topic raised in my introduction. Since the 1960s radical feminism has mounted a sustained attack against the Bible’s masculine

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language for God. “The use of masculine titles and pronouns absolutizes maleness and gives men the right to rule over women.” “Since God is male,” Mary Daly writes, “the male is God.”²⁵² The solution to this problem is to redefine God in nonsexist or even in feminine language. All language about God is metaphorical and analogical and can be therefore changed to overcome the church’s patriarchalism. Instead of the personal and masculine titles, “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit,”²⁵⁵ feminine or sexless titles are used such as “Mother,” “Child of God,” and “Comforter.”

Rosemary Radford Reuther argues that the root image of the divine in human consciousness is the great Womb from which all things are generated. She questions whether a male savior can save women and expounds an androgynous Christology. Christ is not necessarily male and we encounter Him (Her?) in the form of our sister. God is She in whom we live and move and have our being. Virginia Ramey Mollenkott writes of God as the God who

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has breasts, who breastfeeds the universe. Mary Daly dismisses biblical language (“After the Death of God the Father”), exonerates Eve from wrongdoing (“The Fall into Freedom”), questions whether a male Christ can be a role model for today’s woman (“Beyond Christolatry: A World Without Models”), undermines biblical ethics (“The End of Phallic Morality”), and champions a freedom outside of historic Christianity (“Sisterhood as Antichurch”). At the cutting edge of all of this is the revival of ancient goddess religion, which some feminists see as the first stirrings of a new stage of human consciousness.

Evangelical scholar Elizabeth Achtemeier offers the following responses to the arguments of the radical feminists: First, biblical scholars all agree that the true God, i.e., the God of the Bible, has no sexuality. Sexuality is an aspect of the created order (Gen. 1–2) and is confined within the limits of that order (Matt. 22:30). The Bible consistently pictures God as totally “other” than the creation—He is holy, i.e., “set apart” from what He has made (Hos. 11:9; Isa. 31:3; 40:18). By insisting on female language for God, the radical feminists

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are promoting the unbiblical view that God has sexuality. This distorts the biblical understanding of God “who is without sexual characteristics.”

Second, as literary critic Roland Frye has demonstrated, the few instances of feminine imagery for God in the Bible take the form of simile, not metaphor. A simile compares one aspect of something to another. For example, in Isaiah 42:14, God cries out “like a woman in

travail.” In this text it is His *crying out* that is being referred to, not His being as a whole. In a metaphor, however, the whole of a being is compared to the whole of another. God *is* Father, and Jesus *is* the Good Shepherd. “The basic distinction lies between the operations of simile/comparing (mother) and the metaphor/naming (father), and the meanings they convey.”

Third, the Bible uses masculine terminology for God because that is the terminology with which God has revealed Himself. “The biblical, Christian faith is a revealed religion. It claims no knowledge of God beyond the knowledge God has given of Himself through His words and deeds in the histories of Israel and of Jesus Christ and His church.” Contrary to modern theologians who claim that God is the great Unknown,²⁶⁷ and that we must invent language for God, “the God of the Bible has revealed Himself in five principal metaphors: King [Ps. 10:16; 24:8, 10], Father [Acts 1:4, 7], Judge [Gen. 18:25; Ps. 50:6], Husband [Hos. 2], and Master [Col. 4:1], and then finally, decisively, as the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” When the question is asked, “What is the ontological nature of God?” our answer must be, “God is the Father of Jesus Christ.” Kimel explains,

God is not just like a father; He is *the* Father. Jesus is not just like a son; He is *the* Son. The divine Fatherhood and Sonship are absolute,

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transcendent, and correlative.... The relationship between Christ Jesus and His Father, lived out in the conditions of first-century Palestine and eternally established in the resurrection and ascension of our Lord, belongs to the inner life of God. It constitutes the identity of the Almighty Creator.... “Father” is not a metaphor imported by humanity onto the screen of eternity; it is a name and filial term of address *revealed* by God Himself in the person of His Son.... No matter how other groups of human beings may choose to speak to the Deity, the matter is already decided for Christians, decided by God Himself. To live in Christ in the triune being of the Godhead is to worship and adore the holy Transcendence whom Jesus knows as His Father.

Fourth, “God is not just any god, capable of being named according to human fancy.” This is one of the lessons of the great Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4. God is not just any god—one of the diffuse gods known around the world. He is one particular God. He is Yahweh, “**the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery**” (Exod. 20:2). The God of the Exodus, Jesus asserts, is His Father (Mark 12:29–30). One cannot pull names out of a hat and name God to suit the shifting sands of a godless culture. God has defined Himself and revealed Himself, and this knowledge is found in the inspired Word of God.

Fifth, although God is spirit (John 4:24) He has revealed Himself in personal terms. Yes, God has revealed Himself using impersonal metaphors (e.g., Rock, Fire, Water, Bread, Way, Door, and Fortress), and these vividly describe His many characteristics. Yet the principal revelation of God shows Him to be supremely personal. A rock or a door can demand nothing of us, but our God calls for total commitment, “**You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might**” (Deut. 6:5). “No impersonal designations... can adequately express that gracious and demanding relationship of love with Himself into which God woos and calls us.”

Sixth, God’s revelation of Himself in masculine terms is in marked contrast to the world’s religious traditions. In those traditions female deities are often worshipped, and such goddess worship identifies God with the world. The true

God, on the other hand, is transcendent and to be distinguished from the world. Elaine Pagels states that “the absence of feminine symbolism of God marks Judaism, Christianity, and Islam in striking contrast to the world’s other religious traditions, whether in Egypt, Babylonia, Greece and Rome, or Africa, Polynesia, India, and North America.” Ancient Israel was surrounded by nations that worshipped female deities, and the revelation of God in masculine terms made Israel unique. Among contemporary radical feminists classic monotheism is jettisoned for goddess theology which is at heart pantheistic. Virginia Mollenkott writes of “the God with Breasts,” “the undivided One God who births and breast-feeds the universe.” The United Church of Christ’s *Book of Worship* includes these words in a prayer, “You have brought us forth from the womb of your being.” In such theology, Achtemeier says, “A female goddess has given birth to the world!” Budapest writes, “This is what the Goddess symbolizes—the divine within women and all that is female in the universe.... The responsibility you accept is that you are divine, and that you have power.” Achtemeier wisely concludes, “If God is identified with His creation, we finally make ourselves gods and goddesses—the ultimate and primeval sin, according to Genesis 3 and the rest of the Scriptures.”

In the Old Testament There are Other Indications of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The Plural Name

The NT teaching that there are three persons in the Godhead may shed light, Christians believe, on certain mysterious elements of the OT revelation. For

example, although the OT is strongly monotheistic it commonly uses a plural form of the word *God* (אֱלֹהִים, ’ēlōhîm) when speaking of the one true God. This plural form is used, for example, in Genesis 1:1, **“In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.”**

The plural has been variously understood. First, it has been explained as a vestige of a time when Israel’s ancestors were polytheistic. Second, it has been understood to be meaningless, i.e., it is a plural form with a singular meaning. Third, it has been understood to designate not a plurality, but an intensification, i.e., the “great,” “highest,” and “only” God. Fourth, it has been viewed as a plural of majesty, i.e., the one true God is spoken of in an

honorific way. Yet another view is that it denotes plenitude of might, i.e., God is the almighty fountain and source of all things.

A final understanding of the plural is that it suggests a plurality in the Godhead that is only explained by the revelation of the Trinity in the NT. Proponents of this view offer the following arguments: (1) The word is a genuine plural when used of heathen gods [Exod. 20:3], (2) There are singular forms of God used of Yahweh [אֱלֹהִים (’ēl) and אֱלֹהִים (’ēlôah)]. (3) The so-called

honorific plural of majesty is grammatically possible, but is contextually improbable in a context like Genesis 1:26 (**“let Us make man in Our image”**), where the Hebrew has one verb

in the plural [נַעֲשֶׂה, na'āseh, “let Us make”] and two nouns with plural suffixes [בְּצַלְנוּ, b'šalmēnu, “in Our image;” and כִּדְמוּנוּ, kidmûtēnû, “according to Our likeness”]. (4) The NT teaches that there is a plurality of persons in the Godhead. In short, the plural אֱלֹהִים is used “to cover an aspect of the Godhead which is specifically Hebraic, viz., the conception that God is both singular and plural at one and the same time.”

The Plural Pronouns

The idea that God exists as more than one person is further suggested in the OT by the use of plural verbs and pronouns for God. Even though אֱלֹהִים is a plural form it was understood in biblical Hebrew (when used of Israel's God) to refer to one God. One would therefore expect that singular pronouns would be used to refer to God. In four passages of the OT, however, the plural pronoun is used (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8).

The classic text is Genesis 1:26, “**Let Us make man in Our image.**” Here both the verb (“make”) and the pronoun (“our”) are plural. This has been explained in at least six ways by scholars:²⁹³ (1) As an unassimilated fragment

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of myth, i.e., Genesis 1:26 is a holdover from ancient polytheistic mythologies. (2) As an address to the creation, i.e., God addressed Himself to the earth from which man's body would be made, while God Himself would contribute the spiritual part of man's being. (3) As a plural of majesty, i.e., God, like an ancient monarch, issues commands in an honorific way with the royal “we” (e.g., Ezra 4:18). (4) As an address to the heavenly court, i.e., God consulted with the angels of the heavenly court.²⁹⁷ (5) As a plural of self-deliberation, self-exhortation, i.e., God speaks to Himself as in colloquial English (“Let's see,” or “Let's go”).

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The sixth view, and the correct one, in my opinion, is that the plural suggests plurality in the Godhead. The “let us” suggests “the cooperation of the Godhead in the work of creation.” While it is true that Moses was not schooled in the intricacies of Trinitarian theology, what he says is certainly compatible with it. The text does not say whether God is addressing His Spirit (Gen. 1:2) or Wisdom (Prov. 8), but it does suggest some kind of distinction in the divine nature. Barth wrote, “It may be stated that an approximation to Christian doctrine of the Trinity—the picture of a God who is the one and only God, yet who is not for that reason solitary, but includes in Himself the differentiation and relationship of I and Thou—is both nearer to the text and does it more justice than the alternative suggested by modern exegesis in its arrogant rejection of the exegesis of the Early Church.”

The Plurality of “Lords”

In two important passages in the Book of Psalms one person is called “God” or “the Lord” and is distinguished from another person who is also called “God” or “the Lord.” In Psalm 45:6 the psalmist writes, “**Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.**” Then, still speaking to God, the psalmist goes on, “**God, Your**

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God, has anointed You with the oil of joy above Your fellows” (v. 7). In the NT the author of Hebrews (1:8) interprets Psalm 45:6 in a Trinitarian fashion and applies it to Jesus Christ, **“Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever.”**

In Psalm 110: 1, David wrote, **“The Lord (Yahweh) says to my Lord (’ādôn), ‘Sit at My right hand until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet.’”** In a highly charged encounter with the Pharisees Jesus clearly interpreted David to mean that there were two separate persons who were called, “Lord” (Matt. 22:41–46). Who was David’s Lord if not God Himself? And who could say to God, **“Sit at My right hand”** except someone who was also God? From the perspective of fulfilled prophecy in the NT we know that it was God the Father who said to God the Son, **“Sit at My right hand”** (Heb. 1:3; 8:1; 10:12). In short, Psalm 110:1 does suggest a plurality of persons in one God.

The Son of Yahweh

In spite of the monotheism of the OT, at least one passage ascribes a Son to Yahweh. Proverbs 30:4 asks a series of wondering questions about the transcendence of God. One of his questions is, **“What is His name or His son’s name?”** Interpreters have long puzzled over the identity of this figure. Many have

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concluded that in Agur’s words the NT doctrine of the Son of God announces itself from afar.

It should be noted that others are called God’s “sons” in the OT. Angels are called sons of God (e.g., Job 2:1); Israel is called God’s son (Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1); Solomon is called God’s son (2 Sam. 7:14); and Messiah is called God’s Son (Ps. 2:7). It is clear that in these contexts deity is not being ascribed to the “son” of Yahweh. Yet speaking about a son of Yahweh may suggest a divine person, and some believe that is the case in Proverbs 30:4.

The Angel of the Lord (of Yahweh)

Yet another intimation of plurality in the Godhead may come from various references to the angel of the Lord (מַלְאֲכֵי יְהוָה, mal’āk yhw̄h). Although there are numerous references to angels in the OT, on a number of occasions he seems to be more than one of God’s angelic creatures.

The arguments in favor of identifying the angel of the Lord as a divine person are these: First, He identifies Himself as Yahweh. This is true, for example, in the stories of Abraham (Gen. 22:11, 16) and Jacob (Gen. 31:11, 13). On these occasions He spoke both for and as God. Second, He is identified as God by others. This is true in the stories of Hagar (Gen. 16:9, 13) and Joseph (Gen. 48:15–16). Third, He is distinguished from Yahweh, as in the story of Balaam and his donkey (Num. 22:22, 31) and in the story of Gideon (Judg. 6:11–23). Fourth, although Scripture teaches that only God is to be worshipped (Exod. 34:14), the Angel of the Lord accepts acts of reverence and worship (Exod. 3:2, 5; Judg. 13:18–20). Finally, divine knowledge and actions are attributed to Him (Judg. 13:7, 19).

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Many Christian interpreters have concluded that the Angel of the Lord is the preincarnate Christ. Arguing without NT revelation one can hardly deduce the doctrine of the Trinity, but the data, once again, suggests a plurality in the Godhead.

The Deity of Messiah

Additional evidence suggesting a plurality in the Godhead is the OT teaching about the coming Messiah, the anointed king who would sit on David's throne. Three key passages suggest that the Messiah is God. In Isaiah 9:6–7 the prophet speaks of a child who will be born and who will establish the throne of David. Remarkably he also calls this child, “Mighty God” (לַגִּבּוֹר, 'ēl gibbôr). Young wrote, “By means of the words yeled, ‘child,’ and yullad, ‘is born,’ he has called attention to the Messiah's humanity, but by the phrase 'el gibbor we are brought face to face with Messiah's deity.”

In a similar fashion Jeremiah makes an announcement concerning a future time in which Messiah, a king from the Davidic line, will restore the kingdom of Israel and Judah (Jer. 23:5–6). The name of this king will be, “**the Lord our righteousness**” (יהוה צדקנו, yhwḥ idqēnû). Many commentators take this to mean that Messiah is the one by whom Yahweh deals righteously. Others take the expression as a proper name, and they argue that Messiah is not only

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presented as the righteous king but as deity. He is called, “**the Lord our righteousness**” because He is God who saves His people and deals righteously with them.

The third text is Micah 5:2, also a Messianic passage as the Jewish leaders affirmed in Matthew 2:4–6. The prophet looked on to a glorious future in which Messiah would arise in Bethlehem, the birthplace of the Davidic dynasty. He added that this future ruler would be a person of great antiquity. “**His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity.**” This is “strong evidence that Micah expected a supernatural figure.” As Keil remarked, “The announcement of the origin of this Ruler as being before all worlds unquestionably presupposes His divine nature.”

Assuming that one or more of these three texts does attribute deity to the Messiah, one might ask how the evidence is to be evaluated. There is the possibility that Messiah is just another term for Yahweh, i.e., there is only one person in the Godhead who can be called, “Messiah,” “Yahweh,” or a variety of other names. Such a conclusion is rendered impossible by those OT passages in which Messiah is distinguished from God. In Psalm 2 the Messiah is the king whom God has installed upon Zion. He is God's Son and therefore distinct from God. Likewise in Psalm 45:7 Messiah is anointed by God and distinguished from Him. The OT leaves the puzzle unsolved. How can Messiah be God and yet distinguished from God? All that can be said from the OT revelation is that there seems to be some kind of plurality in the Godhead.

The Spirit as Distinct from God

“The New Testament writers identify their ‘Holy Spirit’ with the ‘Spirit of God’ of the older books.” It was He whom the Israelites resisted in the wilderness (Acts 7:51). He gave Israel its ritual service (Heb. 9:8), and He caused men of

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old to write the Scriptures (2 Pet. 1:21). The anointing Spirit of Isaiah 61:1 is the same Spirit who descended upon Jesus at His baptism (Luke 4:18–19), and the Spirit promised by Joel (2:27–28) is the same Spirit who descended upon the disciples on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:16).

The full deity and distinct personality of the Spirit are part of NT revelation to be sure. In the OT there are hints pointing toward the NT doctrine. There is, says Warfield, a “sort of objectifying of the Spirit over against God,” a tendency toward hypostatizing or personifying the Spirit. There are a number of passages in which the Spirit is distinct from God. In Exodus 31:3 Yahweh tells Moses that He has filled Bezalel with the Spirit of God. In Exodus 35:30–31 Moses says the same thing of Bezalel. As Balaam looked at the tribes of Israel, **“the Spirit of God came upon him”** (Num. 24:2). Later Moses is told to commission Joshua, **“a man in whom is the Spirit”** (Num. 27:18–19). Job speaks of the Spirit of God as his Creator (Job 33:4), and David pleads, **“Do not take Your Holy Spirit from me”** (Ps. 51:11). Isaiah 61:1 also distinguishes the Spirit from God, **“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me.”** The tendency toward personifying the Spirit is seen in Isaiah 48:16, **“The Lord God has sent Me, and His Spirit.”** Here the Spirit of the Lord, like the servant of the Lord, has been sent by God on a mission. Isaiah 63:10 says, **“But they rebelled and grieved His Holy Spirit.”** This suggests that the Spirit is distinct from God and that He can be grieved. To sum up, a number of OT texts seem to intimate that the Holy Spirit is divine, distinct from God and personal.

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The Wisdom of God (Personal, Distinct from God, Eternal)

The OT personified divine Wisdom, i.e., it spoke of Wisdom as if it were a hypostasis, i.e., an actual heavenly person. For example, in Proverbs 8 (vv. 22–31) Wisdom speaks as if it was the person, the master craftsman through whom God created the earth. Wisdom says, **“The Lord possessed me at the beginning of His way, before His works of old. From everlasting I was established, from the beginning, from the earliest times of the earth;...then I was beside Him”** (NASB mg.).

Kidner, who concludes that wisdom is here conceived of as a personification, i.e., an abstraction, made personal for the sake of poetic vividness, nevertheless concedes, “But if this is how the poem should be read in its immediate context, there is also a wider setting. The New Testament shows by its allusions to this passage (Col. 1:15–17; 2:3; Rev. 3:14) that the personifying of wisdom, far from overshooting the literal truth, was a preparation for its full statement, since the agent of creation was no mere activity of God, but the Son, His eternal Word, Wisdom and Power (see also John 1:1–14; 1 Cor. 1:24, 30; Heb. 1:1–4).”

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A Diversity in Unity

In Israel’s Great Confession (Deut. 6:4), **“The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”** the word translated “one” is the numerical adjective **אֶחָד** (’ehād). It occurs about 960 times in various contexts, and its predominant use is to designate something that is numerically one.

There are a number of instances, however, where this word can indicate a compound unity. The union of evening and morning in one day (Gen. 1:5, 8, 13), the union of Adam and Eve in **“one flesh,”** the gathering of all the people in one assembly (Ezra 2:64), the treatment of fifty gold clasps as a unit (Ex. 26:6, 11), and the joining of two sticks to represent the union of Judah and Ephraim in a single nation (Ezek 37:17, 19, 22) are all examples of this usage. In light of the NT teaching of three persons in the one Godhead, some scholars have cautiously suggested that

𐤓𐤓𐤓 in Deuteronomy 6:4 may represent diversity in unity, i.e., the compound unity of the Triune God.

The Trisagion of Isaiah 6:3

In Isaiah 6 the prophet Isaiah records the vision that would give shape and direction to the whole course of his ministry. The Seraphim who attend Yahweh

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respond in worship to His holiness, **“Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of hosts.”** Modern commentators are very cautious about suggesting that Isaiah saw the Trinity in the trilogy of praise (“Holy, Holy, Holy”).

One need not assume, however, that Isaiah saw a reference to the Trinity to say that there was one. Delitzsch asks, “Did this thrice-holy refer to the triune God?” He answers in the affirmative. “The fact that three is the number of developed and yet self-contained unity, has its ultimate ground in the circumstance that it is the number of the trinitarian process; and consequently the trilogy (trisagion) of the seraphim (like that of the cherubim in Rev. 4:8), whether Isaiah was aware of it or no, really pointed in the distinct consciousness of the spirits themselves to the triune God.”

Oswalt says, “There is nothing in the context to cause us to take this as a reference to the Trinity.” That is true if we ignore all other biblical evidence for the Trinity. If Isaiah 6 stood alone then the threefold, **“Holy, Holy, Holy”** would be merely emphatic. However, Isaiah does not stand alone. It is a book of Messianic prophecy, and Messiah has come, and we have the New Testament record to guide us. Let me, in light of the NT, make the following five observations: (1) The seraphim do use the threefold, **“Holy, Holy, Holy.”** (2) In verse 8 the Lord, using the plural, asks, **“Who will go for Us?”** (3) The title **“Lord of Hosts,”** all would agree, includes God the Father. (4) In referring to this scene, John observed, **“These things Isaiah said because he saw His [i.e., Christ’s] glory, and he spoke of Him”** [John 12:41]. (5) In Acts 28:25 the Apostle Paul saw in the same scene the presence of the Holy Spirit. **“The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying... ‘Otherwise they might see with their eyes...and I would heal them.’”** These observations may indicate that there is an allusion to the Trinity in Isaiah 6.

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Conclusion

The Mystery of the Doctrine of the Trinity

It is Inscrutable

The difficulty of the doctrine is illustrated by evangelical writer, Marguerite Shuster, using the “new math.” If one is working in base three, one plus one plus one looks suspiciously like “10” to the uninitiated. Or “11,” if one is working in base two. It’s so confusing that most old-timers are quickly driven back to the old math, where one plus one plus one always equals a nice familiar *three*. My generation agrees that things were simpler in the good old days. In this article, however, we have been discussing what Shuster calls, “the oldest math of all.” In the oldest math, one plus one plus one equals one. “Before you or I existed, before any human being

existed, before a world or a universe or a cloud of hot gasses existed, from all eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were and are one God. One plus one plus one equals one.”

There have been many analogies suggested over the centuries, but almost all have been judged to be inadequate. Yet the Trinity is certainly intelligible in

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some of its manifestations, e.g., the creating work of the Father, the saving work of Christ, and the sanctifying work of the Spirit. But the various ways to explain the mystery of the oneness in threeness and threeness in oneness are somewhat speculative. We can only follow the guidelines of those who have gone before in avoiding the destructive heresies of the past.

It is Not Self-Contradictory

In spite of its difficulty, the doctrine is not a contradictory one. We are not saying that God is three Gods and one God at the same time. Contrary to the oft-repeated barb of the Unitarians, Trinitarians can count! Our doctrine would be contradictory if we said that God was three in the same numerical sense in which we said He was one. But, we do not. We simply assert that the God who is one in essence is three with respect to persons.

The Importance of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Theological Significance

The Doctrine of the Trinity is Essential for a Proper Understanding of God

The doctrine makes three points clear. First, it explains the Lord Jesus Christ, and that alone makes the doctrine vital. The doctrine of the Trinity, said Pannenberg, “is not a doctrine of secondary importance” to other concepts about God. He goes on to say that it can be defended “only on the condition that there is no other appropriate conception of the God of the Christian faith than the Trinity.” If the doctrine is sound, then the three persons are God, and everything said in Christian theology about God is said of them in their eternal union. Pannenberg’s point is Christological. This doctrine “simply states explicitly what is implicit already in God’s revelation in Jesus Christ and basically in Jesus’ historical relationship to the Father whom He proclaimed to be the one true God. “If Jesus’ relationship to the Father could be adequately described and accounted for in other terms than those of trinitarian doctrine, the case for that doctrine would be lost.”

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Second, it guards against all of mankind’s false notions of God. Barth comments, “There can be protection against atheism, polytheism, pantheism or dualism only with the doctrine of the Trinity” Antitrinitarianism seems to inevitably lead to one of those false belief systems.

Third, the doctrine of the Trinity assures us that God is truly personal. One of the most wonderful statements in the Bible is, “**God is love**” (1 John 4:8). Such a thing is impossible in the abstract and radical monotheism of Islam, for love requires an object. God, says Shedd, is “not a unit, but a unity.” Love, joy, and communion require a society of persons.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is Essential for a Proper Revelation of God

“Without the doctrine of the Trinity we go back to mere natural religion and the far-off God of deism.” Without the Trinity we cannot know God, and God cannot be revealed. The deity of the Spirit and the Son are vital here.

Paul says, “**The thoughts of God no one knows except the Spirit of God**” (1 Cor. 2:11). Paul’s logic is that because the Spirit is divine, He knows the very thoughts of God. And because He knows them He can tell them to us (v. 12; cf. John 16:13). He guided men so that they could not only receive revelation but record that revelation in the Scriptures (2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21).

Similarly, the NT stresses that we have something unique with the Son-type of revelation found in Scripture (Heb. 1:2). He shares the attributes of His Father (Heb. 1:3); all the fullness of deity resides in Him (Col. 2:9). He has an intimacy with God that is unparalleled (John 1:18). If He is not truly God (John 1:1),

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then the revelation He gave is from one who is only like God and not truly God.

The Doctrine of the Trinity is Essential for a Proper Redemption from God

Paul and the author of Hebrews tell us that the Lord Jesus Christ is our “*mediator*” (1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 8:6; 9:15; 12:24). He is the perfect “middle-man” between God and the sinner. Because of His human nature He can die as our sin bearer; because of His deity His death has infinite value. Bishop Handley Moule said, “A Savior *not quite God* is a bridge broken at the farther end.” In the Trinitarian theology of the Bible there is a wonderful unity of purpose in the redemption of people. God planned it and sent His Son. The Son accomplished our redemption on the Cross, and the Spirit applies the benefits to believing sinners. Students of theology have long noted that a departure from Trinitarianism leads to defection in other areas of theology, e.g., in one’s estimate of sin, the dignity of Christ, and the need for a substitutionary atonement. In fact, substitution is impossible without the Trinity.

Practical Significance

The Trinity Provides an Impetus to Worship

Love that caused us first to be,
Love that bled upon the tree,
Love that draws us lovingly:
We beseech Thee, hear us.

Father of heaven, whose love profound
A ransom for our souls hath found...
Almighty Son, Incarnate Word,
Our, Prophet, Priest, Redeemer, Lord...

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Eternal Spirit, by whose breath
The soul is raised from sin and death.

Paul Jewett said there are certain “ground rules” for students of the Trinity as they seek to describe the activities of the persons of our Triune God. These three “ground rules” can be modified as guidelines for Christian worship: We should, first of all, not be unitarian in our worship. We should gladly pray to the Father (Matt. 6:9), through the Son (Col. 3:17), in the leading of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 6:18)—ever mindful that ours is the Triune God. Second, as we speak of the works of each person, we should not violate the unity of God and think and speak as if there were three Gods. God is One, unified in essence, redemptive purpose, and revelation. The glorious description of our salvation in Ephesians 1 is a case in point—the Father chooses

us, the Son redeems us by His blood, and the Holy Spirit seals us. Third, we should not blur the distinctions; they are real. Just as the Son is not the Father, and the Father is not the Son, so the Father is not the Savior who was crucified for us, nor is the Son the One who sanctifies us. An illustration of this point is the person who leads the congregation in prayer to the Father and then thanks Him for dying on the Cross for our sins—the Father did not die for our sins!

Finally, let us remember that when we were baptized in the “Great Name,” we were announcing our adoption into the joy and warmth of the family of God.

The Trinity Provides a Model for Life

Of all the analogies of the Trinity the one that has biblical support is that of the family. The very idea of “fatherhood” and “sonship” are derived from the persons of the Godhead (cf. Eph. 3:15). One of the miracles of our salvation is that the Lord Jesus Christ wants His people to be brought into familial communion as “sons” with the living God (John 17:21; cf. 1:12–13). The unity and diversity

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that we see in the divine family of Father, Son, and Spirit offer a model for the many relationships of human life.

For married people the Triune God models both diversity—distinct persons with distinct roles—and unity of purpose. The Apostle Paul says the relationship of the Father and Son, with the Father exercising authority over the Son, is a picture of the husband and wife role wherein headship is exercised by the husband. Both are equally human (Gen. 1:26), but both exercise different functions (1 Cor. 11:3).

For Christians involved in the vital reality of church life the Trinity is a model. There is diversity (“many members”), and there is to be unity (“one body”), (1 Cor. 12:12). There should be no rancor or jealousy over differences. In the one body there are different sexes, different races (Eph. 2:16), and different gifts (1 Cor. 12:12–26). All “alienations get transformed into delightful complementarities.” In the mysterious union of Christ and His church (Eph. 5:31–32) there is a wondrous union with Christ, a union in which we do not lose our individual identities.¹

¹, vol. 11, *Emmaus Journal Volume 11*, 1–2 (Dubuque, IA: Emmaus Bible College, 2002), 119–207.