

# FOUR

## God as a Trinity

From *Systematic Theology* by Daniel J. Baker

### Introduction

The truly distinct aspect of Christianity when it comes to our understanding of God is the notion of a triune God, one God who is *three persons* and yet is not three gods—in the words of the hymn writer, “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity.”<sup>1</sup> No other religion has anything like this. Islam is firmly monotheistic and not indifferent to the Christian understanding of the Trinity. For Muslims, Christ is said to be a “messenger” of Allah but nothing more. In the *Quran* we read, “People of the Book, do not go to excess in your religion, and do not say anything about God except the truth: the Messiah, Jesus, son of Mary, was nothing more than a messenger of God, His word, directed to Mary, a spirit from Him. So believe in God and His messengers and do not speak of a ‘Trinity’—stop [this], that is better for you—God is only one God, He is far above having a son, everything in the heavens and earth belongs to Him and He is the best one to trust” (*Sura An-Nisa* 4:171).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reginald Heber, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (1826).

<sup>2</sup> Muhammad A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an* (NY: Oxford University, 2004).

We can look in our New Testament to see what the unbelieving Jewish response is to anything like the Trinity, a doctrine which implies that Jesus is God. For Jews it is simply blasphemy to speak of Jesus as God. We see this in the New Testament. Remember, Jesus was crucified *for blasphemy*. When he affirmed his identity as Son of God to the Jewish council, their response was emphatic: “The high priest tore his robes and said, ‘He has uttered blasphemy. What further witnesses do we need? You have now heard his blasphemy.’”<sup>66</sup> “What is your judgment?” They answered, ‘He deserves death’” (Matt 26:65–66).

And then there is the heresy of Mormonism. Despite calling themselves “The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints,” Christ for Mormons is not divine in the same way the Father is. They say he was created alongside the other creatures and rises above them because of his unique integrity. After God the Father and some form of a heavenly Mother reproduce, Christ, Lucifer, and all humanity are born. Then occurred what is called “the Grand Council” before creation. Here Lucifer and Jesus were present alongside all humanity. Jesus distinguishes himself for being uniquely zealous for the glory of the Father and is rewarded by being called God’s “Son.” In other words, Christ is a *created* being alongside all people and even the devil himself (*Moses 4*).<sup>3</sup>

We could add here the teachings of polytheists (many gods) or pantheists (all things are god). Both have had significant followings throughout history and today. Once again, there is nothing like the Christian teaching on the Trinity in all the world’s religions. This adds enormous weight to the evidence that Christianity is a *revealed* religion and not an *invented* one, as all the others are. No one could have invented such a religion. When you invent something, you do not invent something you cannot fully explain or understand. The Trinity is an unfathomable mystery, a truth with depths we cannot fully explore. In this chapter we will explore this mystery.

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<sup>3</sup> Moses 4, *The Pearl of Great Price* (Draper, UT: Deseret, 2013), 8–9.

The *Heidelberg Catechism* gives us a good summary of the mystery of the Trinity:

Q. 25. Since there is but one only divine essence, why speakest thou of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost?

A. Because God has so revealed himself in his word, that these three distinct persons are the one only true and eternal God.

The Heidelberg Catechism (Question 25)

He is “one only divine essence” but also “three distinct persons” as Father, Son, and Holy Ghost (Holy Spirit). Thinking rightly about God as Trinity is no simple matter. We will start our study with a survey of the basic building blocks we find in the Bible itself. Then we will turn to the progressive understanding of the Trinity as found in the early centuries of the church. Finally, we will present a series of key truths to affirm about the Trinity, truths that summarize what we have observed in God’s Word.

## **The Bible’s Basic Building Blocks on the Trinity**

### **Our God is One God**

The Bible’s starting point for understanding the nature of God is that he is *one God*. Old Testament Israel is surrounded by pagan polytheists and is continually exhorted to turn away from these false gods and to worship the true God only. The first commandment has instant relevance and seriousness, “You shall have no other gods before me” (Exod 20:3; Deut 5:7). A prayer that is to be on the lips of Israelites often is the *Shema*, named for the Hebrew of the opening imperative to “Hear!”: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one.” (Deut 6:4). When Israel loses its way amidst the Canaanite nations, God reminds them, “Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts: ‘I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god’” (Isa 44:6).

And in the New Testament this truth that there is *one God* remains: “There is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5). “We know that ‘an idol has no real existence,’ and that ‘there is no God but one’” (1 Cor 8:4). In the end, there is one divine essence which we rightly name “God.”

## **Our One God is Plural in Nature**

But a second truth that is made apparent early in the Bible’s revelation is that our *one God* is no simple being. Instead, there are hints almost immediately that he is somehow *plural* in his nature. The name *Elohim* in Genesis 1:1, though an intensive plural and not referring to God as many gods, nonetheless serves as a pointer to future revelation. The creation account adds to this plural idea as “God created” in Genesis 1:1 is followed by a reference to “the Spirit of God...hovering over the face of the waters” in 1:2 and then a reference to words that “God said” in 1:3. God spoke a Word and creations came into existence. Already is the anticipation of Jesus “the Word” (John 1:1) without whom “was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:3). Truly, “God brings everything in His creation and providence into being by His Word and Spirit.”<sup>4</sup> Psalm 33 verses 6 and 9 affirms this same pluralistic aspect of God’s creative activity.

Later in the creation account we hear God say, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” (Gen 1:26). Robert Letham rightly says, “While the New Testament never refers to this statement, it is by no means unwarranted to see here a proleptic reference to the Trinity.”<sup>5</sup> Given that humanity is made *only* in God’s image and not the image of any other heavenly being, this “us” in Genesis 1:26 can only refer

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<sup>4</sup> Bavinck, *Our Reasonable Faith*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Letham, *Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 70.

to the Godhead. We see this same use of “us” in Genesis 3:22. In Genesis 18, God appears to Abraham: “Yahweh appeared to him by the oaks of Mamre” (v. 1). But when Abraham “lifted up his eyes and looked,” what he saw was “three men...standing in front of him” (v. 2). Unsurprisingly, such passages have “puzzled rabbinic scholars.”<sup>6</sup>

## **Our One God is Three Distinct Persons**

As the Bible unfolds, we realize this plurality is more defined. God reveals himself as three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. It is not really till the New Testament where God as “Father” is fully brought out, as in Matthew 28:19, where the church is told to baptize disciples among the nations “in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” It is one “name” and thus one God, but this one God is “Father,” “Son,” and “Holy Spirit.” In the Old Testament, these three persons are nonetheless evident. In Genesis 1:1–2 there is “God” and “the Spirit.” In Psalm 2:7, the anonymous author writes, “I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you.’” In Hebrews 1:5 and 5:5, the “me” in this Psalm is identified as Christ the Son of God. The Father is present here as Yahweh (“The LORD”), and Yahweh calls this figure “my Son.” Till Jesus came, it was assumed that this “Son” was simply another way to identify a king like David in Israel. But with Jesus it becomes clear that “my Son” is no metaphorical title but a unique figure with a unique relationship to Yahweh himself. Isaiah 63:16 speaks of God as “our Father,” a rare name for him in the Old Testament, though Christ in Isaiah 9:6 is mentioned as both “a child...born,...son...given” and “Mighty God, Everlasting Father.” In Psalm 110:1 two of the persons of the Trinity are mentioned with *Yahweh* and *Adonai*: “The LORD (*Yahweh*) says to my Lord (*Adonai*): Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.” Jesus will speak of himself

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<sup>6</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 71.

using this verse in the Synoptic Gospels (Matt 22:44; Mark 12:36; Luke 20:42). In Hosea 11:1 the prophet writes, “out of Egypt I called my son,” which is assumed to be Israel until it is then applied to Jesus in Matthew 2:15. All three persons of the Trinity are evident in Isaiah 48:16, “Now the Lord GOD has sent me, and his Spirit.” And then later in Isaiah the three persons are present with another prophecy about Christ: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound” (Isa 61:1). Jesus will apply this prophecy directly to himself as the one anointed in Luke 4:18–19.

When we turn our attention to the New Testament, the three persons are presented in dramatic and clear and abundant fashion. Jesus freely refers to God as “Father” (Matt 5:16; 6:9; 11:25–27) and even “your heavenly Father” (Matt 5:48). Jesus tells us that the Father is none other than “my Father and your Father,...my God and your God” (John 20:17). Jesus is “the only Son from the Father” (John 1:14), and “the Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand” (John 3:35). At Jesus’s baptism, all three persons are evident as Jesus is anointed by the Spirit and the Father speaks from heaven saying, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17). As I said above, we are to baptize in the one “name” of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19). Numerous trinitarian references are found in the epistles like 2 Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” Many more examples could be added, but this will suffice for our purposes. The point here is to establish the three persons of the Trinity.

One important idea to note is that the full deity of the Son and the Spirit are expressed and not simply the mere existence of the Son and the Spirit. Matthew 28:19 is again useful, since the one divine “name” is also said to be the three persons of Father, Son, and Spirit. They share a single “name” and thus being and substance

and yet also be known by their persons. Jesus is rightly called, “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28), and does not refuse such worship. When he is called “Lord” throughout our New Testament, we need to hear the meaning of *Yahweh* from the Old Testament. Passages like Psalm 110:1 in the Greek OT make this clear. Paul means us to hear divinity when he says things like Romans 10:9, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” The Spirit is God as well, being a co-Creator with God (Gen 1:2) and rightly identified as “the Spirit of God” who is uniquely able to comprehend “the thoughts of God” (1 Cor 2:11). In Acts 5, Peter rebukes Ananias for his “lie to the Holy Spirit” (v. 3) because, “You have not lied to man but to God” (v. 4). The Spirit commands God’s people with the same directness and authority as God himself. And so in Acts 13:2, the Spirit says, “Set apart for *me* Barnabas and Paul,” and does not simply say, “Set apart for *God*,” as if he is not God. Clearly, there are three persons in the Godhead, and these three persons are Father, Son, and Spirit.

### **The Three Persons of the Godhead have a Distinct Relationship with One Another**

With this idea we begin to see more of how the persons of the Trinity relate to one another. We can start with Creation. In Genesis 1:1–3 there is God who creates, the Spirit hovering, but then the Word spoken which results in the filling and forming of the six days of creation in Gen 1:3–31. When the Psalmist looks back on this event he says, “By the word of the LORD the heavens were made, and by the breath of his mouth all their host” (Ps 33:6). In this verse *Yahweh* creates through his “word” and through the “breath of his mouth,” “breath” being the word for “Spirit” in Hebrew (*ruach*, translated with *pneuma* in the LXX). There is an echo of such passages when John introduces Jesus as “the Word” present “with God” and who is “God” and without whom “was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:1–3). In this picture of creation we see the

Trinity active in a way that is *from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit*. The three are working inseparably and indivisibly, but they are not working identically. “The three work in harmony rather than in unison.”<sup>7</sup>

Then there is the Incarnation. Jesus’s ministry is often depicted in the Trinitarian framework of *from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit*. The Old Testament prophesies of this Trinitarianism in Isaiah 61:1, where we read, “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.” The Father is described here as *Adonai Yahweh* and *Yahweh*, and he “anoints” the Son (the “me” in the passage) with “the Spirit.” The Son with this anointing then does the ministry assigned to him and described in Isaiah 61:1–3. Jesus will say at the beginning of his ministry that this verse is fulfilled in him (Luke 4:18–19). This same dynamic is described at Jesus’s baptism where the Son is anointed with the Spirit (who descends like a dove) and the Father speaks from heaven (Matt 3:16–17). Also in Ephesians 1:3–14 our salvation is described in Trinitarian terms, where our “God and Father” is the one who predestines it and chooses us (vv. 4–5) and accomplishes it all for his glory (vv. 6, 12, 14), Christ being the Redeemer who makes forgiveness possible (v. 7) and the one “in whom” all of it happens and is happening (vv. 3, 4, 6, 9–11, 13 all having some version of “in Christ”), and the Spirit being the one who seals and guarantees our salvation (vv. 13–14). Such passages repeat the pattern of *from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit*.

The three-ness of these passages does not eliminate the oneness of the Trinity, a theme also clear in the New Testament. Jesus says emphatically, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). In the numerous greetings like Romans 1:7, we read “grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; etc.). Only slightly different is 2 Peter 1:2, “May grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge

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<sup>7</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 124.

of God and of Jesus our Lord.” Joining the Father and Son in this way, calling the Father “God” and the Son “Lord” (*kurios*, equivalent to the Old Testament *Yahweh*) reveals the Church’s perspective. Leon Morris says this reflexive way in which the New Testament joins the Father and Son in these greetings tells us much about the deity of Christ and its understanding of the Godhead.<sup>8</sup> The Father and Son are equally divine and distinct even as they are “one” (John 10:30).

In John’s gospel and letters, we get a profound picture of the persons of the Trinity and their interrelationships. First is the idea of the Father being the *Father* to Christ the *Son*. This is not just a truth connected to the Incarnation, but John shows us there is something eternal about it. In his prologue, we learn of Jesus as “the Word” who is God but also “with God” (John 1:1–3). But then in 1:18 he writes, “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.” “Only God” is not the best translation of this phrase, *μονογενῆς θεός*, *monogenēs theos*. Better is the CSB here: “No one has ever seen God. The one and only Son, who is himself God and is at the Father’s side—he has revealed him.” *Monogenēs* is “only begotten” in NASB and KJV. We know in John 1:18 the idea of “begetting” is in view because of 1:12–13, which speaks of Christians being “born” (*gennaō*) of God and not through human means. Thus, the adjective in 1:18 seems to have “only begotten” in view and not simply “only.”<sup>9</sup> A similar understanding of Christ is in 1 John 5:18, “We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him.” Christ is “he was born of God,” but the verb is actually a perfect verb, which speaks to a past event with ongoing results (at least, in this case it does). Letham captures the nuance well: “The reference again is to eternity, the relation between the Father and the Son, and

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<sup>8</sup> Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1988), 54.

<sup>9</sup> On these passages see Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 115–16.

the connection is again to regeneration.”<sup>10</sup> With such passages we are trafficking in the complicated waters of the Son of God being “eternally begotten” of the Father. We will say more on this below.

Second, in John we also read of the mutual indwelling of the persons of the Trinity: “The Father who dwells in me does his works” (14:10); “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves” (John 14:11). And when the Spirit is sent, he is said to be “with you forever,” but the Spirit is also the means by which Christ will dwell in us: “you in me, and I in you” (John 14:18). The Spirit’s indwelling us is even said to be the Father’s indwelling us: “We [Jesus and the Father] will come to him and make our home with him” (14:23). Jesus is pointing to the mysterious way that the Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Father, the Father and Son are in the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and Son.

Third, the mutual glorification of the persons of the Trinity comes out in John vividly: The Father works to glorify the Son (8:54; 11:4; 16:14; 17:1), the Son works to glorify the Father (12:28; 13:32; 14:13; 17:1, 4), and the Spirit works to glorify the Son (16:14).

Fourth, the mutual love of the persons of the Trinity is evident also: The Father loves the Son (John 3:35; 5:20; 10:17), the Son loves the Father (John 14:31).

Fifth, John speaks of the sendings—the sending of the Son by the Father, the sending of the Spirit by the Father and Son. Jesus describes himself as “sent” by the Father (John 5:36; 20:21; cf. 1 John 4:14), an idea that implies an eternal pre-existence of Christ with the Father. Then in John 15:26 Jesus says, “When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.” And then later in the Upper Room, Jesus says, “It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you.” (John 16:7). There is a

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<sup>10</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 117.

clear reference to the Pentecost sending of the Spirit in these passages: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing.” (Acts 2:33). But there is something more here as well. The Spirit is not said in John 15:26 to be the one who “*will proceed* from the Father” (future tense), but the one who “proceeds from the Father” (present tense). “The Spirit’s sending at Pentecost, in which the Son is the sender, is distinct from the Spirit’s procession, which is continuous and for which the Father is the spirator.”<sup>11</sup> D. A. Carson calls it “eminently defensible” to see here a defense of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed idea of the Spirit proceeding from the Father and thus the Son.<sup>12</sup> The reason to say this is that in this case the relationship of the persons of the Trinity in salvation history is revealing something of the eternal relationship of the persons. On this Letham writes, “The sendings of the Son and the Spirit by the Father in human history (the missions) are distinguishable from their eternal antecedent relations (the processions). Yet, at the same time, the missions reflect the processions.”<sup>13</sup> And further, “This highlights the connection between the economic Trinity and the immanent Trinity, concepts for our benefit, since there can be only one Trinity.”<sup>14</sup>

## **Development of the Doctrine from AD 200–600**

From the earliest history of Christianity, it was believed that our God was one God in three persons, though it was not fully articulated how precisely this was true. The use of “persons” to describe God would not come until centuries after the New

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<sup>11</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 119.

<sup>12</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 529.

<sup>13</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 121.

<sup>14</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 122.

Testament, but you can see even in Tertullian’s “Rule of Faith” from around AD 200 a firm belief that our one God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.<sup>15</sup> As is often the case, it was attacks against the Bible’s teaching on the Trinity that led to more precise understanding and formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. These began in the third century (AD 200s) and primarily developed along two fronts. On one side came attacks against God as three persons by those who wanted to protect at all costs the teaching that God was *one God*. Such teaching is often labelled “Sabellianism” for the Egyptian Sabellius Pentapolitanus whose main years of influence were around AD 215. He was followed by others, including the Michael Servetus who lived in Geneva during the time of Calvin and would be executed for his heresy. Sabellian thinkers “stated the distinction between persons [in the Trinity] as a purely rational distinction, as if there were only one person, which according to its various effects is said to be in the manner of the Father, or the manner of Son, or the manner of Spirit.”<sup>16</sup> It is also called “modalism,” meaning that the One being God would appear in various “modes” in salvation history.

A second common attack tended to focus on Christ himself and diminished his deity to such an extent that he was no longer equal to the Father. These attacks are often labelled “Arianism” after a North African presbyter named Arius (ca. 256–336). He argued that Christ *became* the Son and was a creature like other creatures, only more esteemed. His famous slogan regarding Christ was, “There was when he was not.” Throughout history there have been many variations on this idea that Christ is lesser than the Father, but Arianism of these early centuries proved a particularly sticky heresy. Just when it seemed it was defeated, it would rise up in a different form by a new proponent.

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<sup>15</sup> We looked at Tertullian’s “Rule of Faith” in the “Introduction” above.

<sup>16</sup> Richard A. Muller, *The Triunity of God*, vol. 4 of *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2003), 190.

To get some sense of how the doctrine of the Trinity developed in the early church, I will now trace the Trinitarian ideas found in some of the most important early documents of the church.

## **The Apostles Creed (ca. AD 200s)**

The exact origins of what we call “the Apostles Creed” are not known. It was quoted in a letter of Ambrose of Milan to Rome that he wrote in AD 389, but guesses are that it dates to the AD 200s.<sup>17</sup> It is a trinitarian document, but its statements are fairly simple about each person of the Trinity: “I believe in God the Father Almighty....And in Jesus Christ His Only Son our Lord....I believe in the Holy Spirit.” The Father is identified as “Maker of heaven and earth,” the Son is described by retelling the biography of his incarnation (including his ascension and future return). Nothing about Christ’s pre-existence is included, but of course, to call him “His only Son our Lord” is actually to communicate volumes about his deity. Still, more needed to be said and would be said in future documents of the church.

## **The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) and The Nicene Creed**

Emperor Constantine was famously converted to Christ and desired to see his empire adopt Christian values. Battles over the nature of Christ between defenders of Arius and the orthodox were making this difficult, so he called for a gathering of 318 bishops in Nicaea to settle the dispute. Present at the ecumenical council but not a voting bishop was one of the heroes of Trinitarian orthodoxy, the 27-year-old Athanasius, who would experience profound suffering for his defense of the faith (also *the* St. Nicholas!). Ultimately the biblical Trinitarianism of the North African Alexander, Athanasius, and others won the day. The document they created was The Nicene

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<sup>17</sup> Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative*, 89.

Creed. In its original form it presented a strong affirmation of Christ's deity. He was said to be "Son of God, begotten of the Father, Light of Light, very God of very God...being of one substance with the Father." The idea he was "one substance with the Father" (or con-substantial) was enormously important. He was not a different thing from the Father but was the very same thing. The Creed affirmed belief in "the Holy Ghost" but offered no description of the third person of the Trinity. It added an "anathema" against Arians at the end: "And those who say: there was a time when he was not; and: he was not before he was made; and: he was made out of nothing, or out of another substance or thing, or the Son of God is created, or changeable, or alterable; they are condemned by the holy catholic and apostolic Church."<sup>18</sup> Being an ecumenical council (Eastern and Western bishops present) and possessing the backing of the emperor, this Creed was rightly of massive historical importance.

### **The Council of Constantinople (AD 381) and the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed**

The scourge of Arianism was not wiped out by the Council of Nicaea, and so a few decades later another ecumenical council was called by Emperor Theodosius I. The bishops present once again united against the Arianism of their day, an Arianism in some ways more formidable because it was defended by abler minds than Arius himself. To these "rationalists," it was simply not possible for someone to be a Father and another to be a Son without there being some beginning point when the Father *became* a Father and the Son *became* a Son. For these Arians, the Son therefore had to be "subordinate" to the Father.<sup>19</sup> At the council, three who are called the Cappadocian Fathers were the heroic defenders of orthodoxy:

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<sup>18</sup> Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3 (NY: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907).

<sup>19</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 98–99.

Basil the Great (330–379), Basil's younger brother Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329–389). They said that the Sonship of the Son and the Fatherhood of the Father were both eternal, had no beginning, and did not reflect a difference of deity or status but simply an ordering within the oneness of the Trinity. The result of the ecumenical council was the “Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed” or the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed,” because it took the original Nicene Creed and modified it (in the city of Constantinople, where the council was held). It modified the Nicene Creed of 325 in a few significant ways. The original “Son of God, begotten of the Father” became “the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds.” This was a defense of the “eternal generation” of the Son. Then “the Holy Ghost” was expanded to become, “the Holy Ghost, who is Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets.”<sup>20</sup> This was to connect the deity of the Spirit to that of the Father, so that the Spirit would not be minimized.

### **Augustine’s (354–430) *De Trinitate* (“On the Trinity”)**

Because of its importance in the Western Church and to the cause of Trinitarianism, it is worth noting Augustine’s great work, *De Trinitate*. Herman Bavinck calls it “the most profound exposition of this dogma ever written.”<sup>21</sup> His work intended to demonstrate that “the Trinity is the one and only and true God, and also how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are rightly said, believed, understood, to be of one and the same substance or essence” (I.2.4). He defended that Christ as “the Son of God...is equal to God the Father in nature,” but that in his redemptive work he became less in a “fashion”: “In like manner, in the form of God He made man; in

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<sup>20</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3.

<sup>21</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:287.

the form of a servant He was made man.” (I.7.14). The Son he said was con-substantial with the Father, and his being sent has to do with his personal properties and not because he possessed an inferior “substance”:

But if the Son is said to be sent by the Father on this account, that the one is the Father, and the other the Son, this does not in any manner hinder us from believing the Son to be equal, and consubstantial, and co-eternal with the Father, and yet to have been sent as Son by the Father. Not because the one is greater, the other less; but because the one is Father, the other Son; the one begetter, the other begotten; the one, He from whom He is who is sent; the other, He who is from Him who sends.<sup>22</sup> For the Son is from the Father, not the Father from the Son. Augustine, *De Trinitate* (IV.20.27)

Further, he spoke to a right understanding of the full deity of each person of the Trinity: “For we say that in this Trinity two or three persons are not anything greater than one of them (VIII.1.2); “So also the Trinity itself is as great as each several person therein.” (VIII.1.2). Reacting to the East which saw the deity of the Godhead as flowing out of the Father to the Son and Spirit. Augustine started with the divinity of the whole Trinity itself: “He who is sent is not therefore less than He who sends because the one sent, the other was sent; since the Trinity, which is in all things equal, being also equally in its own nature unchangeable, and invisible, and everywhere present, works indivisibly” (XV.3.5).

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<sup>22</sup> I.e., the Father is being described first and then the Son. In the first phrase (“He from whom He is who is sent”), the Son is described as “He...who is sent,” and the Father is “He from whom [the Son] is.” In the second phrase (“He who is from Him who sends”), the Father is “Him who sends,” and the Son is described as “He who is from Him.”

## The Athanasian Creed (AD 500s)

The Athanasian Creed is one of the great achievements of the early church, but amazingly, its authorship is unknown. It takes the name of the great defender of the Trinity, Athanasius, but its doctrine is too late to be by his hand. Schaff notes that a commentary on the creed was written in about AD 570, so it at least predates this year.<sup>23</sup> In terms of its Trinitarian doctrine it is unsurpassed for an early creed, and it also explores the natures of Christ (two natures in one person). Finally, it does all of this in a poetic and rhetorically powerful manner. I will provide a few excerpts here:

We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence. For there is one Person of the Father; another of the Son; and another of the Holy Ghost.

In this first excerpt we can see the development of the Trinity. By this point there was a clear understanding of words like “Person” and “Essence.” The Trinity was said to be three “Persons” but having only one “Essence.” The full *God-ness* of each “Person” was affirmed but also a sense that the Godhead had three identifiable “Persons.” It was not three “People,” which would be tri-theism, but three “Persons.”

But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, is all one; the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is; such is the Son; and such is the Holy Ghost. The Father uncreated; the Son uncreated; and the Holy Ghost uncreated. The Father unlimited; the Son unlimited; and the Holy Ghost unlimited. The Father eternal; the Son eternal; and the Holy Ghost eternal. And yet they are not three eternal; but one eternal. As also there are not three uncreated; nor

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<sup>23</sup> Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:689.

three infinites, but one uncreated; and one infinite. So likewise the Father is Almighty; the Son Almighty; and the Holy Ghost Almighty. And yet they are not three Almighties; but one Almighty. So the Father is God; the Son is God; and the Holy Ghost is God. And yet they are not three Gods; but one God. So likewise the Father is Lord; the Son Lord; and the Holy Ghost Lord. And yet not three Lords; but one Lord. For like as we are compelled by the Christian verity; to acknowledge every Person by himself to be God and Lord; So are we forbidden by the catholic religion; to say, There are three Gods, or three Lords.

In this second excerpt, the full equality of each Person is affirmed. Attributes fitting for the Father are also said to be true of the Son and the Spirit. They are each so fully divine that the writers believed “every Person by himself to be God and Lord.” An echo of Augustine is here as it affirms that to have one Person of the Trinity is to have the entirety of God.

The Father is made of none; neither created, nor begotten. The Son is of the Father alone; not made, nor created; but begotten. The Holy Ghost is of the Father and of the Son; neither made, nor created, nor begotten; but proceeding. So there is one Father, not three Fathers; one Son, not three Sons; one Holy Ghost, not three Holy Ghosts.

In this third excerpt the distinctiveness of each Person of the Trinity is affirmed. They are each God, but they are not identical as “Persons” (though they are identical in their divine essence). What makes the Father the *Father*? The answer is that he is not “begotten.” What makes the Son the *Son*? The answer is that he is “begotten”—not “made” or “created” as Arians would believe, but uniquely “begotten” of the Father as we saw above in John 1:18 and 1 John 5:18 (cf. Ps 2:7). What makes the Spirit the *Spirit*? It is the fact he is “proceeding” from the Father and Son. These sentences capture the idea of what is called “generation” in the Son and

“spiration” in the Spirit. Note that this is said without any trace of subordination in the Son or lessening of the full eternal deity of the Son and Spirit. The next excerpt makes this even clearer.

And in this Trinity none is before, or after another; none is greater, or less than another. But the whole three Persons are coeternal, and coequal. So that in all things, as aforesaid; the Unity in Trinity, and the Trinity in Unity, is to be worshipped. He therefore that will be saved, let him thus think of the Trinity.

This final excerpt reminds us that within the Trinity the Father is not greater than the Son or Spirit, even though he is Father. Any priority we assign to the Father is only in terms of the relations of each person. He is “unbegotten” where the Son is “begotten” of the Father. This defines their relationship but does not imply a lesser status of the Son: “None is before, or after another; none is greater, or lesser than another.”

## **The Council of Toledo and the *Filioque* Clause (AD 589)**

With the Athanasian Creed it is clear that the theology of the church had developed significantly since the initial Nicene Creed. Therefore, it is not surprising that a final change was made to the Nicene Creed by the Western Church. At the Council of Toledo (Spain), a change was made to the section on the Holy Spirit. Now the Spirit is said to be the one “who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*” (*filioque* in Latin). The reason for the addition was to further protect the full deity of the Son. Too much could possibly be made of the language that the Spirit “proceeds” from the Father *only*, as if deity comes from the Father to the Son and Spirit. This addition to the creed was later to be considered official doctrine by the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 133.

In some ways, the idea is fairly straightforward. We saw above from John's gospel that Jesus "sends" the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7) and he is also "proceeding" from the Father (John 15:26). The earthly fulfillment of this comes in Acts 2, the event which Peter explains as Christ receiving "from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit," which he then "poured out" as they were "seeing and hearing" (Acts 2:33). These two passages make it clear that in some way the Spirit truly did come from the Son *and also* the Father, and at the Council of Toledo it was affirmed that the Spirit's procession was eternally from the Father and Son. The Eastern Church (Eastern Orthodox Church) felt the *filioque* phrase was improper because it was added without an *ecumenical* council but also because it disrupted a historic understanding of the Trinity and especially the Father's place in it. To them "the Father is the guarantor of unity in the Godhead, the source, and the cause of the Son and the Spirit. Thus, the Spirit proceeds from the Father."<sup>25</sup> The issue in the West had to do with the Son and affirming his rightful place, an issue inspired partly by the Arian threat that continued to dog the Western church.<sup>26</sup>

The procession of the Spirit from both the Father and the Son was the final step in our tracing of the development of the Trinity. Now we are ready to summarize the key truths we have observed.

## Summary of the Doctrine of the Trinity

Based on the Bible's teaching and the Church's reflection, we can say the following about the Trinity:

***First, there is one God (one divine essence or being).*** John Frame says simply, "God is One."<sup>27</sup> Louis Berkhof says, "There is

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<sup>25</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 135.

<sup>26</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 135.

<sup>27</sup> John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 423.

in the Divine Being but one indivisible essence (*ousia, essentia*).”<sup>28</sup> And Letham says similarly that God is “one indivisible being (essence, from *esse*, ‘to be’).”<sup>29</sup>

**Second, this one God is also three Persons.** Note that it does not say “three People” as if we worship three gods. It is rather that God is “three *Persons*.” John Frame simply says, “God is Three,”<sup>30</sup> and Louis Berkhof writes, “In this one Divine Being there are three Persons or individual subsistences, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>31</sup>

**Third, the three Persons are each fully God.** Note that it does not say that “the three Persons combined are the full God,” but that, “the three Persons are *each* fully God.”<sup>32</sup> Louis Berkhof says, “The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons.”<sup>33</sup> Robert Letham says similarly, “Each person of the Trinity, when considered in himself, is 100 percent God without remainder. The whole God is in each person, and also each person is the whole God... All the divine attributes are possessed comprehensively by all three persons. Each person of the Trinity, when considered in himself, is totally and comprehensively God, and is the whole God.”<sup>34</sup> This is a crucial idea. Here we are affirming that the Trinity cannot be cut up into pieces like a pie. Everywhere you touch the pie of the Trinity, you touch all three persons of the Trinity. The whole pie is the Father, the whole pie is the Son, the whole pie is the Holy Spirit. The Father and the Son and the Spirit are not *similar*, because each has a divine essence. They are the *same divine essence*. It is for this reason that no one person of the Trinity is in any way subordinate to the others. The Son has the same essence as the Father and therefore cannot be

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<sup>28</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 87.

<sup>29</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 105.

<sup>30</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 423.

<sup>31</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 87.

<sup>32</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 423.

<sup>33</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 106–7.

essentially subordinate to the Father. The Spirit has the same essence as the Father and the Son, and so he cannot be subordinate in any way to the Father or the Son. Again Letham: “None of them occupies space, so to speak, that the others do not.”<sup>35</sup> (Letham, 108).

***Fourth, the Persons of the Trinity are distinct and are ordered in a particular way.*** John Frame says, “Each of the persons is distinct from the others,”<sup>36</sup> and Louis Berkhof says, “The subsistence and operation of the three persons in the divine Being is marked by a certain definite order.”<sup>37</sup> Note that the issue here is “subsistence” and “operation” and not “essence.” In the *essence* of the Divine Being, there is total equality of majesty. But when we are speaking of the *persons* of the Divine Being and their relationship to one another, there is “a certain definite order.” Berkhof says on this order,

The Father is first, the Son second, and the Holy Spirit third. It need hardly be said that this order does not pertain to any priority of time or of essential dignity, but only to the logical order of derivation. The Father is neither begotten by, nor proceeds from any other person; the Son is eternally begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son from all eternity.

Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*<sup>38</sup>

He says that this order is even seen in the prepositions commonly used of each person of the Trinity, where all things are “out of” (*ek*) the Father, “through” (*dia*) the Son, and “in” (*en*) the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup> Robert Letham affirms the same, that this “order” is not “hierarchical”: “The order—from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit—is not hierarchical, nor is it patterned after human

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<sup>35</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 108.

<sup>36</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 423.

<sup>37</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 88–89.

<sup>39</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 89.

relationships. Rather, it is an order of equals, in the identity of the indivisible Trinity.”<sup>40</sup>

Though distinguishable, the persons of the Trinity are inseparable and indivisible. “Since God is one indivisible being, in all his works all three persons operate inseparably,” but “as the three are eternally distinct, each work is specifically attributed—or, *appropriated*—to one of them.”<sup>41</sup> We see this in creation, “God created” (Gen 1:1), the Spirit was hovering (Gen 1:2), and God *said*, “Let there be” (Gen 1:3, etc.). In redemption, God sends the Son, the Son performs his redemptive actions, and he does so by the empowering of the Spirit (John 3:16; Luke 1:34–35; Heb 9:14). Our access to God is also a trinitarian action (Eph 2:18). But each person of the Trinity is identifiable in these united actions. Only the Son is incarnated, for instance. But once again, they are indivisible. There is one “will” in the Godhead, not three.<sup>42</sup>

***Fifth, the three Persons are eternally Father, Son, and Spirit.*** John Frame says, “The three are related to one another eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”<sup>43</sup> This never began to be true but was always true. The Father was always the Father, the Son always the Son, the Spirit always the Spirit. We can speak of this also as the “personal attributes by which the three persons are distinguished.”<sup>44</sup> This refers to the persons of the Trinity in themselves and not as they relate to creation and redemption. In other words, this was true in eternity past, ages before creation existed. Berkhof writes, “Generation is an act of the Father only; filiation belongs to the Son exclusively; and procession can only be ascribed to the Holy Spirit.”<sup>45</sup> John Calvin reflects on this truth as he looks at the Son in particular:

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<sup>40</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 121.

<sup>41</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 109–10.

<sup>42</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 153.

<sup>43</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 423.

<sup>44</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 89.

<sup>45</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 89.

Therefore we say that deity in an absolute sense exists of itself; whence likewise we confess that the Son since he is God, exists of himself, but not in respect of his Person; indeed, since he is the Son, we say that he exists from the Father. Thus his essence is without beginning; while the beginning of his person is God himself.

John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*<sup>46</sup>

***Sixth, though we can know some things about the Trinity there remains in the triune nature of the Godhead a glorious mystery.*** Berkhof says, “The Church confesses the Trinity to be a mystery beyond the comprehension of man.”<sup>47</sup> This might seem like a perfunctory idea, but actually it is vital that we preserve this. Otherwise, we will be inclined to think that the persons and inter-relations of the persons of the Trinity should be explainable from the Bible just like more straightforward issues like church polity or elements of corporate worship or common patterns for prayer. A resistance to the mysterious nature of the Trinity will push us in the direction of the social trinity, the idea that really there are three *people* in the Trinity and their tight relationship to each other is what gives them the oneness we observe. Instead, we need to revere the mystery that the church has professed for almost two thousand years. Though we cannot explain it fully, we affirm heartily what we read in the Athanasian Creed. Letham speaks to his transcendence in the Trinity: “Eternal generation reflects the incomprehensibility of God and is a transcendent mystery, beyond the grasp of our minds. It is a matter of faith.”<sup>48</sup> And John Frame says also, “Theological humility is in order. God has given us a glimpse of his inner life, not a map or a treatise.”<sup>49</sup> Once again we

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<sup>46</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, I.13.25.

<sup>47</sup> Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 89.

<sup>48</sup> Letham, *Systematic Theology*, 119.

<sup>49</sup> Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 500.

say with the hymn writer, “God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!”<sup>50</sup>  
I will close with a quotation from Herman Bavinck:

Every blessing, both spiritual and material, comes to us from the triune God. In that name we are baptized; that name sums up our confession; that name is the source of all the blessings that come down to us; to that name we will forever bring thanksgiving and honor; in that name we find rest for our souls and peace for our conscience. Christians have a God above them, before them, and within them. Our salvation, both in this life and in the life to come, is bound up with the doctrine of the Trinity.

Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Reginald Heber, “Holy, Holy, Holy” (1826).

<sup>51</sup> Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, 2:334.