

CHAPTER 1

TRINITY: GOD IS

And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven [God the Father] said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased."

MATTHEW 3:16–17

Deep longings pervade the human heart.

We long for selfless, trustworthy, unending love from someone we can trust to be faithful and helpful.

We long for unity within the great diversity of humanity, some means by which we can live in peace and oneness that benefits each of us.

We long for communication—from face-to-face conversations to the proliferation of modern technology created for the purpose of letting us know others and be known by them—and have a seemingly insatiable passion to speak and be spoken to.

We long for community, significant and earnest relationships with others, so that we are part of a people devoted to something larger and greater than our individual lives.

We long for humility, where people pour themselves out unreservedly for the benefit and well-being of others.

We long for peace, harmony, and safe altruism for others and ourselves so that abuse, cruelty, misery, and the painful tears they cause could stop.

We long for a selfless common good, a world in which everyone does what is best for all and is not so viciously and exclusively devoted to self-interest and tribal concerns.

Why? Why do we have these persistent deep longings that occasionally compel us to action and often leave us frustrated or disappointed? From where do they emanate, and how can they be satisfied?

Our longings for love, unity in diversity, communication, community, humility, peace, and selflessness are in fact—by design—longings for the Trinitarian God of the Bible and a world that is a reflection of the Trinity. Tragically, human desires corrupted by sin turn in on themselves; rather than finding satisfaction in God, longings become lusts—bottomless pits of selfish desire, never quite satisfied, inevitably leading to despair. Because we are made in the image of the triune God to reflect his glory, we will never stop longing; yet, our sin-stained longings distort that reflection.

The Trinity is the first community and the ideal for all communities. That community alone has not been stained by the selfishness of sin. Therefore, in the diversity of God the Father, Son, and Spirit is perfect unity as one God that communicates truthfully, loves unreservedly, lives connectedly, serves humbly, interacts peaceably, and serves selflessly. In a word, the Trinity is the ideal community in every way. Or, to say it another way, God is a Friend and has Friends.

WHAT IS THE TRINITY?

God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. One God. Three persons. While the word *Trinity* does not appear in Scripture, this One-who-is-Three concept very clearly does. The word *Trinity* is used as a shorthand way of explaining a great deal of biblical truth. It was first used by the church father Tertullian (AD 155–220). To say that God exists as a Trinity does not mean that there are three Gods, or that one God merely manifests himself as either Father, Son, or Holy Spirit on various occasions.

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1647) summarizes the doctrine by saying, “In the unity of the Godhead there be three persons, of one substance, power, and eternity: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.”

For our purposes, we will use the following definition: *The Trinity is one God who eternally exists as three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—who are each fully and equally God in eternal relation with each other.*

To clarify, to say that each member of the Trinity is a “person” does not mean that God the Father or God the Spirit became human beings. Rather, it means that each member of the Trinity thinks, acts, feels, speaks, and relates because they are persons and not impersonal forces. Further, each member of the Trinity is equally God, which means that they share all the divine attributes, such as eternity, omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence.

The doctrine of the Trinity brings together three equally essential biblical truths without denying or diminishing any.

First, there is only one true God. The Old Testament contains a number of clear statements that there is only one God.¹ Likewise, the New Testament clearly states that there is only one God.² Together, the unending thunderous chorus of Scripture from beginning to end is that there is only one God.

Scripture also clearly teaches that there is no one like God.³ Scripture teaches that any claim to be like God is a satanic lie.⁴ Practically, this means that in addition to there being only one Trinity and no other, there is no other God who is eternally existent and uncreated, all-powerful, all-knowing, or all-present.

The biblical emphasis on the existence of only one true God raises

¹Gen. 1:1; Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4–5; 32:39; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 7:22; 22:32; 1 Kings 8:59–60; 2 Chron. 15:3; Ps. 86:8–10; Isa. 37:20; 43:10; 44:6–8; 45:5, 14, 21–22; 46:9; Jer. 10:10.

²John 5:44; 17:3; Rom. 3:30; 16:27; 1 Cor. 8:4–6; Gal. 3:20; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 1:17; 2:5; 1 Thess. 1:9; James 2:19; Jude 25; 1 John 5:20–21.

³Ex. 8:10; 9:14; 15:11; 2 Sam. 7:22; 1 Kings 8:23; 1 Chron. 17:20; Ps. 86:8; Isa. 40:18, 25; 44:7; 46:5, 9; Jer. 10:6–7; Mic. 7:18.

⁴Gen. 3:5; Isa. 14:14; John 8:44.

the question of what is to be made of other “gods” that are worshiped by people in various religions in the days of the Bible and in our present day. The Bible states that these “gods” are very powerful fallen angels who rebelled against God. They hate Jesus and seek worshipers, whom they reward if they serve them well. They perform powerful signs, wonders, and miracles that can deceive people into thinking they are equal with God.⁵ Practically, this means that there are incredibly powerful demons—with names such as Baal, Chemosh, Molech, Brahman, Allah, Mother Earth, Mammon (money), and Aphrodite (sex)—that are wrongly worshiped by multitudes as gods.

From the very beginning the people of God have lived with constant pressure to accept other religions and “gods” as equally worthy of worship as the God of the Bible. Too many times people are like Solomon and divide their devotion between God and the “gods.”⁶ To help embolden us, the Bible presents stirring stories of faithful followers like Shadrach, Meshach, Abednego, and Daniel who would not compromise and who never wavered in their devotion to one God even in the face of great opposition and persecution.⁷

Second, the Father, Son, and Spirit are equally declared throughout Scripture to be God. There are many Scriptures that clearly and emphatically declare the Father to be God.⁸ In the history of the Christian church and all the cults and religions that have erred from biblical truth, there has never been any noteworthy false teaching that has denied the deity of God the Father because it is so obviously clear throughout the entirety of Scripture.

Jesus is also repeatedly declared to be God throughout the Scriptures by both others⁹ and himself, without apology or correction.¹⁰ It is worth noting that Jesus was ultimately put to death for declaring himself to be

⁵Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37; 1 Cor. 10:20; Gal. 4:8.

⁶1 Kings 11. This pattern is repeated countless times in Scripture.

⁷Daniel 3; 7.

⁸John 6:27; 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:6; 2 Cor. 1:3; Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3.

⁹Matt. 28:9; John 1:1–4, 14; 5:17–18; 8:58; 10:30–38; 12:37–41; cf. Isa. 6:9–11; 20:28–29; Acts 20:28; Rom. 1:3–4; 9:5; 1 Cor. 8:4–6; Gal. 4:4; Phil. 2:10–11; Col. 1:16–17; 2:8–9; 1 Tim. 6:15; Titus 2:13; Heb. 1:8; 1 John 5:20; Rev. 1:8, 17–18; 17:14; 19:16; 22:13–16.

¹⁰Matt. 26:63–65; John 5:17–23; 8:58–59; 10:30–39; 19:7.

God, a declaration that if untrue would have been a violation of the first commandment and a blasphemous sin.¹¹

In addition to the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit is clearly called God throughout the Scriptures. In the Old Testament we see he possesses the attributes of God, which reveals his divinity; he is creator,¹² eternal,¹³ omnipotent or all-powerful,¹⁴ omniscient or all-knowing,¹⁵ and omnipresent.¹⁶ In the New Testament, he is also clearly declared God.¹⁷

Third, though one God, the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons. The Father and Son are two persons in frequent salutations of letters in the New Testament,¹⁸ as well as in other Scriptures.¹⁹ Scripture is also clear that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are not the same person.²⁰ Likewise, the Father is not the Holy Spirit.²¹ Jesus was repeatedly clear that he and the Father are distinct persons but one God, saying, “I and the Father are one”²² and “we are one.”²³ Furthermore, the Holy Spirit is not merely an impersonal force but a person who can be grieved,²⁴ resisted,²⁵ and insulted.²⁶ The personhood of the Holy Spirit explains why Jesus speaks of him as a personal “he” and not an impersonal “it.”²⁷

WHAT IS THE TRINITARIAN GOD OF THE BIBLE LIKE?

Perhaps the best-known statement about the Trinitarian God of the Bible is found in 1 John 4:8, which simply states, “God is love.” When plumbed to its depths, this definition of God is unprecedented.

¹¹Matt. 26:64–66; Mark 14:62–64; John 8:58–59; 10:30–31.

¹²Gen. 1:2; Ps. 104:30.

¹³Heb. 9:14.

¹⁴Mic. 3:8; see also Acts 1:8; Rom. 15:13, 19.

¹⁵Isa. 40:13–14; see also 1 Cor. 2:10.

¹⁶Ps. 139:7.

¹⁷Acts 5:3–4; see also John 14:16; 2 Cor. 3:16–18.

¹⁸Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; 6:23; Phil. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1–2; 1 Tim. 1:1–2; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philem. 3; James 1:1; 2 Pet. 1:2; 2 John 3.

¹⁹John 3:17; 5:31–32; 8:16–18; 11:41–42; 12:28; 14:31; 17:23–26; Gal. 4:4; 1 John 4:10.

²⁰Luke 3:22; John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1.

²¹John 14:15, 15:26; Rom. 8:11, 26–27; 2 Cor. 1:3–4; Gal. 1:1.

²²John 10:30.

²³John 17:11.

²⁴Eph. 4:30.

²⁵Acts 7:51.

²⁶Heb. 10:29.

²⁷John 14:17, 26; 16:7–14.

Love is spoken of roughly eight hundred times throughout the totality of Scripture. In stating that “God is love,” the Bible also reveals that the Trinitarian God of the Bible is simultaneously the definition, example, and source of true love.

In other words, to declare that God is love is to confess that God is Trinitarian. In the very nature of God there is a continuous outpouring of love, communication, and oneness because God is a relational community of love. For example, during his earthly life, Jesus frequently spoke about the deep love between him and God the Father:

- The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.²⁸
- The Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.²⁹
- I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.³⁰

In the Old Testament the most sacred name for God is *Yahweh*. *Yahweh* is a distinctly proper name for the God of the Bible. Because it is sacred, it is never used to refer to any pagan gods; neither is it used in regard to any human. It is reserved solely for the one true God alone. The name *Yahweh* appears some 6,823 times in the Old Testament, as he is the focus and hero of the Scriptures. The third commandment warns us not to use his name in vain or thoughtlessly.³¹ The name of *Yahweh* is so sacred that Leviticus 24:16 commanded that anyone who used it in a blasphemous manner was to be put to death. The severe consequences associated with misuse of the name *Yahweh* caused God’s people such great reverence that they were exceedingly cautious to write or speak his name. Consequently, when reading the Old Testament Scriptures, Jews did not speak the name *Yahweh* but replaced it with ‘*Edonai* (“Lord,” often transliterated from the Hebrew as “Adonai”). The ancient Hebrew Bible had only consonants, so the name of God was written as YHWH.

²⁸John 3:35.

²⁹John 5:20.

³⁰John 14:31.

³¹Ex. 20:7.

When your translation has the word “LORD,” in all capital letters, you know this is the personal name of God, YHWH.

Sometime between AD 600 and AD 900 the rabbis put dots and dashes around the ancient consonants so people would be able to see the vowels. When they came to the divine name YHWH, they added vowels from ‘Edonai. This was transliterated as JeHoWaH. There is nothing wrong with the name Jehovah, but we are sure it is not the name God gave Moses and his people.³²

In light of the unprecedented power, might, and glory of Yahweh, it is also amazing to consider how he chose to reveal himself to his people in Exodus 34:6–7 (this is the most quoted passage in the Bible by the Bible):

The LORD, the LORD, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty.

This description of the entire Trinity is so packed that we must consider each truth it reveals.

- 1) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is a person with the name “LORD.” In the Old Testament, God’s people were surrounded by the Assyrians, Babylonians, Phoenicians, Philistines, and other nations that each had gods. These false gods ruled over a people and a place but did not rule over all people and all places as the Lord of the Bible does. The same can be said of the New Testament, wherein God’s people were also in a world “full of idols,”³³ and even our own day, when spirituality is popular but very few spiritual people know the Lord who rules over all spirits and spiritualities.
- 2) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, begins by telling Moses and us that he is a person. He has a name. He wants to relate. This is very different from the contemporary spirituality of Oprah, Hollywood Buddhism, and Star Wars, where there is only “the Force” flowing through everything.

³²Ex. 3:14.

³³Acts 17:16.

- 3) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is compassionate to hurting and suffering people. He sees our lives, knows our frailty, and responds with compassion.
- 4) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is helpful. Not only does God rule over us and have compassion on us, but God is also at work for us. Our God is a servant who delights in humbly serving the people he has made; he does so not because he has to but because he longs to, as an outworking of his goodness.
- 5) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is slow to anger. Unlike the Greek and Roman gods who are irritable and volatile and take out their anger on people unless they are appeased by sacrifices or praise, the God of the Bible has a long wick. Yahweh can be angered but only after being provoked by sinners determined to arouse his anger through ongoing unrepentant sin and rebellion in abuse of his patience.
- 6) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is lovingly faithful, shown by the wonderfully powerful Hebrew word *hesed*. It speaks of the constant, passionate, overflowing, relentlessly pursuing, extravagant, limitless, trustworthy, and merciful love of our God. It speaks of his caring provision coming from his strong mercy.
- 7) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is dependable and truthful. He never fails and he never lies. As a result, he alone is fully worthy of faith, trust, and devotion, because he alone will always keep his promises.
- 8) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is forgiving. God is keenly aware of our sin. Yet, in his loving mercy he is willing and able to forgive repentant sinners.
- 9) Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is just. In the end, no one who lives in sin and rejects his offer of loving relationship through forgiven sin will have any excuse. God is altogether holy and good, and because he is just, he cannot and will not excuse or overlook sin that is not repented of to him in relationship with him.

This revelation of God takes on extraordinary depth because the Lord gave it in the context of Israel's horrific betrayal and sin when they worshiped the golden calf.³⁴ Yahweh, the Trinitarian God of the Bible, is a person who is compassionate, helpful, slow to anger, loving, dependable,

³⁴Exodus 32.

forgiving, and just to ill-deserving sinners. He is the one we see in the God-man, Jesus Christ. John tells us he is full of grace and truth.³⁵ This is an unmistakable allusion to Exodus 34:6–7. John is saying that Jesus Christ is full of Yahweh. He has come to reveal the Father.

DOES THE TRINITY APPEAR IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

The opening lines of Scripture reveal God in a most surprising way:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.³⁶

We see both God the Father *and* the Spirit of God involved in creation.

It gets even more interesting when we look at how ancient Jewish rabbis understood this passage as they did their interpretative translation of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic, the common language of the people. They did a word study of “beginning” (*re’shit* in Hebrew) and found that it is used in synonymous parallelism with the Hebrew word for “firstborn” (*bekor* in Hebrew) four times in the Old Testament.³⁷ This would mean that the two words, “beginning” and “firstborn,” can have the same meaning. Thus, their translation of the opening words of the Bible includes both words:

In the beginning, by the firstborn, God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.³⁸

In this important translation, predating the birth of Jesus Christ by approximately two hundred years, we find *three* divine persons—the Firstborn, God the Father, and the Spirit—at work in creation.

³⁵John 1:14.

³⁶Gen. 1:1–2.

³⁷Gen. 49:3; Deut. 21:17; Pss. 78:51; 105:36.

³⁸Gen. 1:1–2 in the *Targum Neofiti*.

Paul reflects this pre-Christian Trinitarian understanding when he describes the Son as “the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him.”³⁹ John also uses this idea as he teaches about Jesus Christ as the Word: “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made.”⁴⁰ It is evident that the people of God understood the fundamental concepts of the Trinity long before Jesus was born.

Just a few verses later in Genesis, God speaks of himself with plural pronouns: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.’”⁴¹ This is very unusual, happening in only three other places in the whole Bible.⁴² It makes no sense at all. But when you see the Trinitarian understanding of Genesis 1:1–2, everything falls into place.

We find the three persons referred to in many other passages. One of the most important is: “The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.”⁴³ We see the “Spirit,” the “me” who is anointed (which is Messiah Jesus), and the “LORD” (God the Father). We read that Jesus began his public ministry by reading this passage and identifying himself as the “me” of Isaiah 61:1, saying, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”⁴⁴

Here is another example of the Trinity appearing together in one Old Testament passage:

In all their affliction he [the Father] was afflicted, and the angel of his presence [the Son] saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old. But they rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit; therefore he turned to be their enemy, and himself fought against them.⁴⁵

³⁹Col. 1:15–16.

⁴⁰John 1:3.

⁴¹Gen. 1:26.

⁴²Gen. 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8. Since God refers to himself with singular pronouns thousands of times and in the plural only four times, this cannot be the royal “we.” If God were into that, he would do it consistently. This cannot refer to God and the angels either, since angels don’t create.

⁴³Isa. 61:1.

⁴⁴Luke 4:18–21.

⁴⁵Isa. 63:9–10.

The “angel of the LORD” is another puzzling phenomenon in the Old Testament, but it makes total sense when you realize it is coming from a Trinitarian perspective.⁴⁶ In Genesis 16 “the angel of the LORD” finds Hagar and speaks both command and comfort to her. Then in verse 13 Hagar “called the name of the LORD who spoke to her,” *El Roi*, which means, “You are a God of seeing.” Is this the LORD (Yahweh) or the angel, which means “messenger” or “word,” of the LORD? The conundrum is solved when we realize this is the second person of the Trinity, the eternal Son who became incarnate in Jesus. He came down to comfort and bless Hagar at the spring. She recognized that it was God who had appeared to her in love. In the New Testament, when Jesus comes in the flesh, he again comforts and commands a troubled, non-Hebrew woman by a spring.⁴⁷ This was the Samaritan woman, and she, too, recognized that God had appeared to her.

Lastly, the Old Testament reveals in advance the divine Son who will come as the Messiah, God coming to save sinners and crush sin on behalf of God the Father:

- The LORD [Father] says to my Lord [Son]: “Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.”⁴⁸
- Draw near to me, hear this: from the beginning I have not spoken in secret, from the time it came to be I have been there. And now the Lord GOD [Father] has sent me [Son], and his Spirit.⁴⁹
- I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man [Son], and he came to the Ancient of Days [Father] and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.⁵⁰

⁴⁶See Gen. 22:11, 15; Ex. 3:2; Num. 22:22–35; Judg. 6:11–22; 13:3–21; Zech. 3:1–6.

⁴⁷John 4.

⁴⁸Ps. 110:1.

⁴⁹Isa. 48:16.

⁵⁰Dan. 7:13–14. Gen. 19:24; Ps. 45:6–7; Isa. 48:6–7; Hos. 1:6–7; Zech. 3:2; and Mal. 3:1–2 are some of the other Old Testament passages where two beings are distinguished and both are called Lord or God.

From the beginning of the Bible we see the Trinity, as well as other key doctrines, appearing in bud form. As the Scriptures continue to reveal God, what is called *progressive revelation*, the bud opens bit by bit. The Old Testament people of God looked forward to the coming of the Spirit-anointed Son who would reveal the Father more completely. Then they would understand more of this mysterious promise of the one who is God but differs from the Father, who will be anointed by the divine Spirit who is neither Father nor Son, who would fulfill the ancient promise of God to crush the head of the serpent and redeem God's people.

DOES THE TRINITY APPEAR IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

The New Testament continues and deepens the revelation of God living and active in three fully divine persons. While we get glimpses into the inner, heavenly life of Father, Son, and Spirit (what theologians call the *immanent* or *ontological Trinity*),⁵¹ Scripture focuses on the concrete and historical acts in which the Trinity is revealed as the three persons working together in creation (what theologians call the *economic Trinity*). This is helpful because it allows us to see how God always works in unison and does so in history for his glory and our good.

The New Testament reveals more of the Trinity doing the work of creation, speaking of the role of the Father,⁵² Son,⁵³ and Spirit.⁵⁴

In the Gospels we see the entire Trinity involved in Mary's conception of Jesus. Luke 1:35 says, "The angel answered her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High [Father] will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God [Jesus].'"⁵⁵

At the baptism of Jesus we witness one of the clearest pictures of the Trinity. Matthew 3:16–17 says, "When Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him,

⁵¹John 17 is the clearest example of this.

⁵²Acts 17:24; 1 Cor. 8:6.

⁵³John 1:2; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16.

⁵⁴Matt. 1:18–20; John 3:5; 1 Cor. 6:11; Titus 3:5; see also Gen. 1:2; Pss. 33:6; 104:30; Isa. 40:12–14.

⁵⁵Cf. Matt. 1:20–23.

and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a voice from heaven said, “This is my [Father] beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.” All three persons of the Trinity are present, and each one is doing something different: the Father is speaking, and the Son is being anointed and empowered by the Holy Spirit to be the Messiah and missionary.

Jesus’ Great Commission is also Trinitarian. Matthew 28:19 says, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Baptism is in one name and three persons, an unmistakably Trinitarian formula. In addition, Acts 1:7–8 says, “He [Jesus] said to them, ‘It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.’”

Another example is our salvation, in which the entire Trinity is involved, but with distinct roles, as the following verses indicate:

- In love he [the Father] predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace, with which he has blessed us in the Beloved [Jesus]. In him [Jesus] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace. . . . In him [Jesus] you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him [Jesus], were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.⁵⁶
- . . . The foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood.⁵⁷
- But when the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior [Father] appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior.⁵⁸

⁵⁶Eph. 1:4–13.

⁵⁷1 Pet. 1:2.

⁵⁸Titus 3:4–6.

God the Father devised the plan of salvation and predestined our salvation. God the Son came to die on the cross in our place for our sins. God the Holy Spirit takes up residence in Christians to regenerate them and ensure their final salvation. In this, we see the Trinity clearly at work in our salvation.

Furthermore, the entire Trinity is involved in the bestowing of our spiritual gifts: “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord [Jesus]; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God [the Father] who empowers them all in everyone.”⁵⁹

When New Testament authors sum things up they often use Trinitarian formulas:

- The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God [the Father] and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.⁶⁰
- There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord [Jesus], one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.⁶¹
- Praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life.⁶²

Finally, Jesus himself describes the Trinity: “Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. . . . And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit.”⁶³

WHAT IS THE HISTORY OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

To be a Christian is also to be a member of the universal church. The church includes everyone from every nation, culture, language, and race whose

⁵⁹1 Cor. 12:4–6; see also Eph. 4:4–6.

⁶⁰2 Cor. 13:14.

⁶¹Eph. 4:4–6.

⁶²Jude 20–21.

⁶³John 14:11, 16–17.

saving faith is in Jesus Christ. Practically, this means that a Christian is part of a tremendous heritage and does not come to the Scriptures apart from community with all of God's people from throughout all of the church's history. Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians confess together that the God of the Bible is Trinitarian.

The earliest Christians were Jewish believers. As Jews, they believed that there is only one God and that this God is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is important to note that the early Christians continued to affirm their belief in one God. But they also confessed belief in Father, Son, and Spirit. While the Apostles' Creed was not written by the twelve disciples, it is ancient, dating back to the second century. It begins, "I believe in God the Father," continues with "and in the Lord Jesus Christ," and culminates with "I believe in the Holy Spirit."

Tertullian, who converted to Christianity just before AD 200 and defended Christianity prolifically until he died around AD 220, initiated the use of the Latin words *Trinitas*, *persona*, and *substantia* (*Trinity*, *person*, and *substance* or *essence*) to express the biblical teaching that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one in divine essence but distinguished in relationship as persons within the inner life of God himself.

The three major ecumenical councils are worth noting in order to trace the development of the doctrine of the Trinity. These gatherings of church leaders discussed major theological issues for the purpose of recognizing what the church believed. One reason the councils were called was to respond to heretical teaching. The Council of Nicaea (AD 325) included some three hundred bishops, many of whom bore the scars of persecution, and was convened primarily to resolve the debate over Arianism, the false teaching that Christ was a creature, an angel who was the highest created being, but not God. The Council of Nicaea concluded that the Son was one substance (*homoousios*) with the Father. The Logos, who was incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is God himself. He is not *like* God, but *is* fully and eternally God.

With the deity of Christ officially recognized, the Council of

Constantinople (AD 381) extended the discussion to the identification of the Holy Spirit within the Godhead. Constantinople expanded the Nicene Creed, making the creed fully Trinitarian, and officially condemned Arianism. It solidified the orthodox doctrine of the full humanity of Jesus Christ. The Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) focused on the relationship of Christ's humanity to his divinity (known as *hypostatic union*) and issued the formula of Chalcedon, which became the orthodox statement on the person of Christ. *Hypostatic union* means that Jesus is one person with two natures and therefore simultaneously fully God and fully human.

The contributions of the councils to the doctrine of the Trinity can be summarized under four headings:

- 1) *One Being, Three Persons*. God is one being and has one essence. There is no God but the triune God who exists eternally in three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The whole God is in each person, and each person is the whole God. Threeness of person is not just a matter of action or revelation but of eternal being.
- 2) *Consubstantiality*. One identical divine substance is shared completely by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Any essential characteristic that belongs to one of the three is shared by the others. Each of the three divine persons is eternal, each almighty, none greater or less than another, each God, and yet together being but one God.
- 3) *Perichoresis*. This concept, also called *circumincession* or *interpenetration*, refers to the loving interrelation, partnership, or mutual dependence of the three persons. Some define this in terms of dance, leading to all sorts of strange speculations. But this is a mistake that comes from their ignorance of Greek. *Dance* looks the same in its transliteration but is spelled differently in Greek. Since all three persons are fully God and the whole God is in each of the three, it follows that the three mutually indwell or contain one another, as Jesus said: "Just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you."⁶⁴ This oneness of indwelling is not just in their functioning in this world but even more foundationally in their eternal existence as Trinity.

⁶⁴John 17:21.

- 4) *The Order of the Persons*. There is a clear order of the relations between the three fully divine persons: from the Father through the Son by the Holy Spirit.

As the doctrine of the Trinity developed, theologians struggled to explain the eternal relationships of the Trinity. What differentiates Father from Son from Spirit? Using philosophical methodology, they worked backward from God's economic working in the world to define his eternal relationships. The Bible says the Father sent the Spirit to conceive Jesus in the womb of Mary.⁶⁵ Jesus is therefore referred to as the "only begotten [*monogenes*] Son."⁶⁶ Theologians extended this begetting in history back into the eternal Trinity and posited that the Son is eternally begotten of or generated by the Father. Similarly, they went from Jesus' historical promise to his disciples, "I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father,"⁶⁷ to posit that the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father. Thus, the Nicene Creed (325) defined the Son as "begotten of the Father." The First Council of Constantinople (381) added the definition that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father." This formulation was universally accepted by the church at the Council of Chalcedon (451).

Theologians of the Western church often extended the procession phrase to read that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father *and the Son* [*filioque*]." This revision of the Nicene Creed was made at the Third Council of Toledo (589) and was officially endorsed in 1017. This insertion of a single Latin word to an ecumenical creed caused a crisis of authority that eventually led to the split between the Eastern Orthodox churches and the Western Roman church in 1054. The subtle theological points were far less responsible for the split than the ecclesiastical power struggle over the authority of the pope.

The whole attempt to define the eternal relations in the immanent or ontological Trinity seems misguided. First, God has given us no revelation

⁶⁵Luke 1:31–35; Matt. 1:20.

⁶⁶John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; Acts 13:33; Heb. 1:5; 5:5; 1 John 4:9; 5:1. The KJV uses "begotten."

⁶⁷John 15:26.

of the nature of their eternal relations. We should follow the command of the Bible: “The secret things belong to the LORD our God”⁶⁸ and refuse to speculate. Second, the Apostles’ Creed defines the Son as “begotten, not made.” The point was that something begotten was of the same substance as the one who does the begetting. But the term “begotten” could never be defined with any clarity, so it was of little use. Third, *begotten* unavoidably implies a beginning of the one begotten. That would certainly lend support to the Arian heresy that the Son is a created being and not the Creator God. For these reasons it is best to omit the creedal terms “begotten” and “proceeds” from our definition of Trinity. Our authority is not in creeds but in Scripture.

We stand with the universal Trinitarian definition of the church to confess that God is one God, eternally existing in three persons, Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Each of the three shares fully the one divine essence. God is not simply unity, but eternally exists in rich, loving fellowship as the one and only God.

WHY SHOULD WE STUDY THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

Many Christians find the doctrine of the Trinity difficult to understand. Sadly, out of laziness or fear, some give up far too quickly and subsequently have little interest in diligently studying to grow in their understanding of God. Further, they commonly defend themselves by saying that if they love God in their heart, they need not concern themselves with deep understanding in their mind. Yet, Jesus himself urges us to love God with both our heart and mind.⁶⁹

While the doctrine of the Trinity is certainly difficult to understand, J. I. Packer reminds believers that it is nonetheless true: “The historic formulation of the Trinity . . . seeks to circumscribe and safeguard this mystery (not explain it; that is beyond us), and it confronts us with perhaps the most difficult thought that the human mind has ever been asked to handle. It is not easy; but it is true.”⁷⁰

⁶⁸Deut. 29:29.

⁶⁹Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27.

⁷⁰J. I. Packer, “Trinity,” *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 1993), 40.

Indeed, Christians should study the doctrine of the Trinity because God has given the church a great blessing in truthfully revealing something so glorious about himself; namely, he is triune. If he reveals it to us, he must consider it important and valuable for our relationship. He loves us deeply. He wants our relationship to be intimate and deep so he gives us precious insights into who he is. If we treasure our relationship with God, we should also treasure the revelation he gives us about himself so that we can know him as best as we are able.

Practically speaking, studying the doctrine of the Trinity helps believers appreciate their great salvation, which is frequently described in Paul's writings as the work of the triune God.⁷¹ Our salvation is enriched as we understand this triune working. We come into relation with the Father and experience perfect fatherliness as he invests in us. So Paul prays, "May the God of peace himself sanctify you completely."⁷² The author of Hebrews prays that the God of peace, the great shepherd of the sheep, will "equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight."⁷³ God the Son is the one who loves the church so much that he died to "sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish."⁷⁴ God the Spirit is the holy one who makes us holy: "But you were washed, you were sanctified . . . by the Spirit of our God. . . . [You] are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another . . . [by] the Lord who is the Spirit."⁷⁵

As we grow to more deeply understand the saving plan of God the Father, the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and the sealing of the Holy Spirit, we become more intimately thankful to each member of the Trinity for their work for us, in us, and through us.

⁷¹Rom. 8:3-4, 15-17; 1 Cor. 1:4-7; 2:4-5; 6:11, 19-20; 2 Cor. 1:21-22; Gal. 3:1-5; Eph. 1:17; 2:18, 20-22; Phil. 3:3; Col. 3:16; 1 Thess. 1:4-5; 2 Thess. 2:13. See Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 48n39.

⁷²1 Thess. 5:23.

⁷³Heb. 13:21.

⁷⁴Eph. 5:26-27.

⁷⁵1 Cor. 6:11; 2 Cor. 3:18.

Sinclair Ferguson keenly points out from John 13–17 that it is before Jesus goes to the cross that he has the most to say to his disciples about the blessed Trinity and about his relationship to the Father and to the Spirit.⁷⁶ Christ's final words to his disciples before going to the cross were to explain, although in part, the doctrine of the Trinity. Since the doctrine of the Trinity was so important for Jesus to stress at such a pivotal moment in history, we are right to assume that it is also imperative for us to understand the person and work of Jesus.

We are further blessed when we study the Trinity because we then learn how the cross enables believers to share the unity and love that exist eternally between the Father and the Son,⁷⁷ and how the cross, resurrection, and ascension of Christ bring to us the full power and knowledge of the Holy Spirit.⁷⁸

WHAT ARE THE MAJOR DOCTRINAL ERRORS REGARDING THE TRINITY?

Many heresies have arisen throughout the history of the church that deny the basic assertions of the doctrine of the Trinity, which are these:

- 1) God is three persons.
- 2) Each person is fully God.
- 3) There is one God.⁷⁹

The tendency is for either the threeness or the oneness of God to be overly stressed at the expense of the other, resulting in heretical false teaching.

The three main heresies that contradict the doctrine of the Trinity are *modalism* (the persons are ways God expresses himself, as in Oneness theology), *Arianism* (the Son is a creature and not divine, as with Jehovah's

⁷⁶See Sinclair B. Ferguson, *A Heart for God* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1985), 18–37.

⁷⁷John 17:11, 22–26.

⁷⁸John 14:16–17, 26; 15:26; 16:13.

⁷⁹Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 231.

Witnesses), and *tritheism* (there are three distinct gods, as in Mormonism and Hinduism).

Modalism

Modalism teaches that God is *successively* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; he is not *simultaneously* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Modalism is a heresy that does not view the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three particular persons in relation but merely as three modes or manifestations of the one divine person of God. God revealed himself successively in salvation history, first as Father (creator and lawgiver), then as Son (redeemer), and finally as Spirit (sustainer and giver of grace).

For a modalist, the God of the Old Testament is the Father. In the incarnation, God was manifested in Jesus. Then, after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, God came in the mode of the Holy Spirit. However, the baptism of Jesus and Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane reveal clearly that the three persons converse with each other simultaneously.

Some Pentecostal denominations adopt a "Jesus only" formula for baptism and thus oneness theology. They affirm both that their God is one and that Jesus is fully God. But they deny that there are three divine persons.

The United Pentecostal Church is the largest Oneness group in America. They officially deny the doctrine of the Trinity, saying:

In distinction to the doctrine of the Trinity, the UPCI holds to a oneness view of God. It views the Trinitarian concept of God, that of God eternally existing as three distinctive persons, as inadequate and a departure from the consistent and emphatic biblical revelation of God being one. . . . Thus God is manifested as Father in creation and as the Father of the Son, in the Son for our redemption, and as the Holy Spirit in our regeneration.⁸⁰

In other words, the Son of God is the manifestation of the Father in the flesh. The Son is not eternal, nor preexistent. Jesus is the Father and the

⁸⁰United Pentecostal Church International, "Oneness of God," <http://www.upci.org/about.asp>.

Son: Father in his divinity and Son in his humanity. Hence, the Trinity is said to be a misunderstanding of the biblical teaching.

Admittedly, the doctrine of the Trinity is complicated. Therefore, the only way to accurately discern what a professing Christian believes about the Trinity is to talk with people directly and hear what they actually believe. We must not fall into the heritage of fundamentalism and condemn people based on secondhand reports or their associations.

Arianism

Arianism was an early heretical teaching about the identity of Jesus Christ, founded primarily on the teachings of Arius. The central characteristic of Arian thought was that because God is one, Jesus could not have also been truly God. In order to deal with the scriptural testimony to the exalted status of Christ, Arius and his followers proposed that Jesus was the highest created being of God. So although Christ was fully human, he was not fully God. Arius's teaching was condemned as heretical at the Council of Nicaea in AD 325.⁸¹

Sadly, Arianism is the official teaching of Jehovah's Witnesses, which was founded in 1881 by Charles Taze Russell. This group teaches that there is no biblical basis for the doctrine of the Trinity. They teach that there is one solitary divine being from all eternity. This divine being is Jehovah God, the creator and preserver of the universe and all things. Jehovah's Witnesses essentially believe what Arius taught in the third century; namely, that Christ is not God but rather God's first created creature. Thus, Jesus is the archangel Michael, who is mentioned in the Old Testament. Neither is the Spirit divine but rather more of a cosmic force of Jehovah.

Tritheism

Tritheism teaches that the Trinity consists of three equal, independent, and autonomous beings, each of whom is divine. Tritheism stresses the plural-

⁸¹See Stanley J. Grenz, David Guretzki, and Cherith Fee Nording, "Councils," *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 15.

ity of the Godhead. Many human analogies for the Trinity actually convey tritheism instead. Examples include the erroneous analogy that the Trinity is like an egg with the three parts of yolk, white, and shell.

Additionally, Mormonism believes that the Trinity is three separate gods; the Father is an exalted man who became a god, Jesus is the first spirit-child between God the Father and his wife, and the Holy Spirit is another spirit-child of the Father and his wife. They teach that none of the three persons of the Trinity are eternal or almighty God. The Son and the Spirit are not truly equal with the Father since they are his spirit-children. There are many gods of many worlds. These three are just the gods of this world, the gods we relate to.

One theologian has refuted these three main heresies well:

The doctrine of the Trinity does not on the one hand assert that three persons are united in one person, or that three beings in one being, or that three Gods in one God (tri-theism); nor on the other hand that God merely manifests Himself in three different ways (modalism); but rather that there are three eternal [personal] distinctions in the substance of God.⁸²

Alarming, every generation has some who fall into the same ruts of error that have surrounded the doctrine of the Trinity throughout the church's history. These people are prone to question if not renounce the doctrine of the Trinity. It is important for each generation of Christians, particularly Christian leaders, to be able to lovingly and winsomely define and defend the doctrine of the Trinity because no less is at stake than the issue of who God is.

WHAT ARE THE PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE TRINITY?

Indeed, while that which is hypothetical, theoretical, and philosophical may be interesting to a few people, only that which is practical is of service

⁸²E. A. Park, quoted in Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1907), 304.

to all people. Subsequently, we have chosen to close this chapter with some practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity.

First, Trinitarian life is humble. The doctrine of the Trinity is so complex and wonderfully mysterious that it humbles us. This is because while God can be known truly, he cannot be known fully. This forces us to be humble in our understanding of God and establishes a precedent in our thinking to allow room for mystery, as we indeed see and know in part, as Scripture states.⁸³

Second, Trinitarian life is loving. When 1 John 4:7 says, “Love is from God,” it is revealing that love emanates from the Trinitarian community of God. Trinitarian love includes love for God, family, friend, neighbor, stranger, and even enemy. This is because even though we were enemies of God, estranged by sin, Jesus came to be our neighbor, loved us as a friend, died for our sins to make us family, and shared with us God’s love.

Third, Trinitarian life is worshipful. This means that we worship, including singing, serving, and praying, to the Father, through the Son, by the power of the Spirit.

Fourth, Trinitarian life is relational. John 1:1 says, “In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God [Father], and the Word was God.” In the original Greek, John is saying that God the Father and God the Son were proverbially face-to-face in eternity past. This is the language of friendship, which compels us to live face-to-face with others in companionship and community. This is why Christians practice hospitality to strangers and why they participate in the life of their local church as they live face-to-face with their spouses and children. All of this is to practice for the day when, as Paul says, we too will see God “face to face.”⁸⁴

Fifth, Trinitarian life is unified and diverse. Greek Christian theologians are fond of describing the Trinity with the term *perichoresis*. As the three persons of the Trinity are mutually indwelling, or permeating one another, we are deeply connected as part of the body, yet we retain our own identity. We are always persons in community.

⁸³1 Cor. 13:12.

⁸⁴Ibid.

Sixth, Trinitarian life is submissive. As we hear Jesus teaching us to pray, “Your will be done,”⁸⁵ and himself praying, “Not my will, but yours, be done,”⁸⁶ while he sweated drops of blood from anxiety caused by the looming horror of his crucifixion, we learn to submit ourselves to the will of the Father by the Spirit like the Son.

Seventh, Trinitarian life is joyful. Tim Keller explains:

To glorify something or someone is to praise, enjoy, and delight in them. When something is useful you are attracted to it for what it can bring you or do for you. But if it is beautiful, then you enjoy it simply for what it is. Just being in its presence is its own reward. To glorify someone is also to serve or defer to him or her. Instead of sacrificing their interests to make yourself happy, you sacrifice your interests to make them happy. Why? Your ultimate joy is to see them in joy.⁸⁷

What Keller is rightly saying is that the Trinity is the place of the greatest joy that has ever been or ever will be; each member delights in the others and pours himself out continuously for the good of the others in unparalleled delight. Indeed, another synonym for the Trinity is Happy.

The God of the Bible is in himself eternally relational. Some religions teach that God made people to cure his loneliness; conversely, the fact is that God as a Trinitarian community was never without loving community. Rather, he is a relational God who welcomes us into relationship with himself.

In closing, the Trinity is not a doctrine to be philosophized beyond the teachings of Scripture but rather a humble, loving, worshipful, relational, diverse, submissive, and joyful life to be entered into by the Spirit through the Son to the Father.

⁸⁵Matt. 6:10.

⁸⁶Luke 22:42.

⁸⁷Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 214.