

Doctrine of God

4 – The Tri-unity of God (2)

All theology ought to be doxology, but Trinitarian theology in particular is essentially a matter of praising God.

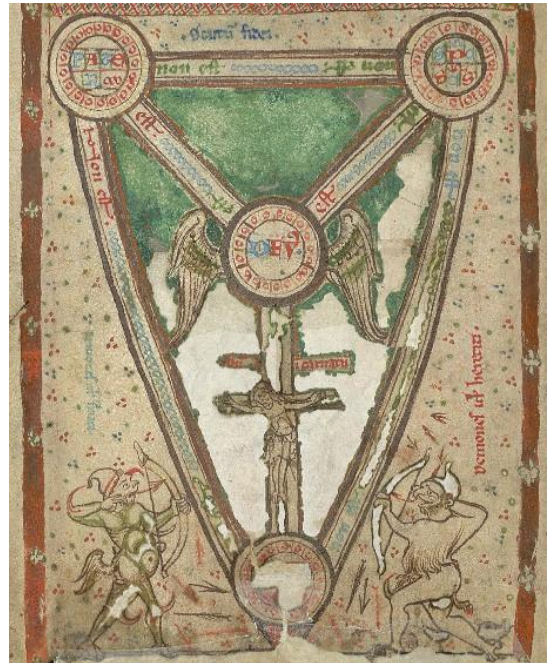
- Fred Sanders

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Ghost! As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be, world without end.

- The Gloria Patri

I. Worship and the Trinity

We study God's Triune nature not just so we can have a proper meta-physic. We study God's triune nature so that we may worship him properly. This is the ultimate goal of all our theologizing – proper worship. And proper worship is fundamentally Trinitarian.



There was never a time when God was not the blessed Three-in-One. He has for all eternity been the glorious and ineffable Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God has shared the knowledge of his Triune Self with his image-bearers. And those whom God has granted the spiritual blessings of salvation he has also summoned to join together in praising him as the Three-in-One: "Blessed be God the Father, who has blessed us in the Beloved and sealed us with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:3-14, *condensed*).

The late theologian John Webster identified the "proper calling" of theology as "the praise of God by crafting concepts to turn the mind to the divine splendor."¹ Doxology is inescapably intellectual. That is, it involves the mind not only in part but in whole. The mind is essential to proper worship because worship is the response to God's self-revelation. Therefore, proper praise depends upon a deepening understanding of the nature of God as he is revealed in Scripture and confessed by the church.

Christopher Holmes has written that "the economy of grace in all of its dynamism drives one to say something about its source, its very condition of possibility."² The Father sends the Son and the Holy Spirit because they are the source of salvation together. The Threeness of God is a necessary condition to our salvation. That is what is meant by the Trinitarian economy of salvation. The salvation of sinners is the fruit of Father, Son and Holy Spirit as distinct Persons joined eternally in inseparable Oneness. Therefore, our praise is complete and satisfactory only as it is directed to God as Trinity.

¹ John Webster, *God Without Measure* Vol. 1 (New York: T&T Clark, 2018) p. 27.

² Quoted in Fred Sanders, *Our Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016) p. 26

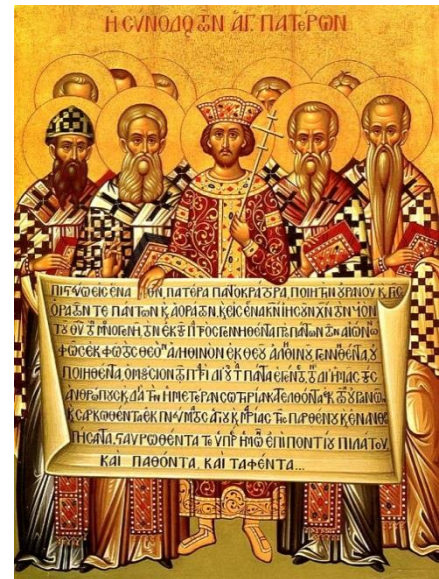
II. The Concept of the Trinity

The early church fathers believed that in order to properly understand the Trinity one must have a heart of devotion to the Lord. For them, the knowledge of the Trinity was simply too esoteric to be properly grasped by the unbeliever or ungodly. In his classic work, On The Incarnation, Athanasius warns his reader:

But for the searching and right understanding of the Scriptures there is need of a good life and pure soul, and for Christian virtue to guide the mind so to grasp, so far as human nature can, the truth concerning God the Word. One cannot possibly understand the teaching of the saints unless one has a pure mind and is trying to imitate their life. Anyone who wants to look at sunlight naturally wipes his eye clear first, in order to make, at any rate, some approximation to the purity of that one which he looks; and a person wishing to see a city or country goes to the place in order to do so. Similarly, anyone who wishes to understand the mind of the sacred writers must first cleanse his own life, and approach the saints by copying their deeds. Thus united to them in the fellowship of life, he will both understand the things revealed to them by God and, thenceforth escaping the peril that threatens sinners in the judgment, will receive that which is laid up for the saints in the kingdom of heaven.³

In the first four centuries a steady witness of men schooled in the Scriptures and fueled by a zeal for God's glory in the church underwent such a course of study. They gained insight into the Scriptures in the company of many fellows who with them disciplined their minds according to what was revealed there. Through years of study and gathering in official capacities these church fathers drafted the great ecumenical creeds which have continued to guide and guard the church from errors and heresies.

The words we use to worship, explain, or describe the Trinity are of great importance. With our words we either properly describe and magnify the Three-in-One or we vandalize his self-revelation. The words we use will give either a proper or improper conceptualization of the Trinity.



Fred Sanders writes, “An entire doctrine of God lurks in the littlest words, in the conjunctions and prepositions of Trinitarian statements.”⁴ Basil of Caesarea understood that “none of the words used to describe God should be passed over without exact examination...Therefore to scrutinize syllables is not a superfluous task.” That said, Basil also argued against “quibbling over prepositions.”⁵

The exactitude of our words matter for it is in the smaller parts of our speech where the internal relations within the Trinity are defined. Error and even heresy intrudes upon the doctrine of the Trinity in connection with how those internal relations are described.

³ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (A.R. Mowbray, 1953), pg. 96.

⁴ Fred Sanders, *Our Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016) pg. 35.

⁵ Ibid.

When done right, Trinitarian theology makes use of a host of intellectual concepts that shape the mind and heart and tunes them to praise. Again, Fred Sanders writes:

Trinitarian theology...names [Jesus] as only-begotten and the filially proceeding and declares that his prevenient glory is shared with the Father and the Holy Spirit undividedly, consubstantially, and perichoretically, as the three persons subsisting in relation. These are just the most historically prominent of the concepts crafted to assist the mind in turning to the glory of the Trinity. Each of them, and the entire corpus of them, directs us to the Scriptural witness as to the Triune God's self-testimony. Trinitarian theology is an intellectual Gloria Patri, a reasonable service, an ascription of one glory to three Persons then, now, and always."⁶

The Son and the Holy Spirit are not merely "surface phenomena" of God's interactions with the world. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not different manifestations of God. Nor are the Persons of the Godhead three different ways that God reveals himself.

If God had not clearly revealed himself as eternally existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit then we would have no hope to discover such a mystery. There is no way for mankind to intuit his way to the knowledge of the Trinitarian oneness of God. For man to attain knowledge of the Trinity it must be taught by God.

It is true that there is no single verse in the Bible which proclaims "God is a Trinity, being one in Essence and three in Persons eternally and unchanging." Nevertheless, this very doctrine is revealed clearly and progressively both directly and indirectly. We receive the doctrine of the Trinity as being set out plainly throughout the text of Holy Scripture. This is why the church both Roman Catholic and Protestant, has uniformly affirmed this doctrine as being at the heart of Christianity.

Long before the church had refined, according to Scripture, her understanding of the Trinity Christians had been praying Trinitarian prayers. "Jesus is Lord" was most certainly a confession of a distinction of the divine Persons within the eternal Godhead. The apostolic witness is, of course, explicitly Trinitarian. References to God the Father, the Lord Jesus, and the Holy Spirit abound throughout the New Testament.

III. The Trinity Defined

"There is no truth more vital to a Christian's life, no truth more calculated to enrich, deepen and delight a Christian's heart than the doctrine of the Holy Trinity." – Ian Hamilton

The biblical witness to God's triune nature upholds both the oneness and three-ness of God. God reveals himself most fully as Trinity in his sending of the Son and, together with the Son, sending the Spirit. Until then there are certainly clear revelations of a mysterious plurality within the indivisibility of God. But it is in God's economy of salvation where God's triune nature is most clearly revealed.

By "mystery" we mean it in the New Testament sense: Something always true, once veiled, but now revealed. God exists eternally as one indivisible Being in three distinct Persons equal in power, authority, and glory.

⁶ Ibid, 26.

God's triune consciousness and tri-personal life: in which three distinct, divine Persons or Subsistences, the Father, The Son, and the Holy Spirit, with unique interpersonal relations, are the one and only Supreme Being, equally have the same divine authority, equally possess each divine attribute, the one and the same divine nature, or essence, or substance, and equally manifest the divine glory. – Greg Nichols

A. Key Terms

1. Essence – Something that exists; the ultimate nature of a thing.

Essence is never accidental or secondary to something else. Essence is the simplest most fundamental quality of a thing. God is one Essence. There are not three essences in God. The three Persons, though distinct are subsumed in the one Essence.

2. Person –

There has always been some controversy over referring to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as “persons.” Much of the controversy was over – rightly – the concern that people would read back into the Godhead, all too human concepts of “person.” That of course is something we must avoid.

Remember our distinction between univocal language and analogical language? Augustine shared these concerns but ultimately believed that among the words available to us, person was probably the best. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not modes of existence or three different revelations of God. They are not three different ways in which we know God. They are not different gods or beings. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all acknowledged and written about in ways that identify them as something very close to Persons.

“When you ask, ‘Three what?’ Human speech labors under a great dearth of words. So we say three Persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence.” (Augustine, *Das Trinitatis*, 5:9.10)

The Persons of the Godhead are not separate divine beings. We must also not think of the Trinity as three individual “centers of consciousness.” Nor are the Persons merely manifestations, revelations, or modes of being. We must carefully avoid reading our notions of person back into the Godhead. The word “person” as applied to the Trinity does not function the same way as it does in our typical uses of the term. The word person must be applied to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit analogically.

3. Subsistence

To subsist means that all is present for the purpose of existence. This is typically used a synonym for “Person” in Trinitarian theology. Because of our tendency to read back into the Godhead our own conception of “Persons,” some theologians prefer to the term subsistence when referring to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

4. Eternal Generation

A term used to describe the Son's relationship to the Father within the Godhead. This doctrine teaches that the Father eternally communicates the divine essence to the Son without division or change so that the Son shares an equality of nature with the Father (sharing all the attributes of deity) yet is also eternally distinct from the Father. The term seeks to do justice to the “begotten-ness” of the Son.

Like all of our speech about God we must remember that we speak not univocally but analogically. So the generation or begotten-ness of the Son should not be directly compared to that which we know in our creatureliness.

"An eternal personal act of the Father, wherein, by necessity of nature, not by choice of will, He generates the person (not the essence) of the Son, by communicating to Him the whole indivisible substance of the Godhead, without division, alienation, or change, so that the Son is the express image of His Father's person, and eternally continues, not from the Father, but in the Father, and the Father in the Son." – A.A. Hodge

This is not to suggest that the Father has priority over or possesses greater glory than the Son or the Holy Spirit. Neither is the Father to be understood as the "Fount of divinity" as in Eastern Orthodoxy as though the Son receives his divinity from the Father.

The Father is not divided from the Son by sending the Son nor is the Spirit separated from the Father and Son in their sending of Him.

"I believe...in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made." – Nicene Creed (325)

B. The Oneness of the Trinity

1. The Deity of the Father

- John 6:27 – "...him the Father, even God, has sealed."
- Romans 1:1-2 – "the gospel of God...concerning His Son."
- 1 Corinthians 8:6 – "...to us there is one God, the Father, of whom are all things."
- 1 Corinthians 15:24 – "...he shall deliver up the kingdom of God, even the Father."
- Ephesians 1:3 – "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ."

2. The Deity of the Son

- Jesus clearly identified as God (Jn 1:1-3, 14; 5:18; 20:28; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8, 10; 2 Pet 1:1; 1 John 5:20)
- Jesus possesses the attributes of God (Matt 11:27; 18:20; 28:20; Jn 1:1-2; 8:30; 12:41; 21:176; Phil 2:6; 3:21; Col 1:15; Heb 1:11-12; 7:26; Rev 2:23; 19:11)
- Jesus performs the works of God (Matt 28:18; Jn 1:1-3; 5:19-20, 24; Eph 1:22; Col 1:15-17; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:3, 11-12)
- Jesus is deserves and receives worship (Matt 4:9; John 5:21-23; 20:28-29; Heb 1:6; Rev 19:10)
- Jesus is given divine names (Isa 6:1-8; 7:14; 8:31; 9:6-7; John 12:41; 1 Peter 2:5-8; Matt 1:23; John 8:58)

3. The Deity of the Holy Spirit

- The Spirit is identified as Divine (Acts 5:3-4)
- The Spirit has the attributes of God (Ps. 139:7-10; Isa. 40:13-14; 1 Cor. 2:10-11; 12:11; Heb. 9:14)
- The Spirit performs the works of God (Gen. 1:2; Job 33:4; Ps. 104:30; Titus 3:5; Rom. 8:11)
- The Spirit is given reverence and devotion due only to God (Luke 12:10; 2 Cor. 13:14; Rev. 4:8-9)

- The Spirit is given the name of God (Isa. 6:8-10 w/ Acts 28:25-27; Ps. 95:7-9 w/ Heb. 3:7-9; 2 Cor. 3:17)

C. The Threeness of the Trinity

The One God exists in three Persons or Subsistences, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The three Persons of the Godhead are not three separate beings or three different manifestations of God. The Persons are not different modes of Divine being.

1. Person

The Greek term for person (*prosopon*) may be translated as “face,” “presence,” or “person” with various nuances: “...who seeing Jesus fell on his *face*,” “they were afraid and bowed down their *faces* to the earth” (Lk. 5:12; 24:5). The term also refers to personal distinctness: “...thanks may be given by many *persons* on our behalf” (1 Cor. 1:11).

The term is also used to refer to God’s personal distinctness: “...their angels do always behold *the face* of my Father” (Matt. 18:10), and “now to appear in *the presence* of God for us” (Heb. 9:24). There are also instances of the term being applied to the personal distinctness of the Son (2 Cor. 2:10; 4:6).

2. Subsistence

The Greek term for subsistence (*hypostasis*) may be translated person, subsistence, substance, or assurance. It occurs five times in the New Testament and connotes “setting under,” “standing beneath,” or, “that which gives support” (Strong). In Trinitarian theology, subsistence typically means a distinct personal consciousness which is living, actively communing, and communicating.

“This I give you to share, and to defend all your life, the One Godhead and Power, found in the Three in Unity, and comprising the Three separately, not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of Three Infinite Ones, Each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three One God when contemplated together...No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking of escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.”

- Gregory of Nazianzus from his baptismal orations



God is love precisely because he has existed for eternity in three Persons. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have always been united in perfect love within the Godhead. Therefore, God has always known love. He knows how to give love and receive love perfectly and purely. He has always known perfect and unsullied community. God has never known a moment of isolation

within Himself. Therefore, God never needed to learn how to love His people. He has never needed to grow in love. God's Triune nature assures us that his love is perfect, pure, and eternal.

When the Son of God took on flesh and became a man, He did so, in no small part to love us with the love lavished upon Him by the Father. Jesus came to include His people in the fellowship He has always known with the Father and Holy Spirit. God's people come to him not merely as forgiven sinners but as dearly loved sons and daughters indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

Because He is triune, God is able to offer to His people a genuine salvation. He is able to love us with an everlasting love. He is able to transport us into an everlasting fellowship. The monistic, and solitary gods of mankind can offer no such salvation; no such love or fellowship.

The Trinity, then, is not an alien add-on to the doctrine of God. It is not a foreign or awkward doctrine invented by fourth century theologians. Rather, in His Word God progressively reveals that He is One and three. He is a singular Being eternally existing in three Persons. Because He is Trinity God is beyond us and near us. Because God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit He is able to love us and save us.

John Calvin once wrote that if we try to think about God without thinking about the Father, Son, and Spirit, then "only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God." Indeed. It is not possible to speak appropriately about God or worship Him rightly apart from knowing Him and honoring Him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

I have no time to cut the Godhead, and to make you dead in the moment of your regeneration, that you should have neither the Gift nor the Hope of Grace, but should in so short a time make shipwreck of your salvation. For whatever you may subtract from the Deity of the Three, you will have overthrown the whole, and destroyed your own being made perfect.

- Gregory of Nazianzus