



REVISED AND EXPANDED

THE HOLY TRINITY

IN SCRIPTURE,
HISTORY, THEOLOGY,
AND WORSHIP

ROBERT LETHAM

FOREWORD BY SINCLAIR FERGUSON

“The doctrine of the Trinity demands the careful study of biblical exegesis, historical theology, Christian orthodoxy and heresy, interdenominational differences and discussions, systematic theology, and practical implications. Robert Letham’s outstanding book (this substantially updated and expanded version is even better than the first) covers all the bases well, and yet still leaves us in awe of the incomprehensible mystery of our triune God.”

—**Joel R. Beeke**, President, Puritan Reformed Theological Seminary

“The doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation stone of a distinctively Christian theology, and interest in it continues to grow. In this revised version of his earlier study, Bob Letham takes us through its many aspects, including the controversies that have surrounded it, and guides us to an understanding based on Scripture, faithful to the orthodox tradition and sensitive to today’s needs. Essential reading for us all.”

—**Gerald Bray**, Research Professor of Theology, Beeson Divinity School, Samford University

“It is a pleasure to recommend the second edition of Bob Letham’s *The Holy Trinity*. This ancient doctrine has stirred up new discussion since his acclaimed first edition, but the author has kept up with what has been going on. So I suppose it is fair to say that this augmented text does not contain the author’s last word on this fundamental Christian mystery, but he has given his readers his latest word. In it, Letham continues to display more of his learning and more of his characteristic *watchfulness* when met by the latest Trinitarian neologisms and analogies.”

—**Paul Helm**, Emeritus Professor of the History and Philosophy of Religion, King’s College, London

“This is a very solid, well-reasoned, and well-researched volume on the doctrine of the Trinity. Letham is a master of historical theology. He brings his immense learning to bear on many contemporary Trinitarian issues in an astute and compelling way. Anyone who reads this work will be greatly informed and enriched.”

—**George Hunsinger**, Hazel Thompson McCord Professor of Systematic Theology, Princeton Theological Seminary

“It gives me great pleasure to commend this revised edition of Robert Letham’s *Holy Trinity*. His Trinitarian theology is always exegetical; he carefully opens the relevant biblical texts and lets them tell us what God says about himself as one God in three distinct persons, in both Old and New Testaments. Letham’s interaction with the great theological tradition of the Christian church, both East and West, models the best historical theology with fairness and clarity, and should be a massive resource for both the academy and the working pastorate. I particularly appreciated his chapters ‘East and West’ (10 and 11); ‘John Calvin’ (12); ‘Under Eastern Eyes’ (15), and ‘Thomas F. Torrance’ (16). Much to recommend throughout!”

—**Douglas F. Kelly**, Professor Emeritus, Reformed Theological Seminary

“This update of what is already a standard work is a real bonus. It is also a tribute to Dr. Letham’s love for his subject that he didn’t let go of it when he finished what must have been a very demanding first edition. This new volume, marked by the same careful exegesis, rigorous historical scholarship, catholicity of spirit, and sustained reverence, will remain, even to dog-ears, the favorite companion of all serious students of the doctrine of the Trinity.”

—**Donald Macleod**, Professor, Edinburgh Theological Seminary

“This book is complex and simple, deep and accessible. There is a reason why the first edition received so much acclaim. Over the past decade, it has shaped my thinking on the Trinity in more ways than I often realize. Even when I find myself reacting to some nuanced arguments related to Eastern versus Western thought, I have often been surprised that my reactions can be somehow traced back to this book. Whether we agree or disagree with all of the author’s points, this is a great book because it has a way of arresting our attention, refusing to let us ignore it. While this second edition could use more updating in light of recent research, it remains as readable, interesting, and helpful as ever.”

—**Ryan M. McGraw**, Morton H. Smith Professor of Systematic Theology, Greenville Presbyterian Theological Seminary

“In this carefully constructed second edition of his important book on the Trinity, Robert Letham forcefully and convincingly demonstrates exactly why the classical doctrine of the Trinity, rightly understood, is indispensable not only for all aspects of theology but for ecumenical agreement today. Especially interesting and helpful for students and scholars alike are his analysis and critique, when appropriate, of a variety of prominent contemporary theologians from the West (Barth, Rahner, Moltmann, Pannenberg, T. F. Torrance) and the East (Bulgakov, Lossky, Staniloae) with his perceptive arguments against panentheist views that collapse the immanent into the economic Trinity and dualist views that separate God from us.”

—**Paul D. Molnar**, Professor of Systematic Theology, Department of Theology and Religious Studies, St. John’s University, Queens, NY

“Robert Letham’s second edition is to be welcomed as a sound guide to biblical, historical, theological aspects of Trinitarian doctrine, and a guide to contributions, dangers, and deviations in contemporary discussions of the Trinity.”

—**Vern Poythress**, Professor of New Testament and Biblical Interpretation, Westminster Theological Seminary

“When people ask me to recommend a good book on the Trinity, I start with a couple of short books designed mainly for devotional and motivational effects. But when I discern that they’re ready to take the next step into the subject and can handle a bigger book with more exegetical depth, more historical scope, and a fair discussion of this doctrine’s range of views, I always point to Letham’s *The Holy Trinity*. This second edition ensures that I can continue sending students to Letham for helpful guidance and confident teaching about this central doctrine.”

—**Fred Sanders**, Torrey Honors Institute, Biola University

“Those of us who read the first edition were struck by Letham’s mastery of the historical narrative of Trinitarian theology. Given recent discussion on subordinationism, the newly written introduction alone is justification for purchasing the updated version. The

book is evidence of how far short we fall of the erudite discussions of the Trinity in the early church, and how seriously close to ‘another religion’ we come when defending the doctrine today.”

—**Derek W. H. Thomas**, Senior Minister, First Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC; Chancellor’s Professor, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“In this updated and refined version of his widely read book, Robert Letham enriches his biblical treatment of the Trinity, broadens his treatment of historical figures, and extends his discussion to include recent debate. *The Holy Trinity* defends and deepens the church’s doctrine of God. Read it, and you will be provoked to thought and prayer.”

—**Chad Van Dixhoorn**, Professor of Church History, Westminster Theological Seminary

“Letham’s widely acclaimed study of the doctrine of the Trinity is a model of theological reflection as it ought to be conducted. All the indispensable features of a proper theological method are on open display throughout—attention to scriptural foundations, sympathetic engagement with the historic creeds and confessions of the church, collegial conversation with the best theologians in the history of the Eastern and Western churches, and a desire to see the doctrine of the Trinity more profoundly inform the church’s worship. Considering the complexities of Trinitarian debates, Letham manages to treat the subject with remarkable clarity and insight. Though much contemporary writing on controversial topics is often marred by an excess or an absence of conviction, Letham strikes a good balance. He clearly and resolutely makes his case for a more robust and consistent Trinitarian doctrine and practice in the church. But he does so without caricaturing the positions of those with whom he differs, while remaining resolute in defending the position he embraces. Since Letham’s study is arguably among the finest introductions to the doctrine of the Trinity available today, its republication in revised form is a most welcome development.”

—**Cornelis P. Venema**, President and Professor of Doctrinal Studies, Mid-America Reformed Seminary

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ROBERT LETHAM


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For Joan

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FOREWORD

On one occasion—it is said—Queen Victoria and Prince Albert were attending a great dinner. During the soup course, Victoria turned to her husband and said, “My dear, this soup is not agreeing with us.” To which, so the story goes, Albert replied feelingly, “My dear, I admire its courage!”

I felt the same way when I first read Professor Robert Letham’s *The Holy Trinity* some fifteen years ago. It surely took the courage of his convictions to commit to print years of study and reflection on the Trinity. It meant not only breaking down the Enlightenment and modern assumption crystallized by Alexander Pope’s line “the proper study of mankind is man,” but also affirming that, in reality, the greatest subject of human investigation and exploration is the knowledge of God the Trinity.

Since its first publication, *The Holy Trinity* has been widely read and appreciated. In this new revised edition, it needs no foreword from me or from anyone else to commend it; to borrow a Paulinism, its praise is already in the churches. But even if the arrival of a second edition does not need a foreword, it merits a fanfare to announce its arrival to a new generation of readers.

In 2004 when the book first appeared, it was time for someone to say out loud that the evangelical king had no clothes on. We had been hearing for decades that the Holy Spirit was no longer “the forgotten person of the Trinity”; now we were being instructed in the right way of “doing church,” or some other magical key to Christian success. Yet the question lingered on: Could the church really be as strong as it thought when by and large evangelical preaching

and literature, plus the flood of new praise songs and much else, seemed to make little or no mention of God the Trinity? The word on “church street” was that the Trinity was the most speculative of doctrines and therefore the least practical for the Christian. It did not really matter—except as a doctrine to be defended if attacked.

Enter Bob Letham, bearing the five hundred pages of *The Holy Trinity*. Its publication was an event of some magnitude. It would be an exaggeration to say that the first edition fell (like Karl Barth’s famous *Der Römerbrief*) like a bomb on the evangelical playground, but the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association did award it the Gold Medallion. And many readers must have hoped that its appearance was like a cloud the size of a man’s hand, giving an Elijah-like assurance that the drought of teaching on the Trinity would soon end. Thankfully, the intervening years have brought renewed interest in, and writing on, the Trinity by a new generation of evangelical authors. Even if this has sometimes taken place in the context of controversy not always sensitive to the riches or the discrimination of the theological tradition, we can rejoice, Paul-like, that whether in calm or storm, attention has been drawn to the doctrine of the Trinity.

So in 2004 this was a landmark work, the fruit of years of research, reflection, discussion, and writing. Who that was alive then could remember when an evangelical or Reformed author had last attempted such a major monograph on the most profound yet fundamental article of the Christian faith?

In retrospect, one can also see that the publication of *The Holy Trinity* was in some ways a prophetic act. For one thing, its very presence was a kind of protest against deformed thinking. A kind of new monism, perhaps even modalism, prevailed in many churches. It had come in three stages as first the Holy Spirit, then the Father, and then the incarnate Son seemed to fill the horizon in various branches of evangelicalism. It manifested itself in the books that were being published, and in the themes that dominated preaching and teaching, seminars and conferences. Their message was often “we need the Holy Spirit,” or “we have discovered adoption,” or “we must preach Christ”—all true, but like everything else, if seen in isolation, each leads to an imbalance if not untruth. From the new

songs that were being written (some verging on me-centeredness, others Jesus-centered without being Trinitarian) to the new forms of the “call to worship” (“we are here to worship Jesus, to sing to Jesus, to pray to Jesus”), there was an absence of Trinitarian formulation, proclamation, adoration, and formation. I have a vivid memory of leaning over to the organizer of a student conference as the band led us in a song that seemed to be unfamiliar not only to me but to everyone else, and whispering to him: “This looks like a teaching moment for you; your band has just encouraged us to deny the Trinity!” It was not intentional. But it was a sign of the times. That you would rightly be jealous to describe the girl you loved was taken for granted; that you would *not* feel the same about God was also, alas, taken for granted.

I suspect that many readers of *The Holy Trinity* therefore greeted its appearance with a sigh of theological relief. Here was (and still is) a book of substance, rooted in Scripture (almost one hundred pages of biblical exposition), which then went on to dig out the old wells (another one hundred and fifty pages on the development of the doctrine through the Reformation), followed by yet another hundred pages on modern discussions of the doctrine.

In that sense, the book was prophetic not only as a protest against deformity, but as a “forth-telling” of the truth of historic Christian theology. It patiently worked through the hard thinking of past theologians on what is the greatest mystery of all to the human mind. It did so in the conviction that the Trinity is the foundation of all that is and therefore must be the reality in the light of which all other mysteries begin to make sense. Augustine surely never wrote a truer word than his *bon mot* that “in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.”

So *The Holy Trinity* well merits a second edition. Like its older sibling, if we exercise the intellectual dimension of the Spirit’s fruit of patience, it will lead us through the mind-stretching discussions of the great theologians. Yes, they are difficult, and that intellectual repentance, the *metanoia* of humility of mind, is in order, for we are seeking here to think and talk about *God*. But it will be rewarded.

Yet even when Dr. Letham has led us through these biblical, theological, and historical sections, he does not rest on his laurels. He wisely and helpfully provides us with what amounts to a theological summary section in which he poses the questions we need to ask and patiently responds to each of them. And then, in addition, since the doctrine of the Trinity is not about the writings of dead theologians but about the *living* God, he points up what it can teach us today. In particular, since God's being as Trinity is the source of all our wonder, Dr. Letham is surely right to underscore that it must also be the ground plan of all our worship of him. We do well, then, to echo John Donne's magnificent Holy Sonnet 14:

Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend
Your force to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

But there is still more. *The Holy Trinity* also demonstrates that this doctrine is the bedrock of the Christian response to movements as diverse as Islam on the one hand and postmodernism and its children on the other. And it is especially fitting in our contemporary climate that the closing chapter is on the subject of persons. For only if God is personal can we be personal, and as Augustine and Calvin underlined, only as we come to know him can we come to a true knowledge of ourselves. For, as is becoming increasingly clear, lose God the Trinity and we eventually lose man, male and female, made as his image.

But I have reflected enough on the merits of *The Holy Trinity*. I must not detain new readers any longer but rather wish you safe and rewarding travels on the grand theological journey that you are about to begin with Professor Letham as your guide. At times you will encounter a steep climb, and the way may seem long and challenging even for experienced travelers. But you will discover magnificent scenery on the way. My best advice, therefore, is that you stick with your guide until the end. When you reach it, you will realize that there is a higher summit yet to ascend—but that is for another

stage of the knowledge of God altogether. What you will find on this journey is that reading and reflecting on *The Holy Trinity* has clarified your thinking, strengthened your faith, and helped you to see that knowing the Father through the Son by the Spirit is eternal life. That will make you feel that the journey has been well worth the effort.

Sinclair B. Ferguson

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

When the publisher approached me about writing this book, I was both delighted and awed—delighted, since for some time I had been planning a work such as this, but in many ways awed, for what an enormous challenge it is to write about the one who is utterly transcendent and incomprehensible! Karl Barth’s thought as he sat in his study preparing his now-famous Göttingen Lectures crossed my mind, too, more than once: “can I do it?” But the sage advice of Basil the Great in a letter to his friend Gregory of Nazianzus is of constant encouragement. Basil recognizes that none of our theological language is adequate to convey our thoughts while, in turn, our thought pales before the reality. Yet we are compelled to give an answer about God to those who love the Lord. So devote your energies to advocating the truth, he urges his friend.¹

This book interacts with theologians from widely differing backgrounds, from East and West, from Roman Catholicism as well as Protestantism. It is, however, written from a Reformed perspective. As B. B. Warfield argued, Reformed theology is “Christianity come into its own.” It is distinctively *Christian* theology. Its pedigree reaches back to the fathers. This was the belief of, *inter alia*, Calvin, Bucer, and Zwingli. To be Reformed is to be truly catholic, biblical, evangelical, and orthodox. While our supreme authority is Holy Scripture, we should also, as did Calvin, the Reformers, and John Owen, listen seriously and attentively to the voices of the fathers. In a culture in which rugged individualism flourishes, we need to learn

1. Basil of Caesarea, *Letters*, 7; PG, 32:244–45.

to “[submit] to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21), recognizing that we are all liable to error.

Sadly, after Calvin, little of significance has been contributed to the *development* of Trinitarian doctrine from conservative Reformed theology. John Owen and Jonathan Edwards both wrote on the Trinity, and Owen’s treatise *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* is without peer in its treatment of communion with the three persons, but they did not contribute anything significant to the *advancement* of the doctrine. This dearth is evident from the lack of such sources quoted in the book, and it is in keeping with the neglect of the Trinity, until recently, in the entire Western church. Indeed, Calvin and Owen stand out by their focus on the persons of the Trinity rather than the divine essence, more an Eastern emphasis than a Western one. This lacuna on the part of conservative Christianity is little short of tragic. A theology that believes our chief purpose is “to enjoy [God] for ever” needs to demonstrate that it is doing just that.

I gladly acknowledge the help of a wide range of people, none of whom can be charged with any deficiencies in the following pages. I thank John Sundet and the committee of the Connecticut Valley Conference on Reformed Theology for their invitation to lecture on the Trinity in March 1997; the faculty of Mid-America Reformed Seminary for inviting me to give the annual guest lectures for 1999, which form the basis for two chapters and an excursus; and Dr. Carl Trueman, for asking me to contribute an article on the Trinity to *Themelios*, the substance of which forms the introduction. I also thank someone unknown to me who, reading my critical review of Robert Reymond’s Trinitarianism in the first edition of his *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, encouraged the publisher to approach me about this book.

I am grateful to Allan Fisher of P&R Publishing Company, and to Barbara Lerch and the staff for their helpful assistance; the publishers of the *Mid-America Journal of Theology* for permission to use material from three articles in volume 13 (2002): “Ternary Patterns in Paul’s Letter to the Ephesians,” which is an excursus following chapter 3; “East Is East and West Is West: Another Look at the *filioque*,” which forms the backbone of chapter 10; and “The Holy

Trinity and Christian Worship,” much of which is incorporated in chapter 18; and the editors of the *Westminster Theological Journal* for permission to use material in my review of the book by Kevin Giles that appears in Appendix 2.

I am appreciative for helpful interaction from Sinclair Ferguson, Don Garlington, Paul Helm, and Tony Lane, for kindly reading draft chapters and making very useful comments; John Dishman and John Van Dyk, for important contributions on physics and chemistry, respectively; the Rev. George Christian, for his constant stimulus to thought on the Trinity; my colleague the Rev. S. Edd Cathey, for checking a number of chapters for readability; and students at my PhD class at Westminster Theological Seminary on Trinitarian Theology: Ancient and Modern, for stimulating contributions to debate. I am inevitably indebted (who is not?) to Grace Mullen of the Montgomery Library, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, for locating and providing relatively inaccessible material, and for the indulgence of the staff while I removed boxloads of books. I thank, too, the session of Emmanuel Orthodox Presbyterian Church, Wilmington, Delaware, and the congregation as a whole, for their interest in the progress of the book and their wonderful support for me and the ministry of the gospel.

Last, but certainly not least, comes the dedicatee, my wife, Joan, who is a constant source of love and encouragement to me.

Moving beyond the sublunary realm, to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, ever one God, I offer this book with unspeakable gratitude, with the prayer of Augustine with which he concludes *On the Trinity*: “O Lord the one God, God the Trinity, whatever I have said in these books that is from you, may your own people acknowledge; if anything of my own, may it be pardoned both by you and by those who are yours. Amen.”²

Wilmington, Delaware
The First Sunday after Trinity
June 2003

2. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.51 (my translation).

PREFACE TO THE REVISED AND EXPANDED EDITION

Harold Wilson, British Prime Minister in the sixties and seventies, famously remarked that a week was a long time in politics. Similarly, fifteen years can be a long time in theological discussion. I finished the first edition of this book in June 2003. Since then, a welter of further work has been done on the doctrine of the Trinity. Some of the questions that have been aired are addressed in this new edition.

Much of the book remains as it was. The teaching of the Bible has not changed in that time, nor have the basic lineaments of the historical discussion. Rather, the thoughts, proposals, and interpretations of our own day have thrown up new issues—sometimes old ones in new guise—with the corresponding need to say new things. Moreover, we all grow older, and our own views mellow and mature. New light is shed on what we once considered settled and fixed.

The changes in this edition can be summarized as follows. I have sought to take account of significant developments in Trinitarian scholarship since 2003. The work of Lewis Ayres on fourth- and fifth-century Trinitarianism is important; I am glad that in many ways my earlier account did not need any radical revision. My sharp distinction between the Eastern and Western churches, a distinction commonplace hitherto, has been increasingly questioned. I have written on this elsewhere. It is correct and salutary to recall that the Trinitarian settlement of Constantinople I is acknowledged throughout the church—there is far more in common than what divides.

I recognize that that division can be overdone. Yet crucial differences have built up over the centuries that are not easily undone. In this edition I prefer to write of *perspectives*, a term that allows for agreement but also difference.

I have added an excursus on post-Reformation developments such as the *pactum salutis*, on some formulations of which I have been known to be critical. I was aware while writing the original edition that Richard Muller was working on post-Reformation Trinitarianism, and so I considered my contribution likely to be redundant. This narrower issue is an intriguing one and raises some questions that need addressing and, in measure, are being addressed. I am well aware that there has been a spate of discussion on Reformed Trinitarianism since 2003. To cover it effectively, however, would require another volume and detract from the coherence of the present one, such as it may be.

Since 2003, the debate on Barth's doctrine of election and its relationship to his doctrine of the Trinity has gained pace and become quite intense. Which has priority—election or the Trinity? This is an issue of Barth scholarship, but it is also a greater matter for Trinitarian theology. The proposals of Bruce McCormack, that God elects to be Trinity, raise immense questions and huge problems, well addressed by Paul Molnar and George Hunsinger.

Another controversy, more parochial but also far-reaching, erupted in 2016 among conservative evangelicals over how far the human obedience of the incarnate Christ reflects eternal antecedent realities within the immanent Trinity. I had addressed this through my reading of Barth. But the *dramatis personae* in the heated argument were from more fundamentalist quarters. I agree that Barth's treatment of the matter is highly questionable. Still, it was more guarded and immensely more informed than many other voices. This is an acutely difficult area, in which we are well advised to be guided by the classic confessional creeds. I have a new and extended discussion in chapter 17, in which I attempt to pull together a range of relevant factors. Part of the problem is the separation of the Trinity from Christology that has occurred over the years.

Since in all this we are dealing with the eternal God, the Father,

the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in indivisible union, who is the author of peace and the lover of concord, in knowledge of whom is eternal life, it is well that we seek to cultivate union, with God and in his church. There is a necessary place for polemics. Yet this should be incidental to the main goal, which is to press on in the knowledge of the one who created and sustains us and the entire cosmos, and who leads us in Christ in the paths of life.

For this edition, I am grateful to John Hughes of P&R, who encouraged me to produce it and has provided helpful suggestions throughout the process, and to Karen Magnuson, who copyedited it to a superb standard. Keith Mathison and Ian Hamilton read parts of the revision and made constructive comments, as did Ryan McGraw. As is customary, but also necessary, I acknowledge that I alone am responsible for any weaknesses that are present; in the case of the incomparable subject, we can only stammer away with fear and yet with great joy.

Bryntirion
The Fourth Sunday after Trinity
June 2018

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AugSt</i>	<i>Augustinian Studies</i>
<i>BCP</i>	<i>The Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the Use of the Church of England</i> (Oxford: Oxford University Press, n.d.)
<i>BCP(E)</i>	<i>Book of Common Prayer and Administration of the Sacraments and Other Rites and Ceremonies of the Church according to the Use of the Episcopal Church</i> (New York: Church-Hymnal Corporation, 1979)
<i>C</i>	The Creed of Constantinople I (commonly called the <i>Nicene Creed</i>)
<i>CD</i>	Karl Barth, <i>Church Dogmatics</i> , ed. Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956–77)
<i>CO</i>	John Calvin, <i>Calvini Opera (Opera quae supersunt omnia)</i> , ed. Guilelmus Baum, Eduardus Cunitz, Eduardus Reuss, 59 vols., <i>Corpus Reformatorum</i> 29–87 (Brunswick: 1863–1900)
<i>CTJ</i>	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
<i>ECR</i>	<i>Eastern Churches Review</i>
<i>EECh</i>	Angelo Di Berardino, ed., <i>Encyclopedia of the Early Church</i> , 2 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992)

EQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
GCS	<i>Die Griechischen christlichen Schriftsteller der ersten drei Jahrhunderte</i> (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1897–)
Greg	<i>Gregorianum</i>
HTR	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>Institutes</i>	John Calvin, <i>Institutes of the Christian Religion</i> , ed. Ford Lewis Battles, trans. John T. McNeill (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960)
JBL	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
JRT	<i>Journal of Reformed Theology</i>
JTS	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
LN	Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds., <i>Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament Based on Semantic Domains</i> (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988)
LS	Henry G. Liddell and Robert Scott, <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> , 9th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940)
MAJT	<i>Mid-America Journal of Theology</i>
MTheol	<i>Modern Theology</i>
N	The Creed of Nicaea
NPNF ¹	Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., <i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , 1st ser. (repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995)
NPNF ²	Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., <i>A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church</i> , 2nd ser. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988)
NT	New Testament

NTS	<i>New Testament Studies</i>
OCP	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i>
OS	Peter Barth and Wilhelm Niesel, eds., <i>Joannis Calvini Opera Selecta</i> , 5 vols. (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1926–52)
OT	Old Testament
PG	J.-P. Migne et al., eds., <i>Patrologia Graeca</i> (Paris, 1857–66)
PL	J.-P. Migne et al., eds., <i>Patrologia Latina</i> (Paris, 1878–90)
PRRD	Richard A. Muller, <i>Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics</i> , 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2003–8)
RD	Herman Bavinck, <i>Reformed Dogmatics</i> , ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, 4 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003–8)
REAug	<i>Revue d'études augustiniennes et patristiques</i>
RechAug	<i>Recherches Augustiniennes</i>
RevSR	<i>Revue des sciences religieuses</i>
SBET	<i>Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology</i>
SCJ	<i>Sixteenth Century Journal</i>
Service Book	<i>Service Book of the Holy Orthodox-Catholic Apostolic Church</i> , trans. Isabel F. Hapgood, 3rd ed. (Brooklyn, NY: Syrian Antiochene Orthodox Archdiocese of New York and All North America, 1956)
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
ST	Thomas Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>
StPatr	<i>Studia Patristica</i>
SVTQ	<i>St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly</i>
SwJT	<i>Southwestern Journal of Theology</i>

<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
WLC	Westminster Larger Catechism
WSC	Westminster Shorter Catechism
WTJ	<i>Westminster Theological Journal</i>

INTRODUCTION¹

I seem to recall that it was Bernard Lonergan who once remarked that “the Trinity is a matter of five notions or properties, four relations, three persons, two processions, one substance or nature, and no understanding.” In 1967, Karl Rahner famously drew attention to the then widespread neglect of the Trinity, claiming that “should the doctrine of the Trinity have to be dropped as false, the major part of religious literature could well remain virtually unchanged.”² Since then, a raft of works have appeared, volumes by the truckload, but many have sought to revise the classic doctrine. More widely, I have been surprised over the years at the confusion prevalent in the most unexpected circles. Yet as Sinclair Ferguson mentioned to me, “I’ve often reflected on the rather obvious thought that when his disciples were about to have the world collapse in on them, our Lord spent so much time in the upper room speaking to them about the mystery of the Trinity. If anything could underline the necessity of Trinitarianism for practical Christianity, that must surely be it!”³

Part of the problem for many may be that in its debates and struggles, the church was forced to use extrabiblical terms to defend biblical language. This was necessary because of the heretics’ use of the Bible to support their erroneous ideas. Athanasius provides a

1. This edited version of the introduction in the first edition was in turn a revised version of my article “The Trinity—Yesterday, Today and the Future,” *Them* 28, 1 (2002): 26–36.

2. Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. Joseph Donceel (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 10–11.

3. E-mail message, April 4, 2003.

glimpse of what happened at the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325), when the assembled bishops outlawed the claim of Arius that the Son was not eternal but was created by God, who thereby became his Father. Originally, the statement was proposed to the council that the Son came “from God.” By this it was intended to say that he was not from some other source, nor was he a creature. Those who sympathized with Arius agreed to the phrase, however, since in their eyes all creatures came forth from God. Consequently, the council was forced to look for a word that excluded all possibility of an Arian interpretation.⁴ Biblical language could not resolve the issue, for the conflict was over the meaning of biblical language in the first place. This reminds us that to understand this or that, we have to consider it in a context other than its own, for meaning cannot be derived by the repetition of that about which meaning is sought. A dictionary is an obvious example of a tool that explains meanings of words in terms of other words and phrases. To think clearly about the Trinity, we must grapple with the history of discussion in the church.

Augustine, in his *On the Trinity*, writes that “in no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable.”⁵ Helvellyn, a mountain in the English Lake District, contains a famous section known as Striding Edge. At that point, the path to the summit leads along a narrow ridge, the ground sloping away steeply on both sides. It is easily passable in good weather, but there have been many fatalities. Many experienced walkers have come to grief there.⁶ In 2015, the mountain had claimed five lives before the end of June.⁷ Exploration of the Trinity has a similar feel, always balanced precariously on a knife edge far more precipitous even than Striding Edge. Dangers loom on both sides, and many are those who fail to retain their balance.

4. Athanasius, *On the Decrees of the Synod of Nicaea*, 19–21.

5. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1.5.

6. <http://www.nwemail.co.uk/news/lakes/Walker-dies-after-falling-from-Lake-District-hiking-spot-f6998c01-8777-44f0-9db3-cbc0247f24db-ds>, accessed March 13, 2018.

7. <https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/586888/Fifth-death-Lake-District-Helvellyn-mountain-summer-holiday>, accessed March 13, 2018.

There have always been two main dangers, from one side or other. The East early faced the danger of subordinationism, viewing the Son and the Spirit as somehow derivative, with their divine status not precisely clear. This was endemic until the fourth-century controversies. The conceptual tools had yet to be developed by which the way in which God is three could be expressed without detriment to the way in which he is one. Other forms of subordinationism have proposed that the Son and the Holy Spirit are somehow less than the Father, with the Trinity viewed as a hierarchy.

On the other side of the path is the threat of modalism. By this is meant the blurring or eclipsing of the eternal personal distinctions. This can come either by treating God's self-revelation as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as merely successive modes of revelation of one unipersonal God (as Sabellius did in the third century) or, alternatively, by a reluctance to recognize God's revelation in human history as revealing anything about who he is eternally. Either way, we are left with no true knowledge of God, for what he says of himself in the Bible may not reflect who he actually is. This, I suspect, has been a common unarticulated perception at the popular level, outside the ranks of those who have taken a close interest in the matter.

In the West in more recent times, a social model of the Trinity has come into prominence, bringing into sharp focus the distinctiveness of the three. When this is so, there is often a noticeably loose, almost tritheistic-sounding tendency.⁸ The Trinity is frequently compared to a human family or to three coequals engaged in a dance around one another. We will see that the analogy of three men sharing a common nature was decisively rejected by the Cappadocians, who were more than any others responsible for the resolution of the Trinitarian crisis in the fourth century. The idea of social Trinitarianism is alien to the classic doctrine, for which the unity and indivisibility of the Trinity, together with the inseparable works of God, are axiomatic.⁹

8. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God* (London: SCM, 1991), has been cited as possibly exemplifying this claim, but see Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 1:309–12, who rejects it.

9. See Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton

Also in the West, Augustine's dominant impact looms large. In the second half of *On the Trinity*, Augustine hesitantly introduces some analogies for the Trinity, aware of their serious limitations.¹⁰ But these analogies have had a great impact over the years. They are based on the primacy of the essence of God over the three persons, for the unity of God is Augustine's starting point. He looks for reflections of the Trinity in the human mind. On this basis, his critics maintain, Augustine finds it difficult to do justice to the full personal distinctions of the three. He describes the Trinity in terms of a lover, the beloved, and the love that exists between them. In particular, there appears to be something of a quandary concerning the Holy Spirit. Does Augustine reduce the Spirit to an attribute? The lover and the one loved are clearly capable of being understood as distinct persons—but love is a quality, not a personal entity. We will argue that such criticisms are overdone and that Augustine himself cannot be charged with these errors, for he was seeking to find an explanation of how one thing could be exemplified in three different ways. Nevertheless, questions remain about how he has been construed by later authors.

Later, Aquinas separates discussion of *de deo uno* (“the one God”) from *de deo trino* (“the triune God”). In his *Summa contra Gentiles*, he holds back discussion of the Trinity until book 4, after considering the doctrine of God in detail in book 1. In the *Summa Theologica*, he discusses the existence and attributes of God in part 1, questions 1–25, turning to the Trinity only in questions 27–43. This pattern becomes standard in theological textbooks in the Western church. In one sense, as Richard Muller writes, this is a logical and orderly way to teach the doctrine.¹¹ Indeed, it follows the procedure in the history of redemption, from the emphatic stress on the oneness and uniqueness of Yahweh to the progressive unfolding of the deity of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the NT. While the Trinity is eternal, the doctrine of the Trinity is latent in the OT, implicit in

Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2012).

10. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, bks. 8–15.

11. Muller, *PRRD*, 4:145–48.

the NT, and then formulated in the church. Aquinas himself was one of the foremost exponents of the doctrine. But this procedure has, in recent centuries, had a negative impact. In Protestant circles, Charles Hodge spends nearly 250 pages discussing the existence and attributes of God before at long last turning his attention to the fact that God is triune. Louis Berkhof follows the same procedure.¹² This tendency is magnified by the pressures of the Enlightenment. The supernatural and the whole idea of revelation were problematic in the Kantian framework. As a symptom of the malaise, Friedrich Schleiermacher restricts his treatment of the Trinity to an appendix in his book *The Christian Faith*. Even B. B. Warfield toys with a modalist position when he suggests that certain aspects of the relation between the Father and the Son in human history may have been the result of a covenant between the persons of the Trinity and thus may not represent eternal antecedent realities in God.¹³ J. I. Packer, in his book *Knowing God*, devotes a chapter to the Trinity, part of the way through the volume, but then continues as though nothing had happened.¹⁴

In keeping with the Enlightenment worldview, the focus of attention from the eighteenth century shifts away from God to this world. Alexander Pope's famous lines sum it up: "Know then thyself, presume not God to scan, the proper study of mankind is man."¹⁵ A batch of new academic disciplines emerges in the nineteenth century devoted to the study of man, with psychology, sociology, and anthropology as the most prominent. In turn, there is a striking development of the historical consciousness. Biblical scholars search for the historical Jesus. Biblical theology, pressured by the Kantian world to prescind from eternity and ontology, tends to restrict and

12. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 1:191–441, on the existence and attributes of God; *ibid.*, 1:442–82, on the Trinity; Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (London: Banner of Truth, 1958), 19–81, on the existence and attributes of God; *ibid.*, 82–99, on the Trinity.

13. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 22–59, esp. 54–55.

14. J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), 67–75.

15. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, 2.1.

limit the reference of biblical statements about the Father and the Son to the historical dimension. A classic case is Oscar Cullmann's claim that the NT has a purely functional Christology.¹⁶ The problem with this line of thought is that if the reference of biblical statements is exclusively this-worldly and restricted to human history, then God as he has revealed himself does not necessarily reveal God as he is eternally in himself.

Evangelicals have their own problems. Biblicism has been a strong characteristic. The post-Reformation slide into a privatized, individualist religion that neglects the church and world has led many to downplay the ecumenical creeds in favor of the latest insights from biblical studies.¹⁷ Prominent aspects of the church doctrine of the Trinity have often been derided or neglected as unbiblical speculation.¹⁸ Opposition to the orthodox doctrine has often tended to come from those who stress the Bible at the expense of the teachings of the church.¹⁹ Leading evangelicals have recently questioned or abandoned the classic doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the one indivisible will.²⁰ What is forgotten is that the church was forced to use extrabiblical language, since biblical language itself was open to a variety of interpretations, some faithful, others not. We alluded above to Athanasius's remarks about the introduction of the words *ousia* and *homoousios* at Nicaea. What is also forgotten is that the classic formularies represent the distillation of the biblical exegesis of the Christian church.

Today many Western Christians are practical modalists—the

16. Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament* (London: SCM, 1959), 326–27; Oscar Cullmann, “The Reply of Professor Cullmann to Roman Catholic Critics,” *SJT* 15, 1 (1962): 36–43, where he qualifies his earlier claims.

17. Robert Letham, “Is Evangelicalism Christian?,” *EQ* 67, 1 (1995): 3–33.

18. Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (New York: Nelson, 1998), but in the second and revised edition Reymond happily corrects this tendency.

19. As seen in the responses to such attacks of Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 28, 31.3; Calvin, *Institutes*, 1.13.2–5.

20. Reymond, *Systematic Theology* (1998). In the second edition, Reymond retracted this opinion. Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware both opposed eternal generation.

usual way of referring to God is “God” or, particularly at the popular level, “the Lord.” It is worth contrasting this with Gregory of Nazianzus, the great Cappadocian of the fourth century, who spoke of “my Trinity,” explaining that “when I say ‘God,’ I mean Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.”²¹ This practical modalism goes in tandem with a dire lack of understanding of the historic doctrine of the Trinity overall. In a letter to the editor of *The Times* (London) in June 1992, the well-known evangelical Anglican David Prior remarked that he had looked for an appropriate illustration for a sermon on the Trinity for Trinity Sunday. He found it while watching cricket on television, the Second Test Match between England and Pakistan. Ian Salisbury, the England leg spinner, bowled in quick succession a leg break, a googly, and a top spinner.²² There, Prior purred, was the illustration he needed—one person expressing himself in three different ways! We give full marks to Prior for spotting the importance of cricket—a pity about the theology. A perceptive correspondent wrote in reply that the letter should be signaled “wide.”

Consider the following common analogies used to explain the Trinity. The generic analogy, of three men sharing a common humanity, considered and rejected by Gregory of Nyssa and others, was adopted by Robert Reymond in the first edition of his *Systematic Theology*, although he abandoned it in the revised edition. This analogy is false because, first, humanity is not restricted to three men. It is possible to conceive of one man or five trillion men. The Trinity consists of only three, no more, no fewer. Moreover, three men are separate personal entities, whereas the three persons of the Trinity share the identical divine substance, indwelling one another—occupying the identical divine space. The analogy leads to tritheism or a pantheon, not the Trinity. The analogy of a clover leaf, one branch with three leaves, is often used. Yet each leaf is only one-third of the whole, while the three persons of the Trinity are both together and severally the whole God. This analogy destroys the deity of the

21. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 28, 38.8.

22. These are three different ways in which a bowler of this type in cricket (equivalent to a baseball pitcher) can deliver the ball to the batsman (batter).

three and reduces once again to modalism. As Gregory of Nazianzus stresses at the end of his *Fifth Theological Oration*, no analogies in the world around us adequately convey the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. He said that “though I have examined the question in private so busily and so often, searching from all points of view for an illustration of this profound matter, I have failed to find anything in this world with which I might compare the divine nature.”²³ Each possibility he considered had elements that led to false conclusions.²⁴ Indeed, such a quest supposes a comprehensive knowledge of God’s nature, which is beyond us.

Colin Gunton argued that this overall tendency toward modalism lies at the root of the atheism and agnosticism that have confronted the Western church in a way that it has not done in the East.²⁵ His thesis has not met with uniform approval. Barth has been held to exhibit modalist tendencies. In particular, his statement on the Trinity as “God reveals himself as the Lord” and his triad of revealer, revelation, and revealedness have the flavor of unipersonality, although in fairness we must recognize that he distances himself from modalism and that the accusations are misplaced.²⁶

For its part, the East has clearly seen the modalistic tendency of the West. As one prime example, the *filioque* clause²⁷ itself has, in its eyes, blurred the distinction between the Father and the Son by regarding them as sharing identically in the procession of the Spirit (Augustine wrote of the Spirit’s proceeding from both “as from a single source”²⁸). According to the East, since the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father, how can the Spirit be said to proceed from both without differentiation or qualification? The West,

23. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31*, 31; Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham, trans., *St. Gregory of Nazianzus: On God and Christ* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 141; NPNF2, 7:328.

24. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31*, 33; Williams and Wickham, Gregory, 143.

25. Colin Gunton, “Augustine, the Trinity, and the Theological Crisis of the West,” *SJT* 43, 1 (1990): 33–58.

26. Barth, *CD*, I/1:295ff.

27. This is the Western addition to the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed: “and the Son” (*filioque*).

28. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.27; 15.47.

in turn, has been quick to point out what it sees as the dangers of subordinationism in the East.

It is my belief that a recovery of the Trinity at ground level, the level of the ordinary minister and believer, will help revitalize the life of the church and, in turn, its witness in the world.

First, let us look at its impact in worship. According to Paul, Christian experience is thoroughly Trinitarian, flowing from the inseparable engagement of all three persons in planning and securing our salvation. The reconciliation brought into effect by Christ has introduced the church into communion with the Holy Trinity. Whether Jew or Gentile, we have access in or by the Holy Spirit through Christ to the Father (Eph. 2:18). Prayer, worship, and communion with God are by definition Trinitarian. As the Father has made himself known through the Son “for us and our salvation” in or by the Spirit, so we are all caught up in this reverse movement. We live, move, and have our being in a pervasively Trinitarian atmosphere. We recall, too, the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, that the true worshipers will from now on “worship the Father in spirit and truth” (John 4:21–24). How often have we heard this referred to as inwardness in contrast to externals, as spirituality rather than material worship, as sincerity as opposed to formalism? Instead, with many of the Greek fathers, such as Basil the Great and Cyril of Alexandria, a more immediate and pertinent reference is to the Holy Spirit (all other references in John to *pneuma* are to the third person of the Trinity, except probably two—11:33 and 13:21) and to the living embodiment of truth, Jesus Christ (the way, the truth, and the life; cf. 1:15, 17; 8:32ff.; 14:6, 17; 16:12–15). The point is that Christian experience of God in its entirety, including worship and prayer, is inescapably Trinitarian. At the most fundamental level of Christian experience, corresponding to what Polanyi termed the “tacit dimension” of scientific knowledge,²⁹ this is common to all Christian believers. The need is to bridge the gap between this prearticulated level of experience and a developed theological understanding so that it is explicitly, demonstrably, and

29. Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958).

strategically realized in the understanding of the church and its members. This is particularly evident in circles that have abandoned, or are abandoning, the classic liturgies, and have opened the door to a virtual free-for-all with no effective checks. A necessary corrective to the ills I have mentioned must begin right here. It is in worship that our theology should be rooted.

Second, we need to recapture and refashion a Trinitarian view of creation. Colin Gunton produced some excellent work in this area. How can unity-in-diversity, diversity-in-unity, everywhere evident in the world around us and in the skies above, be explained without recourse to its Trinitarian origination? Instead of expending their energies in fighting against Darwinism, conservative Christians have a prime need to construct a positive theological approach to creation—and thus the environment—that expressly and explicitly accounts for both the order and coherence of the universe and the distinctiveness of its parts. Precisely because it declares the glory of its Creator, the tripersonal God, the world is to be preserved and cultivated in thankful stewardship, not exploited as a plaything of fate or an accident of chance.

Third, and at a very basic level indeed, a clear outlook on the Trinity should deeply affect how we treat people. The Father advances his kingdom by means of his Son, the Son glorifies the Father, the Spirit speaks not of himself but of the Son, and the Father glorifies the Son.³⁰ All will call Jesus “Lord” by the Holy Spirit to the glory of the Father. Each of the three delights in the good of the others.

In Philippians 2:5–11, Paul urges his readers to follow the example of the incarnate Christ. Christ did not use his equality with God as something to be exploited for his own advantage. Instead, he emptied himself, by taking human nature and so adding “the form of a servant.” He was obedient to the death of the cross, so as to bring about our salvation. Thus, his followers are to shape their lives according to his, the faithful, obedient, and self-giving second Adam, in contrast to the grasping, self-interested first Adam. Paul’s comments, however, reach back to Christ’s preincarnate state. His

30. Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, 1:308–27.

actions in his earthly ministry, in his incarnate state, were in harmony with his attitudes beforehand. Being (present participle) in the form of God, Jesus acted like this. In fact, this is the way that all three persons of the Trinity always are. We are to live like this—looking to the interests of others—because that is what Christ did and also because this is what God is like. The contrast is stark—the whole tenor of fallen man is the pursuit of self-interest. Instead, God actively pursues the interests of the other.³¹

Fourth, a fully self-conscious Trinitarian theology is indispensable for the future progress of evangelism and missions. We find ourselves face to face with a militantly resurgent Islam. I find it hard to see how Islam, or for that matter any other religion based on belief in a unitary god, can possibly account for human personality, or explain the diversity-in-unity of the world. Is it surprising that Islamic areas are associated with monolithic and dictatorial political systems?³² If the Christian faith is to make headway after all these centuries, it must begin at the roots of Islam with the Qur'an's dismissal of Christianity as repugnant to reason due, *inter alia*, to its teaching on the Trinity.³³ For historical reasons, the church in the East was on the defensive in the face of Islamic hegemony. For now and the future, we must recover our nerve, for this is the root of Islamic unbelief and also its most vulnerable point.

In a somewhat different way, postmodernism is unable to account for unity-in-diversity. Islam is a militant and monolithic unifying principle, with no provision for diversity, but postmodernism is a militant diversifying principle without a basis for unity. Its rejection of objective knowledge and absolute truth claims leaves it with no way to account for order in the world. Whereas Enlightenment rationalism imposed a man-made unity, the post-Enlightenment has

31. This is quite different from the case of a person who is persistently abused by another. In that case, from either unwillingness or enforced lack of opportunity, the one abused is unable to contend for his or her own interests, let alone to actively pursue the interests of the other.

32. The one notable democratic system in a dominantly Islamic country, Turkey, was occasioned by the secularization of the state in 1923 by Mustafa Kemal.

33. Holy Qur'an, Surah 4:171, Surah 5:73.

spawned a fissiparous diversity without unity. Currently in the West, this fractured diversity is reaching absurd levels. By its rejection of objective knowledge, it is unable to support science consistently, and so to maintain the fight against microorganisms (has anyone told virulent drug-resistant bacteria and viruses that they are simply engaged in a language game or in a manipulative bid for power?). Nor eventually will it be able to sustain the development of the weapons that our societies will need to defend themselves against aggressors who wish to overthrow them.

In politics, I have already suggested a connection between a unitary view of God and monolithic dictatorship. This is no new claim, for people such as Moltmann have given it a good airing. A proper understanding of the triune God, to the extent of his revelation and our capacity, should lead to something quite different. Since God seeks the interests and well-being of the other, whereas in sin we seek first our own interests, a Trinitarian-based society could alone achieve in a very proximate fashion an appropriate balance between rights and responsibilities, freedom and order, peace and justice. Some balk at this, supposing that the doctrine of the Trinity has no bearing on human life. This is to miss the seemingly obvious point that humanity was made in the image of God, for covenantal partnership with God—indeed, for union with God in Jesus Christ. The Trinity has a huge bearing on human life; if this were not so, how could Christ's humanity be assumed in union? Whatever shape this relationship has, that there is such a relationship seems to me to be clear, given the holistic context of biblical revelation. James Eglinton comments that “in Bavinck's understanding of the Trinity and the cosmos, the Trinity is wholly unlike anything else, but everything else is like the Trinity.”³⁴

What of the path to reclaiming God's triunity as an integral and vital part of Christian experience, witness, and mission? How are we to avoid the dangers of subordinationism on one side and modalism on the other? How can we spell out further these many possible

34. James Eglinton, *The Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 89 (italics original).

outcomes? In the following pages I hope to suggest some lines of approach to these questions. This will include extensive discussion of the history of debate in the church. This is essential for two reasons. First, much of today's writing on the Trinity is in pursuit of particular agendas—ecumenical, ecological, and egalitarian-feminist. Often these writers build their case on an interpretation of past discussion. But this is often culled from highly selective and tendentious readings of a limited range of sources. Without a wide and thorough historical underpinning, the overwhelming majority of readers are at the mercy of such selectivity. Second, the lion's share of what we have to learn comes from listening to the voices of others, past and present. If we follow carefully and patiently the development of the church's understanding of God, it will surely bring great dividends in the ways we have already described.

The prize is exceedingly great. Let us end with Augustine. This is a dangerous area of thought and belief, he said, because of the near presence of heresy on both sides, for wrong views of God can twist and corrupt our worship and ministry, the life and witness of the church, and ultimately the peace, harmony, and well-being of the world around us. It is also dangerous, for a close study of the Trinity must lead us to a closer and fuller sense of awe and worship. It imposes on us a huge responsibility and privilege to live godly lives. It is a mystery, as Calvin said, more to be adored than investigated. It is arduous, for we are dealing in matters too great for us, before which we must bow in worship, recognizing our utter inadequacy. Barth's words are well taken when he writes that "correctness belongs exclusively to that about which we have thought and spoken, not to what we have thought and spoken."³⁵ Lonergan's reference to "no understanding" has a lot of truth, for these are matters beyond our capacity. But it is also (as Augustine added) supremely rewarding, for this is our God, who has truly, to the limits of which we may be capable, made himself known to us, giving himself to us, and thus by the Spirit granting through Christ the Son access to the Father in the unity of his undivided being. This is eternal life, that we may

35. Barth, *CD*, I/1:432.

know the Father and Jesus Christ whom he has sent, in the power and by the grace of the Holy Spirit. In his presence is life and joy forevermore, not simply for us but for others beyond, for those yet to believe and for those not yet born, for generations to come and beyond that for eternity. Let us persevere, then, through the chapters that follow, amid the dangers and the toil, for the great and wonderful prize of better knowing our triune God. We praise you, O God; we acknowledge you to be the Lord.

We praise you, O God; we acknowledge you to be the Lord.
 All the earth worships you, the Father everlasting.
 To you all angels cry aloud,
 the Heavens and all the Powers therein.
 To you Cherubim and Seraphim continually do cry:
 Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth;
 Heaven and earth are full of the majesty of your glory.
 The glorious company of the apostles praise you.
 The goodly fellowship of the prophets praise you.
 The noble army of martyrs praise you.
 The holy Church throughout all the world acknowledges you,
 the Father of an infinite majesty,
 your honourable, true, and only Son,
 also the Holy Ghost the Comforter.

You are the King of glory, O Christ.
 You are the everlasting Son of the Father.
 When you took upon yourself to deliver man,
 you did not abhor the Virgin's womb.
 When you overcame the sharpness of death,
 you opened the kingdom of heaven to all believers.
 You sit at the right hand of God, in the glory of the Father.
 We believe that you shall come to be our judge.³⁶

36. *Te Deum Laudamus*, Morning Prayer, BCP (1662). Personal pronouns and verbs modernized.

PART 1

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

“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 said, ‘This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased.’” (Matt. 3:16–17)

“How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” (Heb. 9:14)

“If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you.” (Rom. 8:11)

“And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 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.’” (Matt. 28:18–19)

“The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” (2 Cor. 13:14)

1

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The Bible and the Doctrine of the Trinity

We must distinguish between the doctrine of the Trinity and the Trinity itself. God always is, and he always is Trinity. From eternity he is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, one indivisible being, three irreducible persons.

On the other hand, *the doctrine of the Trinity* is the developed formulation of what the church understands God to have revealed in the history of revelation and redemption, as recorded in Scripture. Here, the church responded to erroneous ideas that imperiled the gospel. It used refined concepts, language stretched to express the reality that God disclosed.

The Trinity is revealed in the OT in latent form, in the NT implicitly but pervasively. Yet the fully fledged *doctrine* awaited prolonged reflection on the biblical record. As Wainwright states, “In so far as a doctrine is an answer, however fragmentary, to a problem, there is a doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament. In so far as it is a formal statement of a position, there is no doctrine of the Trinity in the New Testament.”¹

God in Genesis 1

“*In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.*” It takes the rest of the Bible to disclose the meaning concealed in this

1. Arthur Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1963), 4.

cryptic sentence.² Even so, the first chapter of Genesis reveals much. It portrays the creation and formation of the world, and the ordered shaping of a place for human beings to live. It presents man as head of creation, in relation to and in communion with God his Creator. The act of *creation* itself is direct and immediate (Gen. 1:1–2), distinct from the work of formation that follows.³ The result is a cosmos formless, empty, dark, and wet—unfit for human life. The rest of the chapter describes the world’s *formation* (or *distinction*) and *adornment*, God’s introducing order, light, and dryness, making it fit for life to flourish. First, God creates light, and sets boundaries to the darkness (vv. 2–5). Second, he molds the earth into shape so that it is no longer formless (vv. 6–8, 9–10). Third, God separates the waters and forms dry land, so that it is no longer entirely wet (vv. 9–10). Following this, he populates the earth, ending its emptiness (vv. 20–30), first with fish and birds, then with land animals, and finally, as the apex of the whole, by humans made in his image. This God is not only almighty, but also a master planner, artist, and architect supreme.

This order is clear from the parallels between two groups of days, the first three and the second three.⁴ On day 1 God creates light, while on day 4 he makes the moon and the stars. On day 2 he separates the waters, the clouds and the seas, and forms the sky, while

2. Fred Sanders, in his excellent book *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016), 191–237 and passim, argues that since the Trinity is preeminently revealed in the missions of the Son and the Spirit in the incarnation and Pentecost, this exegetical procedure is best undertaken by focusing on the NT and afterward reading the OT in the light of the NT. This order has much to commend it; it makes the fully Christian doctrine of God primary. Yet it is impossible to understand the NT apart from the OT background. God first revealed himself as one and then, over time, as triune. This undergirds the legitimacy of beginning with the OT.

3. Herman Bavinck, *In the Beginning: Foundations of Creation Theology*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 100ff. See also the discussion in Aquinas, *ST*, 1a.66.1–4, and questions 66–74 in general.

4. This pattern was discerned at least as long ago as the thirteenth century. See *Robert Grossteste: On the Six Days of Creation: A Translation of the Hexaëmeron by C. F. J. Martin*, Auctores Britannici Medii Aevi (Oxford: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1996), 160–61 (5.1.3–5.2.1); Aquinas, *ST*, 1.74.1. See my article “‘In the Space of Six Days’: The Days of Creation from Origen to the Westminster Assembly,” *WTJ* 61, 2 (1999): 149–74.

on day 5 he creates birds and fish to live there. On day 3 he forms the dry ground, and on day 6 he creates animals and humans, whose native element this will be. He shows his sovereign freedom in naming and blessing his creation, and sees that it is thoroughly good. At the end of it all comes the unfinished seventh day, when God enters his rest that he made to share with man, his partner, whom he created in his own image. Entailed is an implicit invitation for us to follow.⁵

It is needless to elaborate on this, so generally recognized is it. Especially striking is God's sovereign and variegated ordering of his creation. In particular, *he forms the earth in a threefold manner*. First, he issues direct fiats. He says, "Let there be light," and there is light (Gen. 1:3). With seemingly effortless command, he brings into being the expanse (v. 6), the dry ground (v. 9), the stars (vv. 14–15), and the birds and fish (vv. 20–21). It is enough for him to speak; his edict is fulfilled at once. Second, he works. He separates light from darkness (v. 4), he makes the expanse and separates the waters (v. 7), he makes the two great lights, the sun and the moon (v. 16), setting them in the expanse to give light on the earth (v. 17), he creates the great creatures of the seas and various kinds of birds (v. 21), he makes the beasts of the earth and reptiles (v. 25), and finally he creates man—male and female—in his own image (vv. 26–27). The thought is of focused, purposive action by God, of divine labor accomplishing his ends. But there is also a third way of formation, in which God uses the activity of the creatures themselves. God commands the earth to produce vegetation, plants, and trees (vv. 11–12). He requests the lights to govern the day and night (vv. 14–16). He commands the earth to bring forth land animals (v. 24). Here the creatures follow God's instructions and contribute to the eventual outcome. This God who created the universe does not work in a monolithic way. His order is varied—it is threefold but one. His work shows diversity in its unity and unity in its diversity. This God loves order and variety together.

This reflects the chapter's record of God himself. The triadic manner of the earth's formation reflects who God its Creator is. He is a relational being. This is implicit from the very start. Notice the

5. Cf. Heb. 3:7–4:11.

distinction between God who created the heavens and earth (Gen. 1:1), the Spirit of God who hovers over the face of the waters (v. 2), and the speech or word of God issuing the fiat “Let there be light” (v. 3)—and his speech recurs frequently throughout the chapter. Of course, it is most unlikely that the author and original readers would have understood the Spirit of God in a personalized way, because of the heavy and insistent stress in the OT on the uniqueness of the one God. The word *ruach* can mean “spirit,” “wind,” or “breath.” Many commentators understand it to refer to the energy of God—the divine force, the power that creates and sustains life (Driver), an awesome wind (Speiser), a mighty wind (Westermann), God’s outgoing energy (Kidner), or the wind of God (Wenham). Wenham is sound when he suggests that this is a vivid image of the Spirit of God.⁶ Driver recognizes that this passage prepares for the personal use of the term *Word* in John’s Gospel and, by the same token, that the later NT personalizing of the Spirit of God is a congruent development from this statement also.

With the creation of man is the unique deliberation “Let us make man in our image,” expressing a plurality in God (Gen. 1:26–27). Von Rad comments that this signifies the high point and goal to which all of God’s creative activity is directed. But what does it mean? A variety of interpretations have been advanced to explain it. Some suggest that God is addressing the angels and placing himself in the heavenly court, so that man is made like the angels.⁷ Yet the agents addressed are invited to share in the creation of man, and this is never attributed to the angels elsewhere in the Bible. Second, Driver is one of those who suggest a plural of majesty, a figure of speech underlining God’s dignity and greatness.⁸ But this is no longer as favored

6. S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis* (London: Methuen, 1926), 4; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, Anchor Bible 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 5; Derek Kidner, *Genesis: An Introduction and Commentary* (London: Tyndale Press, 1967), 45; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary 1 (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 15–17; Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961).

7. Von Rad, *Genesis*, 57–59.

8. Driver, *Genesis*, 14.

as it once was. Among other things, plurals of majesty are rarely if ever used with verbs. Third, Westermann and many recent interpreters favor a plural of self-deliberation or self-encouragement. Yet few parallels support it. Wenham puts forward a variant on the theme of the heavenly court, only in his case he argues for God's inviting the angels to witness the creation of man rather than to participate in it. He points to Job 38:4–7, where at creation the morning stars are said to sing together and all the sons of God (angels?) shout for joy.⁹

Scripture, however, has a fullness that goes beyond the horizons of the original authors. Many of the fathers saw this statement as a reference to the Trinity. While this was concealed from the original readers and from the OT saints as a whole, the fathers were not at variance with the trajectory of the text. Rabbinical commentators were often perplexed by this passage and other similar ones referring to a plurality in God (Gen. 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8). Philo thought they referred to subordinate powers assisting God in the creation of man. Puzzling over these passages, Jewish interpreters tried to see them as expressing the unity of God.¹⁰ Perhaps it is significant that the NT never refers to Genesis 1:26 with regard to God, but that does not mean it is unwarranted to see here a proleptic reference to the Trinity. The NT does not refer to *everything*, but it does give us the principle that the OT contains in seed form what is more fully made known in the NT, and on that basis we may look back to the earlier writings much as at the end of a detective mystery we reread the plot, seeing clues that we missed the first time but are now given fresh meaning by our knowledge of the whole. In other words, in terms of the *sensus plenior* (the fuller sense or meaning) of Scripture, God's words here attest a plurality in God, a plurality later expressed in the doctrine of the Trinity. The original readers would not have grasped this, but we, with the full plot disclosed, can revisit the passage and see there the clues.

I have written elsewhere, commenting on Genesis 1:26–27, that “man exists as a duality, the one in relation to the other. . . . As for

9. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 28.

10. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 23–26.

God himself, . . . the context points to his own intrinsic relationality. The plural occurs on three occasions in v. 26, yet God is also singular in v. 27. God is placed in parallel with man, made in his image as male and female, who is described both in the singular and plural. Behind it all is the distinction God/Spirit of God/speech of God in vv. 1–3. . . . This relationality will in the development of biblical revelation eventually be disclosed as taking the form of a triunity.”¹¹ I refer there to kindred comments by Karl Barth.¹²

In short, this God who made the universe—establishing an order with a vast range of variety, with human beings as the crown of his creation, representing him as his image-bearers—is relational. Communion and communication are inherent to his very being. In creating the world, he has made us for himself, to enter into communion with him in a universe of ravishing beauty and ordered variety. By his creation of the seventh day, he ceased from his works in contemplation of their ordered beauty and goodness, and invites us to join him. The first chapter of Genesis says to all who read it that Yahweh the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God of Moses, is also the Creator of all things. He who made his covenant with his people Israel is not some merely territorial divinity but is the one to whom all nations are accountable, for he is their Maker. There is a clear unity between creation and redemption. The mandate in Genesis 1:26–29 to multiply and subdue the earth embraces the whole creation, and it is also the basic building block for the unfolding structure of salvation after the fall. Reflecting on this implicitly Trinitarian structure of Genesis 1, Athanasius will write of creation as being *in Christ*.¹³ Because Genesis (no less than any other part of the Bible) is to be read in the context of the whole of Scripture, we can see references in the NT to the role of Christ and the Holy Spirit in creation as reinforcing this (John 1:1ff.; Col. 1:15–20; Heb. 1:3; 11:3).

This vital point is underlined by other—unmistakably poetic—

11. Robert Letham, “The Man-Woman Debate: Theological Comment,” *WTJ* 52, 1 (1990): 71.

12. Barth, *CD*, III/1:196.

13. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1, 3, 12, 14.

accounts of creation in the OT. In Psalm 33:6, creation is said to be “by the word of the LORD . . . and by the breath of his mouth.” In Proverbs 8:22ff., a passage much used and abused in the early-church debates, Wisdom is personified and eulogized as sharing with the Lord in the creation of the heavens and the earth. Job acknowledges that the Spirit of God made him (Job 33:4; cf. 26:13), and the psalmist also talks of God’s Spirit as Creator (Ps. 104:30). It is impossible to think of creation (*this* creation, *this* multifaceted and coherent creation, the only one we know and the only one there is¹⁴) as occurring apart from its Maker’s being relational, and so in accordance with his full revelation as triune, as Bavinck so cogently argues.¹⁵ Bavinck goes even further, arguing that “without generation [of the Son by the Father] creation would not be possible. If in an absolute sense God could not communicate himself to the Son, he would be even less able, in a relative sense, to communicate himself to his creature. If God were not triune, creation would not be possible.”¹⁶ This is borne out by hints in the OT of distinction within the unity of the one God.

The Angel of the Lord

The Pentateuch contains a good number of passages where the angel of the Lord appears and is identified with God himself. In this there are hints of plurality in God. In Genesis 16:7–13, an angel speaks as God, saying to Hagar, “I will surely multiply your offspring,” informing her of the impending birth of Ishmael and of the name he is to have. Hagar replies to the angel, calling the Lord who spoke to her “a God of seeing.” Then in Genesis 21:17–18, the angel again speaks to Hagar about her son, again with the voice of God: “I will make him into a great nation.” To Abraham in Genesis 22:11–18, immediately after he offered Isaac on the altar, the angel of the Lord calls from heaven, making promises in line with the covenant that God had already established. The angel’s words here are the

14. *Pace* theorists of parallel universes, for which there exists no evidence.

15. Bavinck, *In the Beginning*, 39–45.

16. *Ibid.*, 39.

equivalent of the Lord's in Genesis 12:1–3: "I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring." Again, in Genesis 31:10–13, speaking to Jacob, the angel of the Lord identifies himself with the God of Bethel. In Exodus 3:2–6ff., the angel of the Lord appears to Moses in a flame of fire out of the bush, while from the bush itself the Lord sees (v. 4), speaks (v. 4ff.), and identifies himself as God (v. 6).

Later, after the conquest of Canaan, in Judges 2:1–5 the angel of the Lord who goes from Gilgal to Bochum speaks in the name of Yahweh, saying, "I brought you up from Egypt . . . I said, 'I will never break my covenant with you . . . ' But you have not obeyed my voice." Appearing to Gideon, the angel of the Lord (Judg. 6:12, 20–22) *is* the Lord (vv. 14ff., 23–24). Then, when he appears to Samson's parents, Manoah and his wife, in Judges 13:3–23, an angel of the Lord is equated by Manoah's wife at his first showing with a man of God (vv. 3–8), while the second time he is the angel of God, the Lord, and also a man (vv. 9–20). After this, in fearful awe the couple recognize that in seeing the angel of the Lord, they have in fact seen God. In each instance, the angel appears as a man but is simultaneously equated with God. Augustine will debate these questions at length in his great work *On the Trinity*. Here is a figure identified with God, yet distinct from him. As yet, there is no explanation of how this can be, and the whole series of events is seen in the light of there being only one God.¹⁷

Theophanies

Closely related to the appearances of the angel of the Lord are those few occasions when God appears in bodily form. Most notable is the visit by the three men or angels to Abraham, recorded in Genesis 18 and 19. There the Lord appeared to Abraham (18:1). Yet in the same breath, Abraham finds three men standing in front of him (v. 2). He offers them the usual Semitic hospitality (vv. 3–8), including a meal. Then the Lord speaks, in words that only God

17. See also Zechariah 3:1–10, where the angel of the Lord is not explicitly identified with Yahweh but speaks the word of Yahweh.

could utter: “I will surely return to you about this time next year, and Sarah your wife shall have a son” (v. 10). Again, the narrative records that the Lord speaks to Abraham (v. 13).

Following this, the men set out, while the Lord speaks (Gen. 18:16–21). The men turn to leave for Sodom, while the Lord speaks to Abraham (vv. 22ff.). Then the Lord leaves, and Abraham returns home (v. 33), while the two (no longer three) angels arrive at Sodom (19:1). These two angels announce to Lot that the Lord has sent them to destroy the place (v. 13), while after Lot’s precarious escape it is the Lord who destroys it (vv. 24–25). Here is a bewildering and continued juxtaposition of men, angels, and the Lord. It is as though boundaries had disappeared. This passage will puzzle Augustine, who wonders whether this is an appearance of the preincarnate Christ, all three persons of the Trinity, or an angelic visitation. The point is that the one God presents himself in a way that poses questions. As Wainwright comments, this “mysterious oscillation” aroused a great deal of discussion among the rabbis, although not until Justin Martyr in the second century did Christians begin to consider the incident.¹⁸ Not until then does the problem of the Trinity begin to emerge, and there are good reasons—the rigorous Jewish monotheism and widespread pagan polytheism—why it could not have been tackled any earlier.

Joshua’s meeting with the commander of the army of the Lord in Joshua 5:13–15 deserves more attention than it has often received. This mysterious figure appears as a man, but is presumably an angel. Joshua worships him, however, and is not reprovved for it. This is strikingly different from the apostle John’s experiences when he worships an angel (Rev. 19:10; 22:8–9), for both times he is sharply rebuked. Moreover, the commander of the Lord’s army—and remember that Joshua was precisely that himself—speaks to him in the same language that the Lord had used in addressing Moses at the burning bush. Both here and in Genesis, God appears as man; a personal agent speaks as God and yet is distinguished from him. These appearances have frequently been seen as Christophanies, preincarnate appearances of the Son. While I am cautiously noncommittal

18. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 26–29.

on this matter, Sanders rejects the idea, on the grounds that it would undermine the uniqueness of the historical incarnation.¹⁹ But if it is granted that these were appearances of God, and that it was necessary that the Son, rather than the Father or the Spirit, become incarnate (see chapter 17), I see no reason why this should undermine the uniqueness of the incarnation.

Rigorous Monotheism

Behind all these episodes is a pervasive monotheism. Israel was time and again taught that there is one God only—Yahweh, who had taken his people into covenant with himself. Deuteronomy 6:4–5 was central to Israel’s faith: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” These words, and the whole law of which they are a part, trenchantly repudiate the polytheism of the pagan world. In the immediate context, Canaanite religions were the challenge to Israel, but this impressive declaration includes in its scope all pagan objects of worship mentioned in the historical and prophetic literature.

Israel’s history was in many ways a conflict with idols, leading up to the exile. This lesson is rammed home again and again but is finally learned only through the painful tragedy of banishment to a far country.²⁰ Isaiah is full of assertions of the uniqueness and sole deity of Yahweh:

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.
 Who is like me? Let him proclaim it.
 Let him declare and set it before me,

19. Sanders, *Triune God*, 224–26.

20. “All idolatrous worship had been abolished by that time.” Jules Lebreton, *History of the Dogma of the Trinity: From Its Origins to the Council of Nicaea*, trans. Algar Thorold, 8th ed. (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1939), 74.

since I appointed an ancient people.

Let them declare what is to come, and what will happen.

Fear not, nor be afraid;

have I not told you from of old and declared it?

And you are my witnesses!

Is there a God besides me?

There is no Rock; I know not any.” (Isa 44:6–8; see also 40:9–31; 42:8; Zech. 14:9)

The creation account of Genesis was itself a powerful counter to the axiomatic assumption of the ancient Near East that the gods of the nations were territorial deities, presiding over the area in which their devotees lived but without jurisdiction beyond those boundaries. In this light, the conflict between the great king, Sennacherib the Assyrian, and the prophet Isaiah is crucial. Recorded three times in the OT, it is evidently considered an important example of the universal domain of Yahweh. In the vivid account of the confrontation between Assyria and Judah in 2 Kings 18–19, the central point is the duel between the word of the great king, backed up by all the political and economic muscle and all the military might of the greatest power on earth, and on the other hand the word of Yahweh, his human agents utterly powerless, completely at the great king’s mercy. There is simply no contest. The word of Yahweh triumphs with ease!

It is in the light of this monotheistic faith, rammed home time and again, that we should view the passages concerning the angel of the Lord and the various hints of distinction within God’s being that come to light from time to time in the OT. These incidents were never remotely intended as examples of the surrounding paganism’s supposition of a plurality of gods. They fitted a monotheistic framework.

Distinction in God

In a number of passages, Yahweh addresses Yahweh, not in self-deliberation but apparently as distinct agents. Psalm 110:1 records: “The LORD says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand, until I make your enemies your footstool.’” Here Yahweh addresses a figure

whom David calls his “lord” (*Adonay*). In this enthronement psalm, David the king pays homage to this figure, who appears as “more than royal.”²¹ This Lord receives authority and power greater than David. He and Yahweh are fully at one. Yahweh’s oracle is followed by an oath (v. 4) plus a pledge that he will never change his mind in his decree that the Lord be a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. This Melchizedek has appeared in Genesis 14, without any reference to his ancestry, birth, or death—all vital and essential features of the priests in Israel. As an everlasting priest, Melchizedek mediates an everlasting salvation. The psalm points forward to the person and power of Christ, and will be frequently cited in the NT both by Jesus of himself (Mark 12:36 and parallels) and by Peter of Jesus (Acts 2:33–35). The psalm stops short of explicitly identifying David’s Lord with Yahweh, but the connection is as close as could be.

In this psalm we have an example of what Matthew Bates terms “prosopological exegesis,” person-based interpretation of the OT by the NT and early Christian exegetes. This was instrumental in preparing the way for the formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. Bates makes a convincing case that it was a far more widespread interpretive strategy than typology and was probably used by Jesus himself as well as the apostles. It considered that certain discourses in the OT were dialogues between the persons of the Trinity. Hence, in Psalm 110:1, David reports a setting in which God addresses “my Lord,” the Christ. Mark and other synoptic writers relate how Jesus deduced “via scriptural exegesis that God (*the Father*) via a script authored by the *Holy Spirit* had spoken directly to him after the dawn of time about his origin before time began.”²² In this way, the prophets were on occasion swept up to hear intra-Trinitarian discourse referring to events that were to occur at a later date. In turn, the incarnate Son would enact these events performatively in the course of his life and ministry.

This interpretive method went beyond typology even as it differed

21. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73–150: A Commentary on Books III–V of the Psalms* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1975), 392.

22. Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford:

from it. Whereas typology required a correspondence between the OT and NT entities, prosopological meaning demands that the discourse cannot refer to the OT prophet or anyone else. Often the identity of the referent in the passage is a puzzle if it were taken to be a human. It can refer only to one who is divine; indeed, it does not *refer* to them, nor is it simply *about* them, for the divine persons are themselves the actors in the drama. For the reader to appreciate this requires a recognition of the widest context of Scripture, including the sovereignty of God, his transcendence over time, and his purposes in revelation and redemption, so that the Son is in conversation with the Father about later events in human history in his incarnate life that are yet to happen from the prophet's perspective. In the NT, he or the apostles recount these discourses as referring to himself.

The NT writers and early Christian exegetes regarded passages such as this (Psalm 2:7–9 is another, but there are many more, which could not possibly refer to David or the relevant prophet) as involving a revelation of a Trinitarian conversation. In such contexts, the discussion focuses on events that were to occur in the future in relation to the human author. In Psalm 110, the Father is discussing with the Son his future office as Priest-King, the whole being disclosed to David by the Holy Spirit.²³

These proposals have been called “stunningly important,” “a compelling game changer” (Joel Green), “an important contribution” (Larry Hurtado), “a stream of early Trinitarian thinking that has all too often been forgotten” (Lewis Ayres), and “bold and erudite” (Matthew Levering).²⁴ Bates is aware of the dangers of using such a method ourselves and provides some clear guidelines as controls to keep it within bounds. It was used when the natural meaning could not apply to the human author. He contends that it is a valid mode of interpretation, casting light on the Trinitarian relations that go beyond generation and procession, a method that he deems to have been well-nigh essential to the emergence of the doctrine of the

Oxford University Press, 2016), 44–62, here 62. Note also the discussion in Sanders, *Triune God*, 226–37.

23. Bates, *Birth of the Trinity*, 62.

24. *Ibid.*, back cover.

Trinity, greatly facilitating the church's recognition of the personal nature of God. Moreover, it sheds light on the meaning of the literal sense of Scripture, for it attests that the widest theological context should be taken into consideration. Sanders stresses that the method flows from recognition of the missions of the Son and the Spirit and so depends on the fullness of canonical revelation and our own knowledge of the Son and the Spirit, from which we can then reread the OT canonically.²⁵

Then there is Psalm 45:7–8 (6–7 English), which reads, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The scepter of your kingdom is a scepter of uprightness; you have loved righteousness and hated wickedness. Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions.” Here, referring to a royal wedding, “royal compliments suddenly blossom into divine honours,” and while some scholars attempt to evade the obvious fact that the royal figure addressed as God in verse 6 is anointed by God in verse 7, “the Hebrew resists any softening here.”²⁶ Such language makes final sense only in the light of the incarnation of the Son of God.

In a subtle series of ascriptions in Isaiah 63:8–14, Israel's checkered past is in view. Yahweh became their Deliverer (v. 8), the angel of his presence rescued them (v. 9), he loved, pitied, and carried them (v. 9), but they grieved his Holy Spirit and so he fought against them (v. 10). Then he remembered that he had put his Holy Spirit in their midst (v. 11), and so the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest (v. 14). This series of oscillations brings the Spirit of God into rather clear relief, and so, as R. N. Whybray comments, “God's holy spirit . . . is here personified more clearly than anywhere else in the Old Testament, and is on its way to its later full development as a distinct hypostasis in late Jewish and in Christian thought.”²⁷

We also note Isaiah 6:3, where the prophet, in his vision of the exalted Yahweh, hears the trisagion “Holy, holy, holy” in the mouths

25. Sanders, *Triune God*, 226–37.

26. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1–72: A Commentary on Books I–II of the Psalms* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1973), 170–71.

27. R. N. Whybray, *Isaiah 40–66*, New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 258.

of the seraphim. This is another example of what, on the face of it, was originally understood as a threefold ascription of praise to God but that on later reflection, in the light of fuller NT revelation, bears the impress of the three-personed God.

God as Father

While the distinctive covenant name of God, *YHWH*, occurs nearly seven thousand times in the OT, God calls himself *Father* only just over twenty times. Both the stress on monotheism and also the commandment against images for worship underline God's transcendence over all creaturely comparisons. This helps explain why the name is so scarce and also the real absence of feminine images and metaphors for God.²⁸ Indeed, *Father* usually refers to the covenantal relationship of Yahweh to Israel (Ex. 4:22–23; Hos. 11:1) and points to God's free choice, not to sexual activity and physical generation.²⁹ The various gods and goddesses of the ancient world were usually connected with procreation. Israel was hereby taught to avoid thinking of God in physical terms, especially anything drawn from human begetting and fertility. Instead, as Father Yahweh had freely chosen them in the history of salvation, his unconditional promise put him in an entirely different context,³⁰ that of a father's love and of the "intimate closeness" expressed in, for example, Hosea 11:3–4.³¹

Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk;
 I took them up by their arms,
 but they did not know that I healed them.
 I led them with cords of kindness,
 with the bands of love,
 and I became to them as one who eases the yoke on their jaws,
 and I bent down to them and fed them.

28. Gerald O'Collins, *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1999), 12.

29. *Ibid.*, 14, 23; Wainwright, *Trinity*, 43.

30. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 15–18.

31. *Ibid.*, 17, 22.

The Spirit of God

The Spirit of God is mentioned nearly four hundred times in the OT. In general, the Spirit is seen as the power of God at work, on occasion as an extension of the divine personality, but for the most part as little more than a divine attribute. Sometimes Hebrew poetic parallelism implies that the Spirit of God is identical to Yahweh (Ps. 139:7), but this simply begs the question, for there is not the slightest hint even here that the Spirit is to be understood as a distinct person. Rather, it is God's divine power or breath,³² "God's manifest and powerful activity in the world."³³

Frequently, anthropomorphic language is used. The Spirit has personal characteristics—guiding, instructing, being grieved. The Spirit, or breath, of God gives life (Gen. 1:2; Pss. 33:6; 104:29–30), coming upon the inert bones in Ezekiel's vision to reanimate them (Ezek. 37:8–10). The Spirit of God empowers for various forms of service in God's kingdom (Ex. 31:3; 35:31–34; Num. 27:18; Judg. 3:10; 1 Sam. 16:13), and is the protector of God's people (1 Sam. 19:20, 23; Isa. 63:11–12; Hag. 2:5), indwelling them (Num. 27:18 re Joshua; Deut. 34:9; Ezek. 2:2; 3:24; Dan. 4:8–9, 18; 5:11; Mic. 3:8), resting upon and empowering the Messiah (Isa. 11:2–3; 42:1; 61:1). The most remarkable actions of the patriarchs and prophets are all due to the Spirit of God, whether they be those of Gideon, Samson, Saul, or Joseph, who is able to interpret dreams because he was full of the Spirit of God (Gen. 41:38). All these events were to protect Israel or to develop its relationship to Yahweh. There is no evidence, however, that the Spirit was seen as a distinct person. In fact, everything points the other way. In view is not the Spirit's nature but the Spirit's action.³⁴ Yahweh acts through the Spirit, as Wainwright comments.³⁵ To suggest the contrary would have challenged the insistence of Deuteronomy that there is only one God, for no tools existed at that time to distinguish such a putative claim from

32. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 30.

33. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 32.

34. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 88.

35. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 31.

the pagan polytheism that Israel was bound to reject. The Spirit is the power of God at work, a distinctive attribute, no more.

Yet a development in the course of the OT helps pave the way for the Christian teaching. Generally, the Spirit comes only intermittently on the prophets and on select persons such as Samson and Saul, and his presence with his people in general is also intermittent (Ps. 51:11). Later on, however, the Spirit is seen as a permanent possession, with an increased focus on his ethical effect in terms of righteousness and justice (Isa. 11:2; Zech. 12:10).³⁶ The Spirit is also linked with the Messiah in three passages (Isa. 11:1–2; 42:1; 61:1), and is expected to come as a future gift to all of God’s people (Ezek. 11:19; 36:26; 37:12–14; Joel 2:28ff.; Zech. 12:10). Thus, “the developing idea of the Spirit provided a climate in which plurality within the Godhead was conceivable.”³⁷

At this point, B. B. Warfield’s magisterial article “The Spirit of God in the Old Testament” is important.³⁸ He considers the work of the Spirit in connection with the cosmos, the kingdom of God, and the individual, concluding that he was at work in all the ways he works in the NT. But there is a difference. New in the NT are the miraculous endowments of the apostles and the worldwide mission of the Spirit, promised in the OT but only now realized. In addition and principally, the OT was a preparation for the NT, the Spirit simply preserving the people of God, whereas now he produces “the fruitage and gathering of the harvest.”³⁹ Still, Warfield agrees, there is no evidence that he was considered as a distinct person.

The Word and Wisdom of God

After the exile, God is seen to work through a variety of heavenly figures, with divine attributes and powers—Wisdom and Word,

36. *Ibid.*, 32.

37. *Ibid.*, 32–33.

38. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “The Spirit of God in the Old Testament,” in *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1952), 127–56.

39. *Ibid.*, 155–56.

exalted patriarchs, or principal angels such as Michael (Dan. 10:1–12:13). In particular, Wisdom and Word provide the closest background for the eventual emergence of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Wisdom is mentioned in Job 15:7–8 and 28:12, implying preexistence but hardly any personal distinction. In Proverbs 8 and 9 are two poems in which Wisdom is the chief figure. In Proverbs 8:1ff., Wisdom addresses human beings, promising the same things that God gives.⁴⁰ In Proverbs 9:1ff., Wisdom presents herself apparently as a person but more accurately as “a personified abstraction,” in antithetical parallel with folly (vv. 13ff.). Since folly is merely personalized, the same might apply to Wisdom. In the famous section from 8:22, however, more than metaphor is present, for Wisdom cries aloud, hates, and loves and is portrayed as God’s master workman, “an effluence of God’s glory” (Wainwright). Wisdom also advises and instructs and, moreover, is identified with God, yet also distinguished.⁴¹ These themes are repeated in the intertestamental literature. Wisdom has a certain role in creation, is frequently identified with the law, and is also clearly distinguished from God.⁴² While not directly connected with the Messiah, the idea of Wisdom is used by Paul and the early Christians to explain who Christ is.⁴³

The psalmist presents the Word of God as active in creation, in parallel with God’s Spirit (Ps. 33:6–9). When God communicated to man, he spoke (cf. Ex. 3:4ff.; Ps. 33:6–9). But this Word is never personified in the OT in the way that Wisdom is. It was Philo, with the aid of Hellenistic influence present in Alexandria, who thought of the Logos in a personalized way.⁴⁴ Lebreton suggests that “if these

40. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 91–92; O’Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 24. Where I refer to *wisdom*, I keep the first letter lowercase, unless it is the first word in a sentence. In quotations, of course, I retain the source’s casing. Where the word is personalized, as in parts of the OT or in Russian theology, I capitalize the *W*. On occasion, the category in which to place it is a matter of judgment.

41. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 92–94; Wainwright, *Trinity*, 33–34.

42. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 94–98.

43. See James D. G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 163–212.

44. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 35–36; Lebreton, *Trinity*, 99–100.

various obscure and elementary conceptions are not sufficient of themselves to constitute a doctrine of the Trinity, they at least prepare the soul for the Christian revelation."⁴⁵

The Expectation of the Messiah's Coming

The prophets from time to time hold out the prospect of a future Deliverer. In fact, Yahweh himself was to come and save his people and bring them to an age of peace and prosperity. The sign that Isaiah gave to King Ahaz was the birth of a son to be called *Imanu-el* (Isa. 7:14), which means "God with us." There is no clear contender for this accolade in Judah's immediate or later history, and since Hebrew children were regularly given names denoting some aspect of the character or action of Yahweh, no extraordinary significance may have been attached to this oracle at the time. But Isaiah also speaks of a child, a son who would rule, whose dominion was to be of unending peace, security, and justice. This son is evidently portentous. He was to sit on the throne of David and be called, *inter alia*, "mighty God" (Isa. 9:6). Again, Micah foretells a ruler over Judah, born in Bethlehem, of superhuman origins "whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days" (Mic. 5:2–5a). This ruler is associated with God but is not identical to him. In Daniel, the majestic figure of the Son of Man (Dan. 7:13–14) is given universal, everlasting, and impregnable dominion. Jesus was to call himself the *Son of Man* as his most usual self-description. But the exact identity of this figure, presented in Daniel without recourse to any other source, is unclear. Neither the prophet's contemporaries nor later generations grasped the full meaning of these oracles, and only with the presence of Jesus, and the reality of who he was and what he did, is their full meaning disclosed, for then the NT writers apply to Jesus the prophetic statements referring to Yahweh.⁴⁶

45. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 81.

46. *Ibid.*, 101.

Summary

While the OT does not make explicit what is revealed with the coming of Christ and the completion of the NT, it provides the essential foundation without which the full Christian doctrine of God could not exist. As O'Collins puts it, "The OT contains, in anticipation, categories used to express and elaborate the Trinity. To put this point negatively, a theology of the Trinity that ignores or plays down the OT can only be radically deficient."⁴⁷ From the positive angle, "the NT and post-NT Christian language for the tripersonal God flowed from the Jewish Scriptures," for though deeply modified in the light of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, naming God as Father, Son, and Spirit "found its roots in the OT."⁴⁸ This is not to say that by the first century there had emerged in Israel a clear and coherent picture of plurality within the one being of God. This was clearly not the case. These ideas in the OT were scattered and had not formed into anything like a coherent picture.⁴⁹ Even so, the OT provided the means both to distinguish and to hold together the role of Son/Wisdom/Word and Spirit, since these were vivid personifications, not abstract principles. The ultimate acknowledgment by the church of the triunity of God was "providentially prepared" by these foreshadowings.⁵⁰ The OT personalizations helped lay the groundwork for the eventual leap to persons, for "the post-exilic Jews had an idea of plurality within the Godhead," and so "the idea of plurality within unity was already implicit in Jewish theology."⁵¹

On the other hand, there is no evidence in the OT that the question the church had to answer had been raised. That problem was that Christ was not a mere emanation from God and that he was more than a personalized concept. He was a man with whom the apostles conversed and with whom they worked. He had a real

47. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 11.

48. *Ibid.*, 32.

49. Lebreton, *Trinity*, 102–3.

50. O'Collins, *Tripersonal God*, 33–34.

51. Wainwright, *Trinity*, 37.

interaction with God, far more real than theirs. Indeed, they had eavesdropped on “an interaction within the divine personality,” “a dialogue within the Godhead” of which there is little if any trace in the OT. As Wainwright continues, “The idea of extension of divine personality is Hebraic. The idea of the interaction within the extended personality is neither Hebraic nor Hellenistic but Christian.”⁵² This is the great leap forward that the NT contains and that the church was to develop.

As so often, Gregory of Nazianzus gives us a superbly appropriate summary, ingeniously pointing to the historical outworking of revelation, to explain its cautious, gradual, and progressive unfolding of who God is. “The Old Testament proclaimed the Father openly, and the Son more obscurely. The New manifested the Son, and suggested the deity of the Spirit. Now the Spirit himself dwells among us, and supplies us with a clearer demonstration of himself. For it was not safe, when the Godhead of the Father was not yet acknowledged, plainly to proclaim the Son; nor when that of the Son was not yet received to burden us further . . . with the Holy Spirit It was necessary that, increasing little by little, and, as David says, by ascensions from glory to glory, the full splendour of the Trinity should gradually shine forth.”⁵³

We adore the Father, as also his Son, and the Holy Spirit, the Holy Trinity in one Essence, crying with the Seraphim: Holy, holy, holy art thou, O Lord. Now, and ever, and unto ages of ages. Amen.⁵⁴

Key Terms

anthropomorphic
monotheism
typology

52. Ibid., 38–40.

53. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31*, 26.

54. Matins, *Service Book*, 29.

Question for Reflection

How far is it appropriate to talk of the revelation of the Trinity in the OT?

For Further Reading

Matthew Bates, *The Birth of the Trinity: Jesus, God, and Spirit in New Testament and Early Christian Interpretations of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).