



A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership
Volume 10 • Number 3 • Summer 2001

Like many of my generation, in my undergraduate studies, I took a course on the Trinity that left me puzzled as to what conceivable relevance this topic could have for the rest of theology (apart, perhaps, from that of the Incarnation) or for the challenge of the Christian life. With hindsight it is not difficult to see that this was because the track taken on the Trinity was separated from that on the One God and because it focused exclusively on the immanent Trinity (the Godhead considered "in itself," apart from the economy of salvation). This situation, repeated all over the world, led in the sixties to the quiet dropping of the Trinity as a topic of study in theological curricula almost everywhere. Only now is the trend being reversed. This change is not just a matter of fad or fashion. It is occurring because of a growing perception and appreciation of the fact that salvation itself, the very gift of the spiritual life, has a Trinitarian (and also ecclesial) structure, that is, it is God (the Father's) salvation mediated to the Church by Jesus Christ in the power of the Holy Spirit. We cannot understand salvation, spirituality, Christian living in the world without understanding at least something of the Trinity.

DAVID COFFEY

DEUS TRINITAS: THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRIUNE GOD (1999)

BIBLICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY¹

Don Garlington

FORESHADOWINGS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT²

According to Genesis 1:26, God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." What do the plural verb ("let us") and the plural pronoun ("our") mean? Some have suggested they are plurals of majesty, a form of speech a king would use in saying, for example, "We are pleased to grant your request." However, in the Hebrew Old Testament there are no other examples of a monarch using plural verbs or plural pronouns of himself in such a "plural of majesty." So, this suggestion has no evidence to support it. Another suggestion is that God is speaking to angels here. But angels did not participate in the creation of man, nor was man created in the image and likeness of angels, so this suggestion is not convincing. The best explanation is that in the first chapter of Genesis we already have an indication of a plurality of persons in God himself. We are not told how many persons, and we surely have nothing approaching a complete doctrine of the Trinity, but what is implied indicates that more than one person is involved. The same can be said of Genesis 3:22, "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." Consider as well Genesis 11:7: "Come, let us go down, and confuse their language there," and Isaiah 6:8, "Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?" (Note the combination of singular and plural in the same sentence in the Isaiah passage.)

Moreover, there are passages where one person is called "God" or "the Lord" and is distinguished from another person who is also said to be God. In Psalm 45:6-7, the psalmist says, "Your throne, O God, endures forever and ever. . . . You love righteousness and hate wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions." Here the psalm passes beyond describing anything that could be true of an earthly king and calls the king "God" (verse 6), whose throne will last "forever and ever." But then, still speaking to the person called "God," the author says that "God, your God, has set you above your companions" (verse 7). So two separate persons are called "God" (Hebrew *Elohim*). In the New Testament, the author of Hebrews quotes this passage and applies it to Christ: "Your throne, O God, is forever and ever" (Hebrews 1:8).

Similarly, in Psalm 110:1, David says, "The Lord says to my lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.'" Jesus understands that David is referring to two separate persons as "Lord" (Matthew 22:41-46), but who is David's "Lord" if it is not God himself? And *who* could be saying to God, "Sit at my right hand" except someone else who is also fully God? From a New Testament perspective, we can paraphrase this verse: "God the Father said to God the Son, 'Sit at my right hand.'" But even without the New Testament teaching on the Trinity, it seems clear that David was fully aware of a plurality of persons in one God. Jesus, of course, understood this, but when he asked the Pharisees for an explanation of this passage, "no one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions" (Matthew 22:46).

Isaiah 63:10 says that God's people "rebelled and grieved his Holy Spirit," apparently suggesting both that the Holy Spirit is distinct from God himself (It is "his Holy Spirit"), and that this Holy Spirit can be "grieved," thus sug-

gesting emotional capabilities characteristic of a distinct person. (Isaiah 61:1 also distinguishes "The Spirit of the Lord God" from "the Lord," even though no personal qualities are attributed to the Spirit of the Lord in this verse.)

Similar evidence is found in Malachi, when the Lord says, "The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?" (Malachi 3:1-2). Here again the one speaking ("the Lord of hosts") distinguishes himself from "the Lord whom you seek," suggesting two separate persons, both of whom can be called "Lord."

In Hosea 1:7, the Lord is speaking, and says of the house of Judah, "I will save them by the Lord their God," once again suggesting that more than one person can be called "Lord" (Hebrew *Yahweh*) and "God" (Hebrew *Elohim*). And in Isaiah 48:16, the speaker (apparently the servant of the Lord) says, "And now the Lord God has sent me and his Spirit". Here the Spirit of the Lord, like the servant of the Lord, has been "sent" by the Lord God on a particular mission. The parallel between the two objects of sending ("me" and "his Spirit") would be consistent with seeing them both as distinct persons: It seems to mean more than simply "the Lord has sent me and his power." In fact, from a full New Testament perspective (which recognizes Jesus the Messiah to be the true servant of the Lord predicted in Isaiah's prophecies), Isaiah 48:16 has Trinitarian implications: "And now the Lord God has sent me and his Spirit," if spoken by God's Servant and his Son, refers to all three persons of the Trinity.

Furthermore, several Old Testament passages about "the angel of the Lord" suggest a plurality of persons in God. The word translated "angel" (Hebrew *malak*) means simply "messenger." If this angel of the Lord is a "messen-

ger" of the Lord, he is distinct from the Lord himself. Yet at some points the angel of the Lord is called "God" or "the Lord" (see Genesis 16:13; Exodus 3:2-6; 23:20-22 [note "my name is in him" in verse 21]; Numbers 22:35 with 38; Judges 2:1-2; 6:11 with 14). At other points in the Old Testament "the angel of the Lord" simply refers to a created angel, but at least in these texts the special angel (or "messenger") of the Lord seems to be a distinct person who is fully divine.

One of the most disputed Old Testament texts that shows distinct personality for more than one person is Proverbs 8:22-31. Although the earlier part of the chapter could be understood as merely a personification of "wisdom" for literary effect, showing wisdom calling out to the simple and inviting them to learn (verses 22-31), it is arguable that "wisdom" is spoken of in a way that seems to go far beyond mere personification. Speaking of the time when God created the earth, "wisdom" says, "Then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race" (Proverbs 8:30-31). To work as a "craftsman" at God's side in the creation suggests in itself the idea of distinct personhood, and the following phrases might seem even more convincing, for only real persons can be "daily his delight" and can rejoice in the world and delight in mankind. But if we decide that "wisdom" here really refers to the Son of God before he became man, there is a difficulty. Verses 22-25 seem to speak of the creation of this person who is called "wisdom":

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth. When there were no depths I was brought forth, when there were no springs abounding with

water. Before the mountains had been shaped, before the hills, I was brought forth.

Does this not indicate that the "wisdom" in view here was created? In fact, it does not. The Hebrew word that commonly means "create" (Hebrew *bara*) is not used in verse 22; rather the word is the Hebrew *qanah*, which occurs eighty-four times in the Old Testament and almost always means "to get, acquire." The NASB is most clear here: "The Lord possessed me at the beginning of his way."³ This is a legitimate sense and, if wisdom is understood as a real person, would mean only that God the Father began to direct and make use of the powerful creative work of God the Son at the time creation began: the Father summoned the Son to work with him in the activity of creation.⁴ The expression "brought forth" in verses 24 and 25 is a different term but could carry a similar meaning: the Father began to direct and make use of the powerful creative work of the Son in the creation of the universe.

THE FULL REVELATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT⁵

When the New Testament opens, we enter into the history of the coming of the Son of God to earth. It is to be expected that this great event would be accompanied by more explicit teaching about the Trinitarian nature of God, and that is in fact what we find. Before looking at this in detail, a simple list of several passages where all three persons of the Trinity are named together helps us see the big picture.

When Jesus was baptized, "the heavens were opened and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and alighting on him; and lo, a voice from heaven, saying, 'This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased'" (Matthew 3:16-17). Here at one moment we have three members of the Trinity performing three distinct activities.

God the Father is speaking from heaven; God the Son is being baptized and is then spoken to from heaven by God the Father; and God the Holy Spirit is descending from heaven to rest upon and empower Jesus for his ministry.

At the end of Jesus' earthly ministry, he tells the disciples that they should go "and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). The very names "Father" and "Son," drawn as they are from the family, the most familiar of human institutions, indicate very strongly the distinct personhood of both the Father and the Son. When "the Holy Spirit" is put in the same expression and on the same level as the other two persons, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the Holy Spirit is also viewed as a person and of equal standing with the Father and the Son.

When we realize that the New Testament authors generally use the name "God" (Greek *theos*) to refer to God the Father and the name "Lord" (Greek *kyrios*) to refer to God the Son, then it is clear another Trinitarian expression occurs in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6: "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in every one."

Similarly, the last verse of 2 Corinthians is Trinitarian in its expression: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Corinthians 13:14). We also see three persons mentioned separately in Ephesians 4:4-6: "There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all."

All three persons of the Trinity are mentioned together in the opening sentence of 1 Peter: "According to the foreknowledge of God the Father, by the sanctifying work of the

Spirit, that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with his blood" (1 Peter 1:2). And in Jude 20-21, we read: "But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life."

However, the King James Version (KJV) translation of 1 John 5:7 should not be used in this connection. It reads, "For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one." The problem with this translation is that it is based on a very small number of unreliable Greek manuscripts, the earliest of which comes from the fourteenth century A.D. No modern translation includes this KJV reading. Modern translations universally omit it, as do the vast majority of Greek manuscripts from all major text traditions, including several reliable manuscripts from the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. And quotations by church fathers like Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Athanasius demonstrate the same omission.

SUMMARY OF THE BIBLICAL DATA

God Is Three in One

The fact that God is three persons means that the Father is *not* the Son; they are distinct persons. It also means that the Father is *not* the Holy Spirit, but they are distinct persons. And it further means that the Son is *not* the Holy Spirit. These distinctions are seen in a number of the passages quoted in the earlier section as well as in numerous additional New Testament passages.

John 1:1-2 tells us: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God." The fact that the "Word" (who is seen to be Christ in verses 9-18) is "with" God shows distinction from God the Father. In John 17:24, Jesus speaks to

God the Father about "my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world," thus showing distinction of persons, sharing of glory, and a relationship of love between the Father and the Son before the world was created.

We are told that Jesus continues as our High Priest and Advocate before God the Father: "If any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous" (1 John 2:1). Christ is the one who "is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them" (Hebrews 7:25). Yet in order to intercede for us before God the Father, it is necessary that Christ be a person distinct from the Father.

Moreover, the Father is not the Holy Spirit, and the Son is not the Holy Spirit. They are *distinguished* in several verses. Jesus says, "But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (John 14:26). The Holy Spirit also prays or "intercedes" for us (Romans 8:27), indicating a *distinction* between the Holy Spirit and God the Father to whom the intercession is made.

Finally, the fact that the Son is not the Holy Spirit is also indicated in the several Trinitarian passages mentioned earlier, such as the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19), and in passages that indicate that Christ went back to heaven and then sent the Holy Spirit, a separate person, to the church. Jesus said, "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you" (John 16:7).

Some have questioned whether the Holy Spirit is indeed a distinct person, rather than just the "power" or "force" of God at work in the world. But the New Testament evidence is quite clear and strong. First, there are the several

verses mentioned earlier where the Holy Spirit is put in a coordinate relationship with the Father and the Son (Matthew 28:19; 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:46; 1 Peter 1:2). Since the Father and Son are both persons, the coordinate expression strongly intimates that the Holy Spirit is a person also. Then there are the places where the masculine pronoun he (Greek *ekeinos*) is applied to the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13-14), which one would not expect from the rules of Greek grammar, for the word "spirit" (Greek *pneuma*) is neuter, not masculine, and would ordinarily be referred to with the neuter pronoun *ekeino*. Moreover, the name counselor or comforter (Greek *parakletos*) is a term commonly used to speak of a person who helps or gives comfort or counsel to another person or persons, but is used of the Holy Spirit in John's gospel (14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

Furthermore, other personal activities are ascribed to the Holy Spirit, such as teaching (John 14:26), bearing witness (John 15:26; Romans 8:16), interceding or praying on behalf of others (Romans 8:26-27), searching the depths of God (1 Corinthians 2:10), knowing the thoughts of God (1 Corinthians 2:11), willing to distribute some gifts to some and other gifts to others (1 Corinthians 12:11), forbidding or not allowing certain activities (Acts 16:6-7), speaking (Acts 8:29; 13:2; and many times in both Old and New Testaments), evaluating and approving a wise course of action (Acts 15:28), and being grieved by sin in the lives of Christians (Ephesians 4:30).

Finally, if the Holy Spirit is understood simply to be the power of God, rather than a distinct person, then a number of passages would simply not make sense, because in them the Holy Spirit and his power or the power of God are both mentioned. For example, Luke 4:14, "And Jesus returned in the power of the Spirit into Galilee," would have to mean, "Jesus returned in the power of the power of God into

Galilee." In Acts 10:38, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power," would mean, "God anointed Jesus with the power of God and with power" (see also Romans 15:13; 1 Corinthians 2:4).

Each Person Is Equally God

In addition to the fact that all three persons are distinct, the abundant testimony of Scripture is that each person is fully God as well.

1. God the Father Is Fully God

This is evident from the first verse of the Bible, where God created the heavens and the earth. It is evident through the Old and New Testaments, where God the Father is clearly viewed as the sovereign Lord over all and where Jesus prays to his Father in heaven.

2. The Son Is Fully God⁶

John 1:1-4 clearly affirms the full deity of Christ: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men." Here Christ is referred to as "the Word," and John says both that he was "with God" and that he "was God." The Greek text echoes the opening words of Genesis 1:1 ("In the beginning . . .") and reminds us that John is talking about something that was true before the world was made. God the Son was always fully God.

John 20:28 in its context is also a strong proof for the deity of Christ. Thomas had doubted the reports of the other disciples that they had seen Jesus raised from the dead, and he said he would not believe unless he could see the nail prints in Jesus' hands and place his hand in his wounded side (John 20:25). Then Jesus appeared to the disciples

when Thomas was with them. He said to Thomas, "Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing" (John 20:27). In response to this, we read, "Thomas answered him, 'My Lord and my God!'" (John 20:28). Here Thomas calls Jesus "my God." The narrative shows that both John in writing his gospel and Jesus himself approve of what Thomas has said and encourage everyone who hears about Thomas to believe the same things that Thomas did. Jesus immediately responds to Thomas, "Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe" (John 20:29). As far as John is concerned, this is the dramatic high point of the gospel, for he immediately tells the readers in the very next verse that this was the very reason he wrote what he did: "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name" (John 20:30-31).

Jesus speaks of those who will not see him and will yet believe, and John immediately tells the reader that he recorded the events written in his gospel in order that they may believe in just this way, imitating Thomas in his confession of faith. In other words, the entire gospel is written to persuade people to imitate Thomas, who sincerely called Jesus "my Lord and my God." Because this is set out by John as the purpose of his gospel, the sentence takes on added force." Other passages speaking of Jesus as fully divine include Hebrews 1, where the author says that Christ is the "exact representation" (verse 3; Greek *charakter*, "exact duplicate") of the nature or being (Greek *hypostasis*) of God—meaning that God the Son exactly duplicates the being or nature of God the Father in every way: whatever attributes or power God the Father has, God the Son has them as well. The author goes on to refer to the Son as

"God" in verse 8 ("But of the Son he says, 'Your throne, O God, is for ever and ever'"), and he attributes the creation of the heavens to Christ when he says of him, "You, Lord, did found the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands" (Hebrews 1:10, quoting Psalm 102:25). Titus 2:13 refers to "our great God and Savior Jesus Christ," and 2 Peter 1:1 speaks of "the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ." Romans 9:5, speaking of the Jewish people, says, "Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised. Amen."

Isaiah 9:6 predicts, "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government will be upon his shoulders, and his name will be called 'Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God.'" As this prophecy is applied to Christ, it refers to him as "Mighty God." Note the similar application of the titles "Lord" and "God" in the prophecy of the coming of the Messiah in Isaiah 40:3, "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God," quoted by John the Baptist in preparation for the coming of Christ in Matthew 3:3.

A notable recent attempt to downplay this data regarding the Son of God is James D. G. Dunn's *The Partings of the Ways*.⁷ Dunn's book is rich in historical and theological insight. However, in arguing that the New Testament's Christology, as distinct from the Nicean variety, can be confined to Jewish monotheism, Dunn consistently evacuates texts like John 1:1, 14; Philippians 2:6-11 of their most powerful and, I would say, intended impact. Repeatedly Christ is denied the status of *full* Godhood by a reductionism which makes him merely the modality of the divine presence (e.g., 215). In my view, this simply does not do justice—exegetical or theological—to the assertion that "the word *was* God." Equally disturbing are Dunn's suggestions that, in Jewish/Christian dialogue, Christ may be regarded

as an essential complement of the Torah (247), rather than its displacement (as over against John 1:17; 5:39; Romans 10:4), and that classic Trinitarianism is actually a form of polytheism (246)! With regard to the latter, Dunn has not allowed for the possibility that Jewish monotheism has now been superseded by *Christian* monotheism, whereby the one God of Israel is now to be regarded as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (one of the mainstays of Warfield's "Trinity"). N. T. Wright is on target in penning: "Although the writers of the New Testament did not themselves formulate the doctrine of the Trinity, they bequeathed to their successors a manner of speaking and writing about God which made it, or something very like it, almost inevitable."⁸

3. The Holy Spirit Is Fully God

Once we understand God the Father and God the Son to be fully God, then the Trinitarian expressions in verses like Matthew 28:19 ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit") assume significance for the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, because they show that the Holy Spirit is classified on an equal level with the Father and the Son. This can be seen if we recognize how unthinkable it would have been for Jesus to say something like, "baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the archangel Michael"—this would give to a created being a status entirely inappropriate even to an archangel. Believers throughout all ages can only be baptized into the name (and thus into a taking on of the character) of God himself. (Note also the other Trinitarian passages mentioned above: 1 Corinthians 12:4-6; 2 Corinthians 13:14; Ephesians 4:4-6; 1 Peter 1:2; Jude 20-21.)

In Acts 5:3-4, Peter asks Ananias, "Why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit? . . . You have not lied to men but to God." According to Peter's words, to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3:16,

"Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" God's temple is the place where God himself dwells, which Paul explains by the fact that "God's Spirit" dwells in it, thus apparently equating God's Spirit with God himself.

David asks in Psalm 139:7-8, "Where can I go from your Spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there!" This passage attributes the divine characteristic of omnipresence to the Holy Spirit, something that is not true of any of God's creatures. It seems that David is equating God's Spirit with God's presence. To go from God's Spirit is to go from his presence, but if there is nowhere that David can flee from God's Spirit, then he knows that wherever he goes he will have to say, "You are there."

Paul attributes the divine characteristic of omniscience to the Holy Spirit in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11: "For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For what human being knows what is truly human except the human spirit that is within? So also no one comprehends what is truly God's except the Spirit of God."

Moreover, the activity of giving new birth to everyone who is born again is the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, "No one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not be astonished that I said to you, 'You must be born from above'" (John 3:5-7). But the work of giving new spiritual life to people when they become Christians is something that only God can do (cf. 1 John 3:9, "born of God"). This passage therefore gives another indication that the Holy Spirit is fully God.

THERE IS ONLY ONE GOD

Scripture is abundantly clear that there is one and only one God. The three different persons of the Trinity are one

not only in purpose and in agreement on what they think, but they are one in essence, one in their essential nature. In other words, God is only one being. There are not three Gods. There is only one God.

One of the most familiar passages of the Old Testament is the *Shema*, Deuteronomy 6:4-5: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might." Likewise, when Moses sings, "Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majestic in holiness, awesome in splendor, doing wonders?" (Exodus 15:11) the answer obviously is "No one." God is unique, and there is no one like him and there can be no one like him. In fact, Solomon prays "that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God; there is no other" (1 Kings 8:60).

When God speaks, he repeatedly makes it clear that he is the only true God; the idea that there are three Gods to be worshipped rather than one would be unthinkable in the light of these extremely strong statements. God alone is the one true God and there is no one like him. When he speaks, he alone is speaking—he is not speaking as one God among three who are to be worshiped. He says: "I am the Lord, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I arm you, though you do not know me, so that they may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is no one besides me; I am the Lord, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:5-6). Similarly, he calls everyone on earth to turn to him: "There is no other god besides me, a righteous God and a Savior; there is no one besides me. "Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:21-22; cf. Isaiah 44:6-8).

The New Testament also affirms that there is one God. Paul writes, "For there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human" (1 Timothy 2:5). Paul affirms that "God is one"

(Romans 3:30), and that “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist” (1 Corinthians 8:6). Finally, James acknowledges that even demons recognize that there is one God, even though their intellectual assent to that fact is not enough to save them: “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder” (James 2:19). But clearly James affirms that one “does well” to believe that “God is one.”

THE DISTINCTIONS AMONG THE THREE PERSONS

The Three Persons Have Different Primary Functions in Relation to the World

When Scripture discusses the way in which God relates to the world, both in creation and in redemption, the persons of the Trinity are said to have different functions or primary activities. Sometimes this has been called the “economy of the Trinity,” using economy in an old sense meaning an “ordering of activities.” (In this sense, people used to speak of the “economy of a household” or “home economics,” meaning not just the financial affairs of a household, but all of the “ordering of activities” within the household.) The “economy of the Trinity” means the different ways the three persons act as they relate to the world and to each other for all eternity.

We see these different functions in the work of creation. God the Father spoke the creative words to bring the universe into being. But it was God the Son, the eternal Word of God, who carried out these creative decrees. “All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being” (John 1:3). Moreover, “in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things have been created through him and for

him” (Colossians 1:16; see also Psalm 33:6, 9; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:2). The Holy Spirit was active as well in a different way, in “moving” or “hovering” over the face of the waters (Genesis 1:2), apparently sustaining and manifesting God’s immediate presence in his creation (cf. Psalm 33:6, where “breath” should perhaps be translated “Spirit”; see also Psalm 139:7).

In the work of redemption there are also distinct functions. God the Father planned redemption and sent his Son into the world (John 3:16; Galatians 4:4; Ephesians 1:9-10). The Son obeyed the Father and accomplished redemption for us (John 6:38; Hebrews 10:5-7; et al.). God the Father did not come and die for our sins, nor did God the Holy Spirit. That was the particular work of the Son. Then, after Jesus ascended back into heaven, the Holy Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to apply redemption to us. Jesus speaks of “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name” (John 14:26), but also says that he himself will send the Holy Spirit, for he says, “If I go, I will send him to you” (John 16:7), and he speaks of a time “when the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth . . .” (John 15:26). It is especially the role of the Holy Spirit to give us regeneration or new spiritual life (John 3:5-8), to sanctify us (Romans 8:13; 15:16; 1 Peter 1:2), and to empower us for service (Acts 1:8; 1 Corinthians 12:7-11). In general, the work of the Holy Spirit seems to be to bring to completion the work that has been planned by God the Father and begun by God the Son.

So we may say that the role of the Father in creation and redemption has been to plan and direct and send the Son and Holy Spirit. This is not surprising, for it shows that the Father and the Son relate to one another as a father and son relate to one another in a human family: the father directs and has authority over the son, and the son obeys and is responsive to the directions of the father. The Holy Spirit is

obedient to the directives of both the Father and the Son. Thus, while the persons of the Trinity are equal in all their attributes, they nonetheless differ in their relationships to the creation. The Son and Holy Spirit are equal in deity to God the Father, but they are subordinate in their roles.

Moreover, these differences in role are not temporary but will last forever: Paul tells us that even after the final judgment, when the "last enemy," that is, death, is destroyed and when all things are put under Christ's feet, "then the Son himself will also be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection under him, so that God may be all in all" (1 Corinthians 15:28).

The Three Persons Existed Eternally as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

But why do the persons of the Trinity take these different roles in relating to creation? Was it accidental or arbitrary? Could God the Father have come instead of God the Son to die for our sins? Could the Holy Spirit have sent God the Father to die for our sins, and then sent God the Son to apply redemption to us?

No, it does not seem that these things could have happened, for the role of commanding, directing, and sending is appropriate to the position of the Father, after whom all human fatherhood is patterned (Ephesians 3:14-15). And the role of obeying, going as the Father sends, and revealing God to us is appropriate to the role of the Son, who is also called the Word of God (cf. John 1:1-5, 14, 18; 17:4; Philip- pians 2:5-11). These roles could not have been reversed or the Father would have ceased to be the Father and the Son would have ceased to be the Son. And by analogy from that relationship, we may conclude that the role of the Holy Spirit is similarly one that was appropriate to the relationship he had with the Father and the Son before the world was created.

Second, before the Son came to earth, and even before the world was created, for all eternity the Father has been the Father, the Son has been the Son, and the Holy Spirit has been the Holy Spirit. These relationships are eternal, not something that occurred only in time. We may conclude this first from the unchangeableness of God: if God now exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then he has always existed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We may also conclude that the relationships are eternal from other verses in Scripture that speak of the relationships the members of the Trinity had to one another before the creation of the world. For instance, when Scripture speaks of God's work of election before the creation of the world, it speaks of the Father choosing us "in" the Son: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. . . . He chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless before him in love" (Ephesians 1:3-4). The initiatory act of choosing is attributed to God the Father, who regards us as united to Christ or "in Christ" before we ever existed. Similarly, of God the Father, it is said that "those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Romans 8:29). We also read of the "foreknowledge of God the Father" in distinction from particular functions of the other two members of the Trinity (1 Peter 1:2; cf. 1:20). Even the facts that the Father "gave his only Son" (John 3:16) and "sent the Son into the world" (John 3:17) indicate that there was a Father-Son relationship before Christ came into the world. The Son did not become the Son when the Father sent him into the world. Rather, the great love of God is shown in the fact that the one who was always Father gave the one who was always his only Son: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son" (Galatians 4:4).

When Scripture speaks of creation, once again it speaks

of the Father creating through the Son, indicating a relationship prior to when creation began (see John 1:3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Hebrews 1:2; also Proverbs 8:22-31). But nowhere does it say that the Son or Holy Spirit created through the Father. These passages again imply that there was a relationship of Father (as originator) and Son (as active agent) before creation, and that this relationship made it appropriate for the different persons of the Trinity to fulfill the roles they actually did fulfill.

Therefore, the different functions that we see the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit performing are simply outworkings of an eternal relationship between the three persons, one that has always existed and will exist for eternity. God has always existed as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These distinctions are essential to the very nature of God himself, and they could not be otherwise.

Finally, it may be said that there are no differences in deity, attributes, or essential nature between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each person is fully God and has all the attributes of God. The only distinctions between the members of the Trinity are in the ways they relate to each other and to creation. In those relationships they carry out roles that are appropriate to each person.

This truth about the Trinity has sometimes been summarized in the phrase "ontological equality but economic subordination," where the word ontological means "being." Another way of expressing this more simply would be to say "equal in being but subordinate in role." Both parts of this phrase are necessary to a true doctrine of the Trinity: If we do not have ontological equality, not all the persons are fully God. But if we do not have economic subordination, then there is no inherent difference in the way the three persons relate to one another, and consequently we do not have the three distinct persons existing as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit for all eternity. For example, if the Son

is not eternally subordinate to the Father in role, then the Father is not eternally "Father" and the Son is not eternally "Son." This would mean that the Trinity has not eternally existed.

This is why the idea of eternal equality in being but subordination in role has been essential to the church's doctrine of the Trinity since it was first affirmed in the *Nicene Creed*, which said that the Son was "begotten of the Father before all ages" and that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father and the Son." Surprisingly, some recent evangelical writings have denied an eternal subordination in role among the members of the Trinity, but it has clearly been part of the church's doctrine of the Trinity at least since Nicea (A.D. 325). Thus Charles Hodge can say:

The Nicene doctrine includes, the principle of the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son. But this subordination does not imply inferiority. . . . The subordination intended is only that which concerns the mode of subsistence and operation. . . . The creeds are nothing more than a well-ordered arrangement of the facts of Scripture which concern the doctrine of the Trinity. They assert the distinct personality of the Father, Son, and Spirit . . . and their consequent perfect equality; and the subordination of the Son to the Father, and of the Spirit to the Father and the Son, as to the mode of subsistence and operation. These are scriptural facts, to which the creeds in question add nothing; and it is in this sense they have been accepted by the Church universal.⁹

Similarly, A. H. Strong writes:

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, while equal in essence and dignity, stand to each other in an order of personality, office, and operation. . . . The subordination of the person of the Son to the person of the Father, or in other words an order of

personality, office, and operation which permits the Father to be officially first, the Son second, and the Spirit third, is perfectly consistent with equality. Priority is not necessarily superiority. . . . We frankly recognize an eternal subordination of Christ to the Father, but we maintain at the same time that this subordination is a subordination of order, office, and operation, not a subordination of essence.¹⁰

Author

Dr. Don Garlington, who received his Ph.D. from the University of Durham (United Kingdom), is a Baptist minister who serves as professor of New Testament at Toronto Baptist Seminary and Bible College, Toronto, Ontario (Canada). He is the author of several academic works, including the important work, *The Obedience of Faith: A Pauline Phrase in Historical Context*. He is a frequent contributor to various theological publications. He is married and the father of two adult sons, and lives in Scarborough, Ontario. He is a contributing editor to *Reformation & Revival Journal*.

Notes

1. The classic and foundational study of the Trinity continues to be that of B. B. Warfield, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," in *Biblical Doctrines* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1929), 133-72. More recent works include A. W. Wainwright, *The Trinity in the New Testament* (London: SPCK, 1962); M. J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); id., *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991); Robert Morey, *The Trinity: Evidence and Issues* (Grand Rapids: World, 1996); W. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan), 226-61. I am particularly indebted to Grudem.
2. See at more length, Wainwright, *Trinity*, 15-40 (though Wainwright is correct that there is nothing precisely like the Trinity in Judaism); Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 159-74; Morey, *Trinity*, chapters 7-13 (and chapter 14 for the intertestamental evidence).
3. Note this sense of the word in Genesis 39:1; Exodus 21:2; Proverbs 4:5, 7; 23:23; Ecclesiastes 2:7; Isaiah 1:3 ("owner").

4. The confusion surrounding the translation of the verse seems to have been caused by the unusual translation of the Septuagint, which used *ktizo* (create) rather than the usual translation *ktaomai* (acquire, take possession of) to translate the Hebrew term at this verse. *Qanah* occurs eighty-four times in the Hebrew Old Testament and is translated more than seventy times by *ktaomai*, but only three times by *ktizo* (Genesis 14:19; Proverbs 8:22; Jeremiah 39:15), all of which are questionable translations. The other Greek translations of the Old Testament by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotian all have *ktaomai* at Proverbs 8:22.
5. See at more length, Erickson, *God in Three Persons*, 175-210; Morey, *Trinity*, 243-448.
6. See further Wainwright, *Trinity*, 53-92 (note Wainwright's chapter on the worship of Jesus (pp. 93-104); D. Garlington, "Who Did Jesus Think He Was?" *Reformation and Revival* 8:4 (1999), 37-62.
7. J. D. G. Dunn, *The Partings of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity* (London/Philadelphia: SCM/Trinity Press International, 1991), esp. 63-229, 244-47.
8. N. T. Wright, *The Climax of the Covenant: Christ and the Law in Pauline Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 117. Note especially Wright's chapter 6, in which he demonstrates that in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6 Paul draws on the *shema* (Deuteronomy 6:4) and asserts that the Christian *shema* includes the confession that Jesus, not only Yahweh, is Lord and God.
9. Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (3 volumes; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1970), 1:460-62.
10. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge: Judson, 1907), 342.