

Knowing the Trinity from Scripture

Keith Goad

The doctrine of the Trinity is unique. On the one hand, it is absolutely essential for Christians to believe, while on the other hand, it is beyond our human comprehension to understand fully. In fact, it is due to the latter that the doctrine has been denied, distorted, and ignored numerous times throughout the history of the church, and it is due to the former that Christians have been willing to give their lives to defend it. My goal in this article is to provide some clarity concerning how we can know the Triune God from Scripture so that the church's confession is confident, clear, and faithful.

We must confess the Triune God robustly and carefully according to how the Triune God has revealed himself. The doctrine of the Trinity must be robust because we must say all we can say about

the Triune God based upon God's own self-revelation. We cannot shy away from the doctrine because it is beyond our ability to comprehend. The church must know all they can know about the Triune God from Scripture and then seek

to protect it. The doctrine of the Trinity must also be carefully affirmed in the sense that we must not try to be novel or clever in our articulation and confession of the doctrine. As we will see the theological task is to defend what God has revealed, not add to it in order to explain it. The church is not called to make complete sense of the Trinity, but to trust him knowing his ways are above ours.

STUDYING THE TRINITY AS CREATURES

Before we look at specific texts, a few preliminary theological rules need to be established as to how Scripture should be read in order to know the Triune God. The most basic theological principle that must be remembered is God is the Creator and man is his creation. The Creator-creature relationship establishes clear limits concerning what we can know about God. God is spiritual, infinite, eternal, and perfect in his nature. We are finite and temporal, and now sinful.

Our limitations as his creatures and his infinite greatness means we must be careful in what we

KEITH GOAD is Pastor of Jefferson Park Baptist Church in Charlottesville, Virginia.

He received the Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

say about God. We do not have access to God's essence/nature in itself to know it and study it as we would things in the created order. No human being is capable of comprehending God's nature as they would something in the created world. God is beyond our limits to measure or observe. This is why our knowledge of him is dependent upon his actions and declarations. We have true knowledge of God that is trustworthy, but it is not a complete, perfect knowledge of God so that we know only in part what he knows in full. God alone knows himself perfectly and exhaustively. We are limited by more than our creatureliness; our sinful condition also ensures that our knowledge of him can only be partial (1 Cor 13:12). What we know is given to us according to his wisdom and grace.

Being creatures dependent upon what God says and does entails that as we approach the doctrine of the Trinity we must do so carefully. Regarding the Trinity, we cannot see anything in creation that resembles it. It is not a doctrine that is revealed in creation like God's power and wisdom (Rom 1:20). We do not come to know the Triune God via deduction or induction. We cannot know him perfectly in his divine nature apart from Scripture and God's word revelation. And even when it comes to Scripture, it is Scripture as an entire canon which teaches us the doctrine of the Trinity. One must read all of Scripture together to obtain a clear vision of the Trinity, hence the hermeneutical principle of "the analogy of faith," or better, "Scripture must interpret Scripture." George Prestige rightly observes that the theologians who opposed the Trinity in church history tended to concentrate on a few texts and a "parrot repetition" of them. The Orthodox theologians, especially represented in the Patristic era, "showed a far profounder sense of the need to interpret the Scriptures as a whole by comparing one passage with another."¹ In order to know the Triune God, we must commit to know him from all of his Word-revelation.

Furthermore, as creatures we must recognize that our language is inadequate to confess God

perfectly. If employed properly, human language can provide a robust and safe confession, as it remains faithful to the Scriptural revelation. For the most part, our language and categories are meant to describe things in this world. However, God uses our language to reveal himself, but every word from every language combined in its best order could never describe God as he is in himself. He can be rightly apprehended, but never comprehended fully. We can know God truly from his revelation, but never exhaustively. We must seek to safeguard the Trinity with our language by using terms and categories such as one essence/nature and three persons. These concepts do not add content to the Trinity, rather they function to safeguard what is revealed.²

As creatures dependent upon the Creator, who also speaks to us, means there are two kinds of confessions, *kataphatic* and *apophatic*. *Kataphatic* confessions affirm what God has revealed so that the church declares what must be believed. While the study of the doctrine of the Trinity should always produce mystery, awe, and wonder, there are truths revealed that cannot be questioned. Christians must boldly confess the deity of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit as well as the unity of the three persons because Scripture teaches it and salvation ultimately depends upon it. *Apophatic* confessions are negating confessions that mark off what is not true about God. *Apophatic* confessions are necessary to safeguard what can be known as well as guard against what cannot be confessed. *Apophatic* confessions are built upon what we know and seek to protect what has been revealed.

Lastly, because God is holy and pure, the student of God's word must pursue him with a holy life committed to purity. We must grow in our love for God, hatred for sin, and a desire for purity as we pursue the one true God who is perfect and pure. Seeing the Triune God is not an intellectual exercise alone, it is dependent upon our affections and purity of heart. We must pray for clarity from the text and the willingness to obey it. As Jesus

taught, blessed are the pure in heart for they shall see God (Matt 5:8).

STUDYING THE TRINITY WITH FRIENDS

We should not try to reinvent the wheel regarding the doctrine of the Trinity. Interpreting Scripture by ourselves afresh is a grand ideal, but it is also a dangerous business; we need to learn from the great theologians who have preceded us. Yes, Scripture is clear and true, but one must learn how to process and understand all the passages together, how to prioritize the texts, and how to reason through them, according to their own presentation. The Church Fathers have already set forth rules and principles to help us read Scripture. Although following them blindly is unfaithful, ignoring them would certainly be unwise.

What I appreciate about the Church Fathers' formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity was their ambition to guard what God had revealed and to pursue God in order to see him and love him. First, Scripture, and reasoning from its internal logic and its own presentation, was the basis for their doctrine of the Trinity. They defended God according to Scripture and they provided safeguards so that the church had confidence in their articulation and confession of the doctrine. The church knew what to say boldly and what to avoid saying.

Second, a clearer vision of God was their ambition for the purpose of worship. The goal was to love God with all their hearts and to assist the church in having confidence to love the Triune God. The only way one can do this is by pursuing a clear knowledge of God from his revelation and to continually be purified by Scripture. One Church Father compared knowing God to climbing a mountain. The higher he climbed in knowing God, the clearer the vision of God and the more he had to be purified of his sin. One's position on the mountain was determined by their purity so that the only way to get closer to God and have a better vision of God was to repent of sin and submit to God.³

We must rely on these friends because they make our way up the mountain easier. I once got lost with a friend hiking through the Rockies because we lost the markers and got off the trail. Without the help of those who came before us, hiking without a trail was long and grueling. Likewise, the theologians who come before us have blazed a trail up the mountain so we can understand Scripture better and see God clearer. I hope to say nothing new below, but only reiterate what I have learned from the Church Fathers concerning how to read Scripture to see the Triune God. They are guides in as much as they help one understand Scripture and see God clearer.

The early creeds and confessions are guides because the language they added clarifies and safeguards the trustworthy confession of the Trinity. As I said above, the creeds do not add content to the Trinity; rather, the early church came up with the grammar of one essence/nature and three persons in order to protect the revealed truth that there are three persons who are fully divine and that these three persons are one God together. The "person" and "essence/nature" language cannot add content to the Trinity or inform us more about the Trinity, it only protects what is revealed. As Augustine wisely stated, "we say three persons, not in order to say that precisely, but in order not to be reduced to silence."⁴ The councils of Nicaea and Constantinople did not provide more information about the Trinity. They added language to safeguard the confession of the Trinity, not to the understanding of the Trinity.

Many of the errors in contemporary Trinitarian theology can be traced back to contemporary theologians not following the safeguarding grammar provided by the early church as a starting point for Trinitarian reflection. For example, too many current theologians start by defining what "person" means and then deducing from that what the three must be, but "person" is not intended to define the three. We cannot say, person = x , therefore the three are x . Rather, we must derive from

Scripture what the three are and then see if the contemporary term “person” with its connotation of personality still defends that is revealed about the three. The term “person” has become universal for Orthodoxy so the best option is to make it clear that the three are not three persons precisely like us.

THE ONE GOD WHO CREATES AND SAVES SINNERS

Having established some basic rules, we must now consider the texts from God’s word that inform how we know our God as the Triune God. We will begin in Genesis 1-3 because these foundational chapters already provide some of the most basic rules for knowing God. God begins his revelation by separating himself as the Creator from everything that exists. The one God created all that exists except for himself. This one God created all things good and as soon as man rebelled against him he promised salvation. From Genesis 1-3, we can already gain crucial, yet straightforward theological reflections that are essential in our formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity. First, for example, there is one God. Second, God alone creates. Creating is a divine activity. Man is made like God in the sense that we can procreate, but this is only a dim reflection of the divine fiat of God that brought everything into existence out of nothing. Another principle vaguely seen in Genesis 3, but clearly established in the rest of Scripture, is that God alone saves sinners. God’s gives his promise to save at the beginning of our story of rebellion. Salvation will be developed more as the promise in Genesis 3:15 is developed through redemptive history, which only makes sense if God is viewed as a Triune God.

We could walk through the rest of the Old Testament to see how the Trinity is revealed vaguely. With New Testament lenses we can see more clearly the Trinity in Genesis 1:1-2 as the Father speaks, the Son is the Word, and the Spirit brings order. This is not completely obvious from Genesis

until we see the three revealed more clearly in the New Testament. It is important to go to the clearest texts in order to understand how the less clear texts are better understood. God alone who creates all things and who alone can forgive sins leads to the clearest accepted rule, that God is one as nicely reflected in the Shema of the Old Testament. That is why the most basic principle of Judaism is that there is one God. (I am leaving the referents in the previous phrase undefined because it is unhelpful to start with the terms person and essence.)

As we work through the Old Testament, we are following the principle that the Old Testament reveals the one whom we will come to know as the Father clearly and the Son vaguely. As we move to the New Testament, we will see that the New Testament clearly reveals the Son as fully divine along with the Father and that the Spirit’s divinity is developed more clearly due to the coming of the Son in redemptive history. It is due to God’s progressive revelation that we start with the principle that we start with God as one before we defend from Scripture that there must be a Father and a Son who are also the one God. Only after establishing that the two are divine, namely the Father and Son, should the Spirit’s deity be argued. This does not make the Spirit insignificant; it simply models the way God has revealed himself. This principle leads us to conclude that the church age today is where the Spirit is more clearly revealed, and that he will be perfectly revealed in the next.⁵

Confessing one God is a simple starting point. To add to the confession of one God that there are two who are the one God together without denying the one is another matter because it is counter-intuitive and stretches man’s intellectual capacity. The doctrine of the Trinity is only confessed because it is clear in Scripture and necessary for the entire plan of salvation that the Bible describes. It is clear because the Son is revealed as fully divine, equal in deity with the Father and one God with the Father.

FATHER AND SON DISTINGUISHED AND INTERDEPENDENT

We can begin considering the Son's divine equality with the Father with his declaration that God is his Father, and he is the Son. John 1 opens with a grand prologue that ends with the highpoint of declaring that the Word who has become flesh is none other than the eternal, only begotten Son of the Father (see also 1 John 5:18 for the Son being designated as the begotten of God). He is unique because there is no other Son who is fully divine. This qualifies him to proclaim God's word with grace and allows men to see the Father in a new and better way. It is important to note that with this relational claim Jesus makes a divine claim. The Jews wanting to stone him for blasphemy in John 5 is evidence that this is understood to be a divine claim. Jesus tells Philip that when he sees him he sees the Father because he is the perfect representation of the Father. He only says what he hears from the Father and only does what he sees the Father doing (John 5). It is this unique Father-Son relationship that clearly sets Jesus apart and identifies him with the Father.

The very language used regarding the Father and the Son necessarily leads one to understand that there is a unique relationship between them. The one God is not known as the Father in the Old Covenant as he is in the New because the Fatherhood is distinctly tied to the Son. The first and second persons of the Trinity are interdependent upon one another in their most personal names, Father and Son. Without the Father, there would be no Son and vice versa. He is the only perfect and eternal Father because he has never been a Son and he is always a Father (Eph 3:14). The Son is the perfect Son because he has never been a Father and is always a Son. There can never be a time when the Father was without his Son and vice versa. This means that both the Father and Son are necessarily divine according to the names revealed by the Son. These personal relations are the clearest identity markers for the two and should be seen as the best distinguishers for the two. (The

Spirit lacking a clear relational distinction marker is one of the reasons his deity was left undefined in the early confessions). The Son's deity is revealed through his name in relation to the Father, his actions, his titles and descriptions.

Some of the early attacks on the Son's full deity was based on Jesus' own confession in John 14:28, "The Father is greater than I." There are three possible ways to interpret this passage, with one interpretation seen as the best one, especially in context with the entire teaching of Scripture. First, the Son is stating that the Father is greater than him in his nature because the Father alone is God the Creator and he is dependent on him as a creature. This interpretation is impossible in light of other texts where Jesus states he and the Father are one. Second, Jesus is stating that the Father is greater than his human nature. This is the Augustinian interpretation. Its strengths are that it is a real possibility and it does not contradict any other teaching in Scripture. However, the problem with this interpretation is that it really says nothing unique or significant. There would be no need to state that the human nature is less than the divine nature. The third and best option interprets the Son referring to his "personhood" as the Son in relation to the Father, not his nature. This interpretation depends on a clear distinction between the three persons and the one simple nature they all share together. This interpretation is more popular among the Eastern theologians because it coincides well with the doctrine that the Father is the *Monarchia* among the three persons (as Augustine would also confess that the Father is the *Principio* among the three). The confession of Christ simply reveals that there is a clear order among the persons, but it is not an order of deity or being greater in nature. Rather it is an order in their relationships as Father, Son, and Spirit.

THE FATHER AND THE SON ARE THE ONE CREATOR

The first test for deity is if the person in question is classified with the Creator or creation. One of the

clearest revelations of the Son being fully divine, yet distinct from the Father, is his action of creating alongside the Father. The church must confess that the Father and the Son are the one Creator (This sentence is intentionally grammatically incorrect. This demonstrates how our language is not designed to perfectly delineate the infinite God). The Father is easily recognized as the Creator. The question is whether the Son is also the one Creator because if he is not counted in the “class” of Creator, he is then a dependent creature.

John begins his gospel by clearly affirming that the Son was not created and that he was the agent of creation. The first line echoes the words of Genesis 1, “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” This passage has three essential divine claims. First, he states that the Son was in the beginning implying that the Son was with God before creation. Second, he states the Son has a relationship with God, “he was with God (the Father).” This confession is important especially if it clarifies the previous phrase because the Son would be with God in the beginning, thus clearly not counting him among the creatures. The reason I placed “the Father” in parenthesis next to God in this passage is that the Father must be the logical referent here. A rule that we did not establish above, but is essential for reading many passages, is that anytime the Son or the Spirit are stated alongside of “God,” the reference must be the Father.⁶ The third divine claim is the clearest, “the Word was God.” Here “God” is clearly referring to the deity that the Father and Son both share. In case the first three claims were not clear, John continues, “all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made” (John 1:3). This verse affirms (*kataphatic*) that the Son is the Creator and then assures us that he is the Creator by rejecting the idea that anything was made without him (*apophatic*).

Paul further clarifies how the Father and the Son are co-creators as one God in 1 Corinthians 8:6, “there is one God, the Father, from whom are all

things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” All things are *from* the Father and all things came *through* the Son. Richard Bauckham argues that Paul intentionally rearranges the Shema to include both the Father and the Son in the one God of Israel.⁷ Paul adapts the most important confession for Israel to include the Father and the Son. Both persons are called the Creator, but they are distinguished by their distinctive creative actions.

Some early attacks on the Son’s deity also came from a misinterpretation of Paul’s confession in Colossians 1:15 of Jesus as the “firstborn of all creation.” The next verse clearly states the firstborn nature of the Son, namely, “by him all things were created,” which is a confession *not* in reference to time, but in regard to position and rank as the one who is preeminent over creation. In other words, to be the “firstborn” is to possess a certain status within a family or household. The following verse then demonstrates why he is preeminent—*because* he has created all things.

THE SON AND THE FATHER REVEAL GOD

A second test for deity is the Son’s activity of revealing God. The understood rule is that only God can reveal God. One of the most significant and incredible requests in all of Scripture was Moses asking God to show him his glory (Exod 33:18). God’s response was that Moses could not see his face, but that he would reveal his backside. A clear motif through Scripture is a desire to see God face to face in his glory and that God will reconcile man so that he can see his face. Today, man is only able to see God face to face because the Son has made it possible. Seeing God is dependent upon salvation because one must be purified in order to see the face of God (Matt 5:8). The hope for all Christians is that we will finally see God as he is when the Son returns and completes our purification (1 John 3:3).

In John’s Gospel, he strongly emphasizes the Son’s ability to reveal God. One of the clearest

texts for Jesus being able to reveal God is when Philip asks Jesus to show him the Father (John 14:8). Jesus responds, “when you have seen me, you have seen the Father.” It is not clear how much Philip understood concerning the Triune Father-Son relationship at this point. It is clear that he recognizes the Father as God and that the Son could reveal the Father. What he did not realize was that the Son was always revealing the Father in the sense that the deity of the Father was revealed in the Son and the Son came to do the will of the Father (John 5).

John ends his prologue with one of the more controversial, yet clearest confessions that the Son is able to reveal God, “no one has ever seen God, the only begotten God who is in the Father’s bosom, he has made him known” (John 1:18). I have translated this verse to point out the relational imagery that is lost in the dynamic equivalence. There are a number of key concepts. First, John is clearly contrasting the revelation of Jesus with Moses in John 1:17 so that Jesus is understood now to be the one that allows sinful man to see God, unlike Moses. Second, there are two that are being counted as the one God, the Father and the one in the Father’s bosom, or God and the only-begotten God. Third, the relationship between these two are clearly defined in eternal generational terms—the Father’s bosom and the begotten Son.

The language of “only-begotten” and “Father’s bosom” has made many feel uncomfortable, even though this has been the affirmation of the church throughout the ages. Some have wrongly viewed the begetting language as implying that the Son is caused and dependent upon the Father, and is therefore not equal to him. This is not correct. Instead, this unique, biblical language gives us the grammar needed to confess the Father and the Son uniquely and distinctively. The relationship of “only begotten” is important because the primary names of the first two persons that clearly distinguish them imply begetting—Father and Son. In the same way that the Father is greater than the

Son in their relationship, the Father is the begetter of the Son in their relationship, but not their essence or nature. The begetting does not imply a physical cause or dependency, nor does it imply there was a time when the Son was not because God is atemporal and eternal. While the language of John 1:28 may challenge our own minds, the teaching of the verse reveals that the Son is able to reveal God because he is begotten of the Father.

THE FATHER AND THE SON ARE THE ONE SAVIOR

The third test for the Son’s deity is based on the principle that God alone forgives sins and saves sinners. The early controversy over the deity of Jesus Christ was one of the most important for Christians. At stake was man’s salvation. If the Son is not divine, then how are we saved? The question of the Son’s deity was of utmost importance because man’s sin is against God and only God can “fix” the problem. If Jesus were merely a creature, he is not able to truly save us and put us back into a proper relationship with God. Our discussion of the biblical material for this will be reduced to a few texts since there are too many texts that speak to the Son’s deity with regard to his being the Savior.

The gospel of Mark introduces the beginning of Jesus’ gospel ministry with the controversial declaration to the paralytic, “your sins are forgiven (Mark 2:5).” The scribes correctly respond, “who can forgive sins but God alone?” (Mark 2:7). Obviously their accusation that Jesus was blaspheming was wrong, but they were correct that only God can forgive sins. Since we carry an infinite amount of guilt because we have sinned against the God who is infinite in his holiness, we needed a divine Savior who can satisfy his own righteous requirements and thus forgive us of our sin. In other words, in order to save us, God had to provide a Savior who is able to take on himself an infinite amount of guilt and wrath thus satisfying his own righteous and holy demand.

In addition, the Son’s particular relationship to

the Father is the basis for one of the most central and important ways of expressing Salvation—adoption. The Father has sent his Son to redeem sinners so that all who believe in him can become sons. We see an allusion to the Father sending his Son when he commanded Abraham (the father of many) to sacrifice his beloved son. We see a more explicit teaching on the Savior being a son to God in 2 Samuel 7, as related to the Davidic covenant. In a far greater way than Old Testament teaching, Jesus makes it clear that he is this Son by calling God his Father, a confession that the Jews recognize as a claim for deity, and not merely a claim to take the role of Israel and the Davidic king (John 5:18). Furthermore, Galatians 4:1-7 is one of the many clear places that the Father-Son relationship is essential for our salvation. The Father, “when the fullness of time had come,” sent his Son to take on a human nature (becoming like us in every way except sin) so that we could be adopted as sons. The Son not only dies to forgive our sins, but he also bestows upon us all the rights and privileges that are his as the proper and true Son of the Father. He must be God to forgive us and his relationship to the Father is essential to our salvation from being sinners and becoming sons.

The Triune relation of Father-Son and its significance in salvation is important for us as Christians also as we now have the incredible privilege of calling God our Father in prayer. We can only be in a relationship with God as a Father in the name of the Son and with the Spirit applying to us all the privileges of sonship, “crying out Abba Father.” Since the perfect Son of the Father has come to share with us all the rights and privileges of sonship, we are reconciled to God and able to approach him as our Father.

THE SPIRIT ALSO CREATES, REVEALS, SAVES

Having demonstrated that the Son is the one God with the Father because he creates, reveals God, and saves sinners; we must now demonstrate the Spirit as the one God also on the basis of his

actions. The Spirit’s deity was more debated in the early church because his titles and actions are not as clear as the Son. First, his names—the Spirit or Comforter—are not as necessarily distinctive as the Father-Son names that necessarily imply interdependence and distinction. Second, less is revealed about the Spirit and his actions. As Gregory of Nazianzen put it, the Father was clear in the Old Testament and the Son vague. The Son was clear in the New Testament and the Spirit vague. The same Gregory was the primary advocate for adding in the confession that the Spirit is *homoousian* with the Father and the Son because he believed Scripture was clear enough and that the church’s experience of the Spirit also confirmed what Scripture already taught.

First, the Spirit is divine because of his creative activity in Genesis 1, “and the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Gen 1:2). This by itself is not enough to understand that there is more than one person in the Godhead. However, as we look back at Genesis from what is revealed about the Spirit in New Testament, we can see that the Spirit was active as Creator along with the Father and the Son. He is distinctive because he is not speaking and he is not being spoken. He is hovering over creation bringing order to it.

Second, the Spirit is divine because he reveals God. Here there are more texts that point to this essential role in revealing God because he illuminates the heart and inspires Scripture. Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 2:14 directly points to the deity of the Spirit as essential for his ability to impart to us the truths of God. The Spirit who has been sent by God knows the depths of God. Paul argues from an analogy of man, “who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him?” (1 Cor 2:11). It is the Spirit’s unique and special relationship with the Father that allows him to convey God’s truth to us. We are entirely dependent upon the Spirit who comes to us from the Father for receiving and understanding the truth from God, “we have

received, not the Spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God (Father), so that we may know the things freely given to us by God” (1 Cor 2:12).

One of the clearest aspects of the Spirit’s ability to reveal God is his role in working in and through men in order to provide the church an authoritative revelation from God in Scripture. Scripture is “breathed out” by God according to 2 Timothy 3:16. Likewise, 2 Peter 1:21 explains “being breathed out” or “produced” further by declaring that the prophets were carried along by the Holy Spirit. The inspiration of Scripture, the production of God’s word in our words, is provided to us by the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Spirit has given us one of the clearest revelations of God, Scripture.

Another way the Spirit reveals God is in his ministry of illumination. After Jesus told Philip that the Father could be seen in the Son, he promises that another helper would be sent, the Spirit of truth (John 14:15-18). This Spirit indwells believers to continue the ministry of the Son and the Father. In John 16:4-15, Jesus tells the disciples that it will be better for the disciples if he goes because the Spirit will come. The Spirit’s ministry will be more beneficial for them than the Son’s because the Spirit continues his ministry—applying to us internally what the Son accomplishes. Logically the Spirit must be divine if the Son is divine and his internal ministry is more advantageous for the believer. We also see the Spirit of Truth is promised to come “convicting the world concerning sin, righteousness, and judgment (John 16:8).” The Spirit will guide them into all truth declaring the things that are to come, glorifying the Son, and taking what is the Son’s and giving it to the disciples (John 16:13-15).

Third, the Spirit is divine because he participates in the salvation of sinners. Jesus teaches Nicodemus that in order to see the kingdom of God he must be born again, being born of the Spirit (John 3). The regeneration of the dead man must come from the Spirit of God giving life. Paul further explains the Spirit’s role in salvation as the one who gives the new birth. We have already

looked at Galatians 4 with regard to the Son giving us a share in his sonship through adoption. The Spirit applies the adoption and teaches us to call out to God, “Abba Father.” Romans 8 is similar as Paul assures us that the Spirit of God (Father) who raised Christ from the dead now dwells within us (8:11). This Spirit has given us eternal life and applied the adoption of Christ to us so that by the Spirit we cry “Abba Father.” Paul also alludes to the Spirit’s illumination with regard to assurance because the Spirit testifies to our spirit that we are sons (Rom 8:14). The Spirit applies adoption and gives us assurance in the salvation of Christ.

Fourth, before we move on from the Spirit, it is important to recognize why Gregory of Nazianzen was so adamant that the Spirit be confessed as perfectly and completely divine. It parallels the argument that the Church Fathers made from Scripture for the deity of the Son. In the same way that our salvation depended on the Son, our spirituality and sanctification depends on the Spirit. If there is no Spirit, how can we be spiritual and grow in our love for God? The Spirit who dwells in us must be divine, because we are dependent upon him purifying us so that we can see God more clearly. We depend upon him leading us into God’s trust, convicting us of sin, keeping us protected from sin, giving us wisdom and discernment, and producing fruit that is pleasing to God. Further, the church that is under the headship of Christ depends on the Spirit that Christ sent for the gifts we need to be united, productive and obedient. The church must not neglect the mysterious third member of the Trinity because all that we have and are supposed to be depends upon him. Thankfully it does not always depend on us recognizing our need for him.

THE UNITY OF THE THREE

Above I argued progressively across the canon of Scripture from one God to three being the one God. I began with the Father as God. Then argued that the Son must be included with the Father as the one God. The arguments were based on his

unique relation to the Father as the Son as well as his actions of creating, revealing, and saving. I then demonstrated that since the Spirit also creates, reveals, and saves, he must also be recognized as the one God. Now, we need to help clarify how these three should be understood to be the one God together and equally.

One of the most helpful theological categories for understanding and worshiping the Trinity is “the inseparable operations” of the three. We have demonstrated that all three created, revealed, and saved. More importantly, all three are actively participating in every creative action, every revelation, and every salvation. All three share the same purpose and end, work together in their distinct, yet harmonious, actions.

One of the clearest revelations of the inseparable operations of the Triune God is the baptism of Jesus. Matthew 3:16-17 reveals how all three persons of the Godhead are responsible in the missions of saving sinners. The Son was seeking to be baptized. When he was brought up out of the water, the Spirit demonstrates his anointing of the Son by descending in the form of a dove. The Father then declares, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.” The mission of God is presented as a Triune mission. All three persons work in unison for one goal and purpose—our salvation. Each one distinct in his particular work in the mission, but the three together unified in their end and goal.

The baptism of Jesus demonstrates a beautiful picture of the three working together for the same purpose. The Father’s declaration clearly fulfills the Father-Son imagery from Genesis 22 and 2 Samuel 7. The Father has sent his only Son to die for sinners. The Son has submitted to the Father and has chosen to come to die for sinners. The Spirit working in the incarnation of the Son who came down to ensure that he took on a complete human nature, but without sin (Luke 1:35). The Spirit, as promised by Isaiah in chapter 11 has anointed the Son for his ministry of dying for sinners. The same Father and the Son sent the same

Spirit after the Son’s ascension. In this way, we can confess that our salvation is dependent on the entire Godhead. Our salvation is in Christ, from the Father, by the Spirit.

There is a clear order, what is often called *taxis*, in the Godhead that does not imply a hierarchy of being in terms of the nature of God. The person of the Father is first in the Trinity. As the Son confessed the Father was greater than him, the Father is first among the persons, but not according to the one nature. The Son came to do teach according to the instruction of the Father (John 5). The Father and the Son sent the Spirit who applies what the Son has accomplished to us so that the Son can then take us up to the Father. The order of descent is important because we must ascend to God according to how the Triune persons descended in order. We are only able to come to the Son if the Spirit draws us to him (1 Cor 12:3). The Son then carries us up the Father into the true Holy of Holies. The three working together in this way is why we are called to enter boldly into the presence of God.

Paul describes it as such in his progression of how God has saved us in Ephesians 1:3-14. The Father chose his children to be predestined for adoption through Jesus Christ. It is in Christ that we have redemption and the forgiveness of sin. The Spirit is then sent to us to seal what Christ was sent to accomplish for us so that our inheritance in Christ is guaranteed. This is one continual action from God that is worked out by all three persons working together inseparably. Romans 8:11 also mentions all three persons as the Spirit of the Father who raised Christ indwells us. The Father who sent the Son raised him from the dead. The Father then sends the Spirit to indwell those whom the Son died for in order to give them assurance and power to persevere.

The doctrine of inseparable operations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit has numerous implications. First, it guards the distinction of the three as each one acts in a way distinct from the others but also in concert with them. One way to distin-

guish the three is by each person's sending relationships. The Father is not sent, he sends. The Son is sent by the Father and sends only the Spirit. The Spirit does not send, he is sent. The three cannot be confused for one another because they each have a distinct operation. While the sending differs so we know they are distinct, they purpose for sending is all the same—the salvation of sinners.

Second, the inseparable operations also guard the unity of God. The three are unified in their ends and purposes. The three relate distinctly, but are indivisibly one in what they seek to accomplish. This is why the early Christian theologians concluded there was only one nature that each of the three shared together. There is one will of God that is determined and accomplished by all three. They all share the same intention in all their actions. This should be a great encouragement to believers because it reminds us of how sure our salvation is in all three persons of the Godhead. The Father has called effectively, the Son has died as the substitute for sinners, the Spirit seals the heart of the believer. Christians can look at how all three persons share the one intention of saving them from their sins and have absolute confidence in their salvation.

CONCLUSION

We must now ask: How does the doctrine of the Trinity affects us as Christians? Is the doctrine merely an intellectual exercise or is it central to who we are and what we do? I, along with the entire church, insist on the latter.

First, above all else, we are called to love the God who has revealed himself to be Triune. The only way to truly love God is to know him as he has revealed himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Father's love is seen in his sending his only Son to die for us even while we were sinners. The Son's love is seen in his willingness to die for us as our Savior and Lord. The Spirit's love is clear by his applying the work of the Son and his constant internal testimony. We can only love God because he loved us first. We can only see the love

of the Son if the Spirit illuminates our hearts and calls us to the Son. We can only know God as our true loving Father if we are carried up to him in the Son. If we are to love God, we must see how all three persons have inseparably, yet uniquely, loved us so that we love him.

Second, we are called to profess and proclaim the God who has saved us. Salvation is not simply the Son dying for us, but also involves the Father electing and the Spirit sealing. When we have the opportunity to proclaim the God who saves, we must recognize that the goal is to exalt Christ and what he has done for sinners. We confess Christ confidently and boldly when we know that the Spirit is the one who draws sinners to the Son. It is not in our strength or cleverness to call men to salvation—it is in our faithfulness to exalt Christ clearly and in the Father's good will to call sinners to himself through the illuminating power of the Spirit. We have confidence that God is capable and we recognize that our responsibility is to be faithful. An implication is that pastors must be clear in confessing a clear doctrine of the Trinity so the body has confidence to know the Triune God. Pastors must model boldness in the gospel, confidence in the work of the Spirit, and clarity in how the Triune God is revealed throughout Scripture.

Third, we are called to pray to God. We pray to the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. As we have already mentioned, our access to God the Father in prayer is based on our union with Christ having been adopted into the family. The Spirit convicts and illuminates our hearts so that we know how to pray, and when we do not know how to put it into words, the Spirit speaks on our behalf.⁸

ENDNOTES

¹George Prestige, *God in Patristic Thought* (London: SPCK, 1952), 147.

²For further discussion on this see Augustine *On The Trinity* book 5 and *Confessions* book 4.

³Gregory of Nazianzus, Oration 2.

⁴Augustine *On The Trinity* 5.2.11 (trans. Edmund Hill; New York: New City Press, 1991), 196.

⁵See Gregory Of Nazianzus *On The Spirit* Oration 31.6 and the way Augustine patterns his argument in *On The Trinity*.

⁶Other examples that make this rule essential is Paul stating that Jesus is at the right hand of God in Col 3:1-2. If “God” in this passage is not referring to the Father, it would imply the Son is not divine. Something he has made clear already in Col 1:15-20.

⁷Richard Baukham, *God Crucified* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 37-38.

⁸ If the reader is interested in reading the Church Fathers and seeing how they interpret Scripture to know the Triune God I suggest the following books: (1) Athanasius, *On the Incarnation of the Word*. This is one of the first, clearest arguments for the deity of the Son and why his deity is essential for our salvation; (2) Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*. This is the first, full defense of the deity of the Holy Spirit. It primarily is based on the Spirit’s divine actions and titles; (3) Gregory of Nazianzus, *The Theological Orations* (28-31). These orations alone are, in my opinion, the high-water mark for doctrine of the Trinity in the East. The first is a prolegomena that sets forth rules for theological discourse. The second is on the oneness of God in his nature. The third and fourth are on the Son’s deity. The fifth is the most important document written on the Holy Spirit apart from Scripture; (4) Augustine *On The Trinity*. This is the high-water mark on the Trinity in the Western tradition. There is not a great difference between Augustine and Gregory concerning the most basic doctrines of the Trinity. I recommend focusing on books 1-8 and 15 because this is where he argues from Scripture.