

Chapter 7: The Doctrine of God: The Trinity

One of the great mysteries of God's nature is the fact that Scripture presents three figures as God (the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit), yet maintains God's unity ("God is one"; Deut 6:4). Theologians have coined vocabulary to express God's "three-in-oneness": Trinity, trinitarianism, triune, Godhead, etc. As such, these are not biblical terms, but the terms help us express the teaching we see reflected in Scripture. The goal of this chapter is to sketch the biblical teaching about God's unity, juxtaposed with its clear testimony that the Son and the Spirit are also individual persons referenced as God.

The Unity of God

In an earlier chapter we briefly noted God's simplicity or unity. The idea was that God is not a compound being. Rather, God is a completely unified being. As Deut 6:4 says, the Lord our God is *one* (cf. Eph 4:6). God is one, not more than one. In this sense, God's simplicity points us back to his self-existence.¹ While Scripture mentions other gods (*'elohim*) whom the Israelites were to avoid, Yahweh alone was to be worshipped.² The name of this God was Yahweh (Exod 3:14; 6:3). He was, in biblical thought, utterly unique. It is to him that Scripture assigns the attributes we have discussed in preceding chapters, attributes specifically denied to all other gods. Yahweh alone was creator, sovereign, all-powerful, all-knowing, etc. There was no god like Yahweh; he was and is incomparable (Deut 4:19-20, 35; 17:1-3; 29:23-26; 32:17, 39; Exod 15:11; Isa 45:14; 46:9).

The "oneness" of God therefore references not only his nature but his exclusivity as a proper object of faith and devotion. This is why the Old Testament insists on rejection of idolatry. The very first commands of the ten commandments make this explicit: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod 20:2-3). The connection between the commands and Deut 6:4, the statement of Yahweh's unity or oneness is made clear in Deuteronomy. After the statement about the Lord being "one" in Deut 6:4, "the commands of Exodus 20 are virtually repeated. In positive terms God's people are told: 'Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name' (Deut. 6:13). In negative terms they are told: 'Do not follow other gods, the gods of the peoples around you' (v. 14)."³

¹ As Ryrie notes (*Basic Theology*, 58), the Hebrew wording of Deut 6:4 can be translated in a variety of ways: "The Lord our God is one Lord," or "The Lord our God, the Lord is One," or "The Lord is our God, the Lord is One," or "the Lord is our God, the Lord alone."

² See the discussion in Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible*, First Edition. (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 23-37.

³ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 294.

The New Testament likewise affirms the oneness of God. In James 2:19 the writer tells his readers, “You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!” Paul tells Timothy “there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.”

God the Father

Yahweh, the God of Israel, the God of the Bible, is known as God the Father. The word “father” is used of God fifteen times in the Old Testament and 245 times in the New Testament.⁴ The primary point of reference is God’s status as creator. The Bible presumes God is the creator-father of all things “in heaven and earth, visible and invisible” (Col 1:16). Since he was chronologically prior to “all things” (Col 1:17) this creation is cast as being out of nothing (cf. Heb 1:2; 2:10 Rev 4:11). Human beings are the clay, God is the creative artisan potter and father (Isa 64:8). Malachi asks, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?” (Mal 2:10).

A perusal of the biblical data, though, shows us that the concept of God as father goes well beyond creation. Psalm 68:5 tells us that God is “Father of the fatherless and protector of widows.” The psalmist relates God’s fatherhood to his salvation: “You are my Father, my God, and the Rock of my salvation” (Psa 89:26). God’s election of Israel as his chosen people, God is the nation’s father and redeemer (Isa 63:16).

Jesus refers to the God of the Old Testament as father. In Matt 6:26 he tells those listening to his teaching, “Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.” Jesus elsewhere told his followers “call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven” (Matt 23:9). Our heavenly father meets all our needs (Matt 6:32).

Hints of a Godhead in the Old Testament

Alongside the clarity of God’s unity and his status as Father, there are hints in the Old Testament that God is more than one person. Theologians usually try to demonstrate this via plural language in the Old Testament. For example, there are Gen 1:26 (Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. . . .”) and Gen 11:7, where God says, “Come, let us go down and there confuse their language, so that they may not understand one another’s speech.” These are weak proofs. Not only is the language not defined as three persons, but it makes little sense to see a Trinitarian Godhead in the words. In the latter instance, the Lord has already “gone down” to earth to see the tower of Babel (Gen 11:5). In view of God’s omnipresence and unity, all three persons of the Trinity would therefore “be down” and there would be no need to request the persons of the Godhead to change locations. More telling is Gen 3:5, where the serpent says to Eve, “For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.” The verse has two occurrences of the noun *’elohim* (“God”). This noun is morphologically plural (i.e., its grammatical shape or

⁴ Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, 57.

form is plural). Whether the noun can be translated as a singular entity (“God”) or plural entities (“gods”) depends in part on what verb with which it is paired in a sentence. In the first part of the verse, the verb “knows” is grammatically singular (*yada*). This tells us the translation “God knows” is intended. But the second occurrence is different. The verb is plural (*yode’ê*). This means the second instance could be translated “you shall be like gods, knowing good and evil.” That this is legitimate is seen later in v. 22, when we read, “Then the LORD God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of us in knowing good and evil.” The “one of us” shows plurality is intended. Some would say this is the Trinity and take that understanding back to 3:5 and its plural verb. But this results in having more than one *’elohim* as the Lord God, or what is known as tritheism. Because God is one, though, he cannot be more than one *’elohim*.⁵ This is why tritheism is considered a heresy by orthodox Trinitarian theologians.⁶ As Geisler notes, “Unlike tritheists, trinitarians do not affirm a god with three different substances; they confess that God is three distinct persons in one substance.”⁷ The Trinity is therefore understood as one God in three persons, not three gods. In the Genesis 1 and 3 examples, the reference to the other *’elohim* is to members of the heavenly host, created supernatural beings who are lesser than the one God, Yahweh.

If the sort of plural language of Genesis is no proof for a Godhead, what evidence for the idea is there in the Old Testament? Briefly,⁸ there are several passages that show the God of the Bible is more than one figure or person. In Exod 23:20-21 we discover a particular angel is assigned by God to lead the Israelites to the Promised Land (cf. Judg 2:1-3). God tells Moses that God’s name is in the angel. God’s “name” (Hebrew, *shem*) is another way of referring to God himself (Isa 30:27-28; Psa 20:1, 7). Consequently, this angel was God in human form to the Israelites. This same angel was in the burning bush at Sinai along with God (Exod 3:1-3). In Genesis this angel appears several times, in one passage telling Jacob “I am the God of Bethel” (Gen 31:13) where Jacob had earlier met Yahweh and built an altar to him. The angel, curiously, is God, but is also distinct from God. In the Old Testament there is Yahweh who is invisible and transcendent all the while there was this angel, who was also Yahweh immanent with people, God in human form. The most telling passage may be Gen 48:15-16, where the dying patriarch, Jacob, blesses the sons of Joseph. In his three-stanza prayer, Jacob prays:

⁵ Other *’elohim* can exist *separately* from the triune Godhead as inferior supernatural beings; the Trinity cannot be composed of three distinct, separable *’elohim*. God is one *’elohim* but three persons.

⁶ See Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 305. As Bird notes, “The Athanasian Creed addresses the doctrine of the Trinity in lines 1–28, while lines 29–44 address the doctrine of Christ. With respect to the three persons of the Trinity, the first section ascribes divine attributes to each person, specifying that each person of the Trinity is uncreated (*incretus*), limitless (*immensus*), eternal (*aeternus*), and omnipotent (*omnipotens*). The purpose of ascribing these attributes to all three persons is to avoid subordination, but it also stresses the unity of the three persons in one being, thus avoiding anything resembling tritheism” (Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 98).

⁷ Norman L. Geisler, “Trinity,” *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 735.

⁸ For a lengthier discussion, see Heiser, *Unseen Realm*, 127-148.

The God before whom my fathers, Abraham and Isaac, walked,
The God who shepherded me [all my life] unto this day,
The angel who redeemed me from all evil,
may he bless the boys. (LEB)

The verb “may he bless” is not grammatically plural, as though God and the Angel were separate grammatical subjects. Rather, the singular verb fuses the two together. And yet the Angel—as it turns out, the Angel of Yahweh—sometimes shows up with Yahweh in different scenes (e.g., Exod 3:1-14; Judg 6:11-27; 1 Chron 21:7-17). They are the same God, yet different persons.

This particular angel factors into hints of a third person of the Godhead, the Holy Spirit, in the Old Testament. The Angel had been tasked with escorting Israel out of Egypt and to the Promised Land (Exod 23:21-22; 33:2). Isaiah 63:9 credits the Angel of the Lord with rescuing Israel from their afflictions, but also (63:10) notes that the people rebelled (*marah*) and grieved (*'atsab*) the Holy Spirit. In Psalm 78:40-41, a passage explicitly parallel to Isaiah 63, one that rehearses the same grievous rebellion, the text has Israel grieving (*'atsab*) and rebelling against (*marah*) God. The two passages, taken together, interchange God and the Spirit while having the Angel who simultaneously is God as being a participant in the story as well. In other words, if we read the story collectively in light of both passages, the incident has all three persons of the Godhead in view.

God the Son

There is abundant evidence in the New Testament that Jesus is cast as God, yet is simultaneously also distinct from the Father and the Spirit.

Since the Old Testament Angel of Yahweh is presented in certain passages as Yahweh present in human form, he is the backdrop to the incarnate Christ, where the Son, the second person of the Trinity, was born of a woman. Jude 5 has Jesus in the role of the Angel, leading Israel to the Promised Land.⁹ As such, this equation of Jesus with the Angel is instructive. Jesus is God but is not the Father (see below), just as the Angel was God but not the Father. The Angel is therefore the second person of the triune Godhead come to interact with humans in human form, just as Jesus was the second person of the triune Godhead. Jesus is also conflated with God and the Holy Spirit, who is also cast as God in his own right (see below). The phrase “Holy Spirit” is interchanged with “Spirit of Jesus” or “Spirit of Christ” in several passages (Acts 16:6-7; Phil 1:19; Rom 8:9; 1 Pet 1:11; Gal 4:6), and on two occasions the biblical text describes Jesus as the Spirit (2 Cor 3:17, 18).

⁹ Jude 5 is controversial due to manuscript divergences. Some manuscripts, for example, read “lord” instead of “Jesus.” However, the “Jesus” reading is to be preferred on text-critical grounds and is now adopted in the main editions of the Greek New Testament used in classrooms all over the world today (i.e., Nestle-Aland 28 (NA28); United Bible Societies 5 (UBS5), and the Society of Biblical Literature Greek New Testament (SBLGNT)).

What is the New Testament evidence for Jesus as God?

First, Jesus is presented as existing prior to his birth to the virgin Mary. Jesus is said to have come from heaven (John 3:13, 31), and to have existed with the Father before the world was created:

John 17:5 - And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed.

Phil 2:5-7 - Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Closely related to the preceding are passages like John 8:58, where Jesus said he existed before Abraham: "Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). The key component of this verse is "I AM," which is the name of God from the burning bush incident (Exod 3:14). Jesus presents himself as "I AM" in other passages (John 8:24; 13:19; 18:5, 6, 8).¹⁰ It is no wonder, then, that Jesus could tell the disciple Thomas that to have seen him is to have seen the Father (John 14:7-9).

Second, Jesus is explicitly referred to as God. John 1:1, 14, 18 are instructive:

In the beginning was the Word,¹¹ and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. . . . No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

Other examples of this sort of direct language can be found. In John 20:28, after seeing the resurrected Christ, the apostle Thomas exclaims, "My Lord and my God!" In Romans 9:5, speaking of the Jews, Paul writes "To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen." In Titus 2:13 Paul writes about "waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior

¹⁰ The verses listed have "I AM" with no predicate complement in the Greek. A predicate complement would be either a predicate noun or adjective following the verb "am". In other words, at times Jesus is presented simply in the Greek as "I AM," rather than "I am the bread of life," or "I am the light of the world" (both examples of a noun that follows the predicate verb "am").

¹¹ Note that the "Word of the Lord" in the Old Testament is also at times portrayed as God in human form (i.e., with anthropomorphic traits). See Gen 15:1-6; 1 Sam 3:1-10, 19-21 (esp. v. 10); Jer 1:1-9 (esp. v. 9).

Jesus Christ.”¹² Hebrews 1:8, speaking of Jesus and citing Psa 45:6-7 reads, “But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.’” Peter greets his readers with this salutation: “. . . to those who have obtained a faith of equal standing with ours by the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ.”¹³ In Rev 1:8 God is called the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, whereas in Rev 22:13 the same title is given to Jesus.

Third, the Scripture has Jesus as the creator of all things. “All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made (John 1:3). Through Christ “all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him” (Col. 1:16). And “in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world (Heb 1:2). If God alone is the creator, then this identifies Jesus with God as the agent of God’s own creation. This, combined with Jesus’s pre-existence noted above, is strong witness to his deity. Jesus also shares God’s attribute of maintaining and upholding creation (Heb 1:2).

Fourth, the fullness of the Godhead is said to dwell in Jesus: “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9). Jesus is not partially indwelt by the fullness of deity, but in every respect. And as the Yahweh was in the Angel (Exod 23:21-22), so he was in Jesus (John 10:38).

Fifth, Jesus self-consciously said things that identified him with God. Erickson cites some instances:

For example, Jesus said that he would send “his angels” (Matt. 13:41); elsewhere they are spoken of as “the angels of God” (Luke 12:8–9; 15:10). . . . More significant yet are

¹² The question in Titus 2:13 is Do the words “God and our Savior Jesus Christ” refer to two persons or the same person, thus putting forth a strong statement that Christ is God? There are several reasons why the Greek text points to one person: “First is the ‘God and Savior’ (*theos kai sōtēr*) formula. This was a stereotypical formula common in first-century religious terminology. It was used by Jews in Palestine and throughout the Roman Empire in referring to their one true God, Yahweh. It always denoted one deity, never two. If the name Jesus Christ did not follow the expression ‘God and Savior,’ this phrase would invariably and naturally be taken by any reader to refer to one person, yet the name Jesus Christ is simply added by way of clarification and to establish identity. . . . Second, the term ‘Savior’ (*sōtēros*) is without the definite article. When two nouns (here ‘God’ and ‘Savior’) in the same grammatical case (here the genitive) are linked by ‘and’ (*kai*), the repetition of the Greek definite article with the second noun (here ‘Savior’) would show that the nouns are separate items. If there is no repetition, it indicates that the nouns are being considered together, or (as in this case) they have a single referent—that is, ‘God’ and ‘Savior’ are the one and the same person, then defined as Jesus Christ” (Murray J. Harris, *Navigating Tough Texts: A Guide to Problem Passages in the New Testament* [Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2020], 189-190).

¹³ As with Titus 2:13, the strength of the identification of Jesus as God derives from the grammar of the verse. Grudem writes of Titus 2:13 and 2 Pet 1:1: “Both verses have the same Greek construction, in which one definite article governs two nouns joined by the Greek word for *and* (*καί*). In all cases where this construction is found the two nouns are viewed as unified in some way, and often they are two separate names for the same person or thing. Especially significant is 2 Peter 1:1, for exactly the same construction is used by Peter three other times in this book to speak of ‘Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ’ (2 Peter 1:11; 2:20; 3:18). In these three other verses, the Greek wording is exactly the same in every detail except that the word *Lord* (*Κύριος*) is used instead of the word *God* (*θεός*). If these other three instances are all translated ‘Our *Lord* and Savior Jesus Christ,’ as they are in all major translations, then consistency in translation would seem to require the translation of 2 Peter 1:1 as ‘Our *God* and Savior Jesus Christ,’ again referring to Christ as God.” (Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 235, note 15).

the prerogatives Jesus claimed. In particular, his claim to forgive sins resulted in a charge of blasphemy against him. When the paralytic was lowered through the roof by his four friends, Jesus's initial comment was, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (Mark 2:5). The reaction of the scribes indicates the meaning they attached to his words: "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?"¹⁴

The point of course is that, rather than clarifying for those offended that he did not mean to equate himself with God, Jesus does the opposite—he heals the man so that all would know he had authority to forgive sins, a status reserved only for God. Erickson continues:

The authority Jesus claimed and exercised is also clearly seen with respect to the Sabbath. God had established the sacredness of the Sabbath (Exod. 20:8–11). Only God could abrogate or modify this regulation. Yet consider what happened when Jesus's disciples picked heads of grain on the Sabbath, and the Pharisees objected that the Sabbath regulations (at least their version of them) were being violated. Jesus responded by pointing out that David had violated one of the laws by eating of the bread reserved for the priests. Then, turning directly to the situation at hand, Jesus asserted: "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath. So the Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" (Mark 2:27–28). He was clearly claiming the right to redefine the status of the Sabbath, a right that belongs only to someone virtually equal to God.¹⁵

God the Holy Spirit

There has been considerable debate over whether the Holy Spirit is a person (as opposed to a thing or force) and whether the Holy Spirit is God. We'll consider those in order.

1. The Personhood of the Holy Spirit

Michael Bird summarizes the issues of whether the Holy Spirit is a person or not: "Personhood is a complex matter, but we are safe to say that a person is a living being (no robot, imaginary friend, or pet rock), who is self-aware, capable of cognition, is able to relate to other beings, and possesses recognizable character traits. A person is someone who can distinguish 'I' from 'you'."¹⁶

Acts 13:2 makes it clear that the Spirit distinguishes himself as a personal entity in relation to other persons: "While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.'" The Spirit also has the qualities of a person. For example, he has intelligence; he knows what God knows (1 Cor

¹⁴ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 625.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 626.

¹⁶ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 615–616.

2:10-11), has a mind (Rom 8:27), and teaches people (1 Cor 2:13). He is described in ways that suggest he is a person: the Spirit can be grieved (Eph 4:30) and blasphemed (Matt 12:31), makes choices (1 Cor 12:11), makes decisions relating to the lives of believers (Acts 16:6-11), is to be obeyed (Acts 10:19-21), can be lied to (Acts 5:3) and resisted (Acts 7:51) and outraged (Heb 10:29).¹⁷ Bird adds the following summary to the Spirit's personhood:

Elsewhere in the NT we find activities and roles attributed to the Spirit that imply he is a personal agent. Jesus promised to send the Holy Spirit who would come as another *paraklētos*. The translation of *paraklētos* is notoriously complex; it can mean something like "Comforter," "Advocate," or "Helper" (John 14:16, 15:26-27; 16:7). The Holy Spirit is "another *paraklētos*," who continues the ministry of Jesus in the midst of the disciples as sent from the Father (14:16). His role is to witness, convict, guide, hear, speak, glorify, and declare (16:8-15).

Paul's discourse in Romans 8 contains further images of the Spirit as an active person. There is the leading of the Holy Spirit to our becoming sons of God (Rom 8:14), the witness of the Spirit to our own spirit (8:16; cf. Acts 5:32), and the help of the Spirit in prayer (Rom 8:26). The intercessory work of the Spirit is linked to the "mind of the Spirit" (8:27). The Spirit of God knows the thoughts of God (1 Cor 2:11), and it is the Spirit who decides how the grace gifts are to be distributed among the church (12:11).¹⁸

Another consideration of the Spirit's personhood deserves attention—a grammatical one. While the word translated "Spirit" in Greek (*pneuma*) is grammatically neuter, there are places where the Spirit is referred to with masculine pronoun language. If this were not the case, then an exegetical argument would exist, based on the neuter noun, that the Spirit is merely an "it" and not a person. The masculine pronoun language changes that. For instance, in John 16:13-14 Jesus uses the masculine pronoun (*ekeinos*) in describing the Spirit.

Lastly, there are a number of passages that identify the Spirit with other persons whose personhood is not in doubt. Jesus is the obvious example. The Spirit and Jesus are identified with each other twice in 2 Cor 3:17-18 in explicit language ("the Lord is the Spirit"). Jesus is not an "it" and so neither is the Spirit. Erickson elaborates on this phenomenon elsewhere in connection with the Spirit as "Comforter" or "Helper" (*paraklētos*):

The term *παράκλητος* (*paraklētos*) is applied to the Holy Spirit in John 14:26; 15:26; and 16:7. In each of these contexts it is obvious that it is not some sort of abstract influence that is in view. Jesus is also expressly spoken of as a *παράκλητος* (1 John 2:1). Most significant are his words in John 14:16, where he says that he will pray to the Father who will give the disciples another *παράκλητος*. The word for "another" here is *ἄλλος*

¹⁷ Ryrie *Basic Theology*, 396.

¹⁸ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 616.

(*allos*), which means “another of the same kind.” In view of Jesus’s statements linking the Spirit’s coming with his own going away (e.g., 16:7), this means that the Spirit is a replacement for Jesus and will carry on the same role. The similarity in their function is an indication that the Holy Spirit, like Jesus, must be a person.¹⁹

2. The Deity of the Holy Spirit

While it can be established that the Spirit is a person, is he also God?

The answer to this question must be yes given the scriptural data. For one thing, there are passages where the Holy Spirit is referred to as God or interchanged with God. For example, in Acts 5 Peter charges Ananias with lying to the Holy Spirit (“why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit”), then repeats the charge, changing his wording to “You have not lied to man but to God”). The same sort of interchange is evident when comparing 1 Cor 3:16-17 and 6:19-20, where believers are referred to as the temple of God and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Bird points out that “It is commonly said that God raised up Jesus from the dead (Acts 2:24, 32; 3:26; 4:10; 5:30; 10:40; 13:30; 13:37; Rom 10:9; Gal 1:1; 1 Pet 1:21), and yet it is stated elsewhere that the Spirit raised up Jesus (Rom 8:11).”²⁰ New Testament writers have the Spirit speaking the words spoken by God in Old Testament passages (compare Acts 28:25–27 // Isa 6:8–10; Heb 10:15–17 // Jer 31:31–34).

The Holy Spirit is also described as possessing attributes of God. He has a dispenses the power of the Most High (Luke 1:35). He is said to be eternal (Heb 9:14). He is omnipresent (Psa 139: 7-10). He must be omniscient since he possesses the mind of God (1 Cor 2:10-11). Like Jesus, he is also agent of creation (Gen 1:2; Job 26:13; 33:4; Psa 104:30). When the writers of Scripture were assisted by the Spirit in writing, they “spoke from God” (2 Pet 1:21).

Lastly, the Spirit is joined to God and Christ, both clearly deity, as an equal partner in formulaic language expressions. For example, Matt 28:19 demands, “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.” Paul writes “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). Erickson adds, “in 1 Corinthians 12, as Paul discusses spiritual gifts, he coordinates the three members of the Godhead: ‘There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work’ (vv. 4–6).”²¹ Why would biblical writers include the Spirit in these ways if the Spirit was not co-equal with God and Christ? Erickson elsewhere draws attention to this phenomenon in the Gospel of John in particular:

¹⁹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 784–785.

²⁰ Bird, *Evangelical Theology*, 617.

²¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 784.

The Fourth Gospel contains the strongest evidence of a coequal Trinity. The threefold formula appears again and again: 1:33–34; 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7, 13–15; 20:21–22 (cf. 1 John 4:2, 13–14). The interdynamics among the three persons comes through repeatedly. The Son is sent by the Father (14:24) and comes forth from him (16:28). The Spirit is given by the Father (14:16), is sent from the Father (14:26), and proceeds from the Father (15:26). Yet the Son is closely involved in the coming of the Spirit: he prays for his coming (14:16); the Father sends the Spirit in the Son's name (14:26); the Son will send the Spirit from the Father (15:26); the Son must go away so that he can send the Spirit (16:7). The Spirit's ministry is understood as a continuation and elaboration of that of the Son. He will bring to remembrance what the Son has said (14:26); he will bear witness to the Son (15:26); he will declare what he hears from the Son, thus glorifying the Son (16:13–14).²²

Attempts Toward Articulating the Trinity

The textual data clearly demonstrate the deity of Christ and the Holy Spirit along with God the Father. They also affirm the unity of God. Yet how are we to understand this three-person Godhead? Early Christians struggled to articulate what is ultimately inscrutable. Indeed, the Trinity is one of those more obvious elements of the incomprehensibility of God. Nevertheless, it is worth a few moments sketching those attempts. Some of these viewpoints came to be considered heretical.

Dynamic and Modalistic Monarchianism

“Monarchianism” refers to sole sovereignty, the sovereignty of one. Generally it was an early (second-third centuries A.D.) approach to God “that stressed the unity of God.”²³ There were two varieties. Dynamic Monarchianism was a view “that Jesus was not of the essence of God, but that God was at work in him” while Modalistic Monarchianism was a view “that God was one person, not three, but that he revealed himself successively in three different roles.”²⁴ Both of these views rightly came to be considered heresies in succeeding centuries on the basis of the testimony and exegesis of Scripture. Erickson comments on modalism, which, of the two, was more thoughtful:

Modalistic monarchianism was a genuinely unique, original, and creative conception, and is in some ways a brilliant breakthrough. Both the unity of the Godhead and the deity of all three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—are preserved. Yet the church in assessing this theology deemed it lacking in some significant respects. In particular, the fact that the three occasionally appear simultaneously on the stage of biblical revelation

²² Ibid., 301.

²³ Erickson, *The Concise Dictionary of Christian Theology*, 128.

²⁴ Ibid., 129.

proved to be a major stumbling block to this view. Some of the trinitarian texts noted earlier proved troublesome. The baptismal scene, where the Father speaks to the Son, and the Spirit descends on the Son, is an example, together with all those passages where Jesus speaks of the coming of the Spirit, or speaks of or to the Father. If modalism is accepted, Jesus's words and actions in these passages must be regarded as misleading.²⁵

Orthodox Viewpoint

Trinitarians eventually came to agree that the correct way to articulate the trinitarian Godhead was to affirm that there is one indivisible God in terms of being and nature, yet three persons in that one indivisible God. Consequently, the persons are eternally united in essence, attributes, and purpose, yet they are distinct persons. There is one "substance" yet three persons.

Against modalism, these persons are not periodic or sporadic "modes" of manifestation, for they are all equally eternal and immanent. Indeed, they must be so equal in order to be God. The Son and Spirit do not cease to exist while God is in the "Father mode"; likewise the Spirit and Son "modes" do not cancel out the Father. If all three eternally exist, there is no need for modes of existence.

This view is also not tritheism, for it insists God is one essential deity, not three distinct deities. Grudem's comments are appropriate on this point:

. . . [I]t is important to affirm that each person is completely and fully God; that is, that each person has the whole fullness of God's being in himself. The Son is not partly God or just one-third of God, but the Son is wholly and fully God, and so is the Father and the Holy Spirit. . . . Rather, we must say that the person of the Father possesses the *whole being* of God in himself. Similarly, the Son possesses the *whole being* of God in himself, and the Holy Spirit possesses the *whole being* of God in himself. When we speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together we are not speaking of any greater being than when we speak of the Father alone, or the Son alone, or the Holy Spirit alone. The Father is *all* of God's being. The Son also is *all* of God's being. And the Holy Spirit is *all* of God's being. . . . But if each person is fully God and has all of God's being, then we also should not think that the personal distinctions are any kind of additional attributes added on to the being of God. . . . Rather, each person of the Trinity has all of the attributes of God, and no one person has any attributes that are not possessed by the others.²⁶

The "Economic" Trinity

The term "economic Trinity" seeks to understand the Trinity from the perspective of God's saving activities. That is, the relationships between the Father, Son, and Spirit are seen through

²⁵ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 304.

²⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 252-253.

how they are active in specific works in which they are involved (e.g., creation, salvation). Each member of the Trinity has a role to play, and these roles give us a glimpse into how the persons of the Trinity are related to each other. This perspective ultimately holds that “certain members of the Trinity have roles or functions that are subject to the control or authority of other members,”²⁷ and so there is subordination of activity within the Godhead, though all three persons are the same essence. This view has hierarchy being intrinsic to the Trinity. Grudem summarizes the view (which he adopts):

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.²⁸

While agreeing with the idea that there are three Persons of one essence in the Trinity, contemporary Christians (evangelical and otherwise orthodox varieties) continue to disagree as to whether subordination is an intrinsic part of the Trinity. It is fair to say, though, that the economic view is the more ancient perspective in the context of historic Christianity.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 1240.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 251.