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## THE HOLY TRINITY

*The seeds that developed into the full flower of New Testament trinitarian revelation are already planted in the Old Testament. Elohim, the living God, creates by speaking his word and sending his spirit. The world comes into being by a threefold cause. Similarly, יהוה, the covenant God, makes himself known to, saves, and preserves his people by his word and spirit. In the angel of the Lord, whether created angel or the Logos, God, specifically his word, was uniquely and powerfully present. Similarly, the spirit of God is the principle of all life and well-being as well as of holiness and renewal. A threefold divine principle underlies creation as well as re-creation and sustains the entire economy of Old Testament revelation.*

*These Old Testament ideas were further developed in intertestamental Judaism. Divine Wisdom is hypostatized and, under Greek philosophical influence, Philo fused Plato's doctrine of the ideas, Stoic logos-doctrine, and the Old Testament doctrine of wisdom into a single system. However, based on metaphysical dualism keeping God and world separate, Philo regards the Logos as a necessary intermediary being, a mediator between God and the world. In Jewish theology this developed into a complex angelology that increasingly diverged from the Old Testament, which is not dualistic and does not consider logos as immanent reason. In addition, the intermediate beings in Philo and Jewish theologies have no soteriological significance, no connection with the Messiah; the significance of the spirit of the Lord is virtually neglected. While this development shares language with the New Testament, its world of ideas is quite different.*

*The true development of the trinitarian ideas of the Old Testament is found in the New Testament. In the incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the one true God is revealed as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. These three are identical with those who revealed themselves to the Old Testament saints in word and deed, prophecy and miracle. The threefold principle in operation in creation and salvation is, however, made more clear in the New Testament. All salvation, every blessing, and blessedness have their threefold cause in God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The New Testament revelation is trinitarian through and through.*

*Scripture also gives us insight into the relations between the three persons of the Trinity. God the Father is the Creator, the father of his people, Israel, and supremely the father of his Son, the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ." The Father is preeminent in creation and redemption, the first in the divine economy. From this the Arians wrongly infer that the Father alone is God; a claim found nowhere in Scripture. On the contrary, the names given to Christ reveal the immanent relations of the triune God. Thus, Logos points to the one who is able to fully reveal God because from all eternity God communicated himself in all his fullness to him. He is also the Son of God in a metaphysical sense; by nature and from eternity he is elevated above angels and prophets. He is the "firstborn" and "only begotten" as the full image of God, who from all eternity bears a unique relation to the Father. He is not*

*a creature, but is and was and remains God, who is over all, blessed forever. The Spirit is God as the immanent principle of life throughout creation; he is holy because he is God. He is both divine and personal. Finally, as Christ is related to the Father, so the Spirit is related to Christ. As the Son witnesses to and glorifies the Father, so the Spirit witnesses to and glorifies the Son. By the Spirit we have communion with no one less than the Son and the Father themselves.*

*Scripture does not provide a fully developed trinitarian dogma but gives us its essential ingredients. The Apostolic Fathers do little more than cite Scripture though they exalt the Son and avoid both the Docetic and Ebionite heresy. Faced with the challenge of Gnosticism, apologists such as Justin Martyr clearly teach the divinity of the Son, though he does not clearly express the immanent relations between Father and Son. Certain influences of Greek philosophic thought find their way into Justin's formulations and were later rejected by the church. Opposition to Greek philosophic influences is particularly strong in Irenaeus, the great opponent of Gnosticism, with its idea of God as "depth" and its notion of the logos as the immanent principle of the cosmos. It is Tertullian who more clearly distinguished the persons of the Trinity while maintaining the unity of God. He was the first to deduce the Trinity of persons from the very being of God rather than from the person of the Father. Origen took it the next step by conceiving the immanent Trinity totally as an eternal process within the divine being itself, though he subordinates the Son to the Father by deriving the Trinity from the person of the Father.*

*At Nicaea, the church did not follow Origen but repudiated subordinationism and affirmed the full deity of the Son. The challenge was now to maintain the true unity of the Godhead. Elaborating and developing the doctrine of the Trinity to completion fell to Athanasius, the three Cappadocians, and Augustine. For Athanasius the Trinity is eternal; Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three from eternity. At the same time all three persons are of one essence and have the same attributes. In the main this teaching of Athanasius is affirmed by Basil and the two Gregories and clarified with more names, illustrations, and analogies. In the West, it was Hilary and especially Augustine in their respective treatises De trinitate who vigorously defended the doctrine. Augustine does not consider the Father but instead the one, simple, uncompounded essence of God as the source of the Trinity. This essence dwells equally and fully in each person. By noting many analogies of the Trinity in creation, Augustine connected the doctrine of God with the cosmos.*

*Opposition to the dogma of the Trinity comes from outside (Jews and Muslims) and from within Christianity itself. The confession of the Trinity is the heartbeat of the Christian religion. All error is traceable to a departure from this doctrine: to a denial of the unity in order to preserve threeness (Arianism) or to a formulation of unity that fails to maintain threeness (Sabellianism). Arianism was subordinationist and adoptionist; the Logos was created but a perfect creature who became, as it were, a God. The opposite view, that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are only different names or modes of the one God came to expression as monarchianism, patripassionism, and modalism. Both errors appealed to Scripture and made use of Greek philosophy to advance their arguments; both positions continued to have influence in the church and theology.*

*Arianism has appeared in various forms of subordinationism, in Socinianism and in full-blown Unitarianism. Jesus, though exemplary, is an ordinary person, though a great one. Neither the Holy Spirit nor grace is necessary for salvation. Sabellianism retains the divinity of the Son and Spirit but absorbs them into the one divine being so that proper distinctions between them disappear. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are one and the same person or being, three modes of activity or revelation of the one divine being. The work of the triune God was seen, as in Joachim of Fiore and David Joris, as taking place in*

three successive periods, each one associated with one person of the Trinity. It was, however, especially Michael Servetus who devoted all his intellectual powers to repudiate the church's doctrine of the Trinity. Gnostic and theosophical speculations can be found in the trinitarian thought of Jakob Böhme, Zinzendorf, and Swedenborg. Such theosophical thinking paved the way for radically philosophical interpretations of the Trinity in Kant, Spinoza, Schelling, Hegel, and Strauss.

Properly to defend Scripture's teaching, the church found it necessary to use language that went beyond Scripture. This affirms the Christian's right of independent reflection and theology's right to exist. Confusion between Greek-speaking and Latin-speaking churches on various terms for the being (unity) of God and the diversity of persons (threeness) accompanied differences in challenges faced by orthodox Christianity in East and West. Terminological disputes have been frequent in the church, particularly concerning the notion of "person." Boethius provided the influential definition of person as an individual rational being, potentially leading to tritheism and a loss of divine unity. In the modern era "personality" is attributed to heroic human qualities and often denied to God. We must not lose sight of the important point: In the dogma of the Trinity the word "person" simply means that the three persons in the divine being are not "modes" but have a distinct existence of their own. The divine being is tripersonal. Thus, settled Christian dogma teaches that in the one being of God there exist three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, who each fully share the divine essence yet differ in personal attributes. The Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten or generated, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father (and the Son).

The name "Father" is the preferred description of the first person. "Father" is not a metaphor derived from the earth and attributed to God; "unbegotten" is not to be taken in contrast to creatures but as an inner trinitarian relation. The Father is eternally Father; the Son was generated out of the being of the Father from eternity. It is God's nature to be generative and fruitful. To deny this is to leave one with an abstract, deistic view of God. The generation of the Son is spiritual; it does not create division and separation. Therefore, the most striking human analogy is thought and speech. Just as the human mind objectivizes itself in words, so God expresses his entire being in the Logos. For God to beget is to speak, and his speaking is eternal. The Son is begotten out of the very being of the Father; from eternity the Son is "very God of very God." The personal property of the Holy Spirit is "procession." Both the deity and personality of the Spirit have been contested. It is true that these do not confront us as forcefully in Scripture as do the deity and personality of the Father and the Son. Yet the profound religious significance of making the same confession about the Spirit did become increasingly clear to the church. There is no salvation or communion with God apart from the Holy Spirit. Only if the Holy Spirit is truly God can he impart to us the Father and the Son. He who gives us God himself must himself be truly God. Those who deny the deity of the Holy Spirit cannot maintain that of the Son. The Trinity completes itself in the divine person of the Holy Spirit.

Gradually, however, an important difference developed between the East and the West in the doctrine of the Trinity. The East teaches that the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, but not that the Spirit is also from the Son and receives his existence from him. Unlike Augustine, who posited the unity of the Trinity in the divine nature, the East did not go beyond the church fathers who sought the unity in the person of the Father. Eastern objection to the term filioque is a last lingering remnant of subordinationism and tends to a dualistic separation of orthodoxy and mysticism.

The immanent relations of the three persons in the divine being also manifest themselves outwardly. All God's outward works are common to the three persons and indivisible. There is, however, an appropriation of properties and works to each person. The Father works of himself, through the Son, in

*the Spirit. All the works of God ad extra have a single author. Yet, all things proceed from the Father, are accomplished by the Son, and completed in the Spirit. In an economic sense, the work of creation is more specifically assigned to the Father, redemption to the Son, and sanctification to the Holy Spirit. In the history of revelation, the economy of the Father was especially that of the Old Testament, that of the Son began with the incarnation, and that of the Holy Spirit began on the day of Pentecost.*

*From the beginning of the church's reflection on the Trinity, attempts have been made to elucidate it by illustrations and prove it by arguments. The number three plays an important role in Scripture and in the polytheistic lore of nonbiblical peoples. Numerous trinitarian analogies have been found in the natural world and on a higher level. Augustine and especially medieval thinkers also developed logical analogies. In modern philosophy triplicity even achieved formal dominance in the work of Kant and the dialectical method of Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel. Some sought to go beyond analogy to positive arguments for the Trinity from the nature of thought or of love. Augustine found clear imprints of the Trinity in human consciousness and reason and especially in the self-knowledge of the human soul as memory, intelligence, and will, but he still considered these only a posteriori evidence not a priori proof. Augustine's favorite analogy comes from love itself: Lover, Beloved, and Love. Theosophy in the person of Jakob Böhme and the philosophy of Schelling posited a plural All-Oneness that unites the oneness of Deism and the allness of pantheism. God is subject (will), object (idea), and the identity of both subject and object. Here theogony and cosmogony join: in God's self-revelation to his creatures he at the same time becomes manifest to himself.*

*Though modern philosophy with its speculation again brought the trinitarian dogma into favor, the church and theology generally assumed a reserved attitude toward these philosophical construals of the Trinity. Analogies at best are a posteriori evidences, and even then the mystery of the Trinity must be honored. Scripture alone is the final ground for the doctrine of the Trinity. Analogies have some value since they remind us that the creation itself shows imprints of the triune God. The arguments also have some value in demonstrating that belief in the Trinity is not irrational. Though grace is superior to nature, it is not in conflict with it. The thinking mind situates the doctrine of the Trinity squarely in the full-orbed life of nature and humanity.*

*The doctrine of the Trinity makes God known to us as the truly living God, over against the cold abstractions of Deism and the confusions of pantheism. A doctrine of creation—God related to but not identified with the cosmos—can only be maintained on a trinitarian basis. In fact, the entire Christian belief system stands or falls with the confession of God's Trinity. It is the core of the Christian faith, the root of all its dogmas, the basic content of the new covenant. The development of trinitarian dogma was never primarily a metaphysical question but a religious one. It is in the doctrine of the Trinity that we feel the heartbeat of God's entire revelation for the redemption of humanity. We are baptized in the name of the triune God, and in that name we find rest for our soul and peace for our conscience. Our God is above us, before us, and within us.*