

EDITORIAL

ONE GOD—THREE PERSONS

God’s trinity (trinitarianism) stands unarguably as a *sine qua non*, i.e., an indispensable fact of Christianity. It has been, is, and forever will be an indisputable, foundational, bedrock belief of the Christian faith.

The Master’s Seminary doctrinal statement succinctly summarizes this precious truth thusly: “We teach that there is but one living and true God (Deut 6:4; Isa 45:5–7; 1 Cor 8:4), an infinite all-knowing Spirit (John 4:24), perfect in all His attributes, one in essence, eternally existing in three Persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:14)—each equally deserving worship and obedience.”

While God’s trinity appears implicitly and explicitly throughout the Bible, no one text declares or explains the fullness associated with the incomprehensible triune God (Isa 40:28). However, the plethora of evidence in both Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT), plus the writings of the early church, make this an overwhelmingly undeniable tenet of biblical orthodoxy.

Starting in the OT, one immediately encounters Gen 1:26 and 3:22 (cf. 11:5–7) using the plural pronoun “us” in reference to God.

Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth” (Gen 1:26).

Then the Lord God said, “Behold, the man has become like one of Us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might stretch out his hand, and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever” (Gen 3:22).

The same use of “us” also appears in Isa 6:8: “Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, ‘Whom shall I send, and who will go for Us?’ Then I said, ‘Here am I. Send me!’”

But, how can one be three? Deut 6:4 hints at the answer: “Hear, O Israel! The Lord is our God, the Lord is one!”

The Hebrew word (אֶחָד), translated “one” here, frequently communicates the idea of unity in diversity. For instance, Gen 1:5 (one day in two parts—evening and morning); Gen 2:24 (one couple in two partners—male and female); Exod 24:3 (one voice in many people); Exod 26:6 (one tabernacle in multiple parts); Num 13:23 (one

cluster in many grapes). So, it is no surprise to see one God in three persons being alluded to by Moses in his last book of the Pentateuch.

With even greater specificity, Isaiah speaks of three persons when referring to the one God of Israel—Lord God, Me, i.e., Christ, and Spirit (48:16). Also see Isa 61:1—Spirit, God, and Me, i.e., Christ, who interpreted this text in just such a manner (Luke 4:18–19).

In the progress of God's written revelation, the NT evidence becomes more direct and increasingly frequent:

After being baptized, Jesus came up immediately from the water; and behold, the heavens were opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending as a dove and lighting on Him, and behold, a voice out of the heavens said, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased" (Matt 3:16–17).

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19).

The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God" (Luke 1:35).

When the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, that is the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father, He will testify about Me (John 15:26).

But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you (Rom 8:11).

Now I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me (Rom 15:30).

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).

. . . how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God? (Heb 9:14).

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God . . . (1 John 4:2).

But you, beloved, building yourselves up on your most holy faith, praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting anxiously for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ to eternal life (Jude 20–21).

The *magnum opus* of trinitarian Scriptures comes in Eph 1:3–14 which speaks of each Person’s involvement in the salvation of believers.

- 1:3–6 – God the Father
- 1:7–12 – God the Son
- 1:13–14 – God the Holy Spirit

Actually, and not unexpectedly, the three members of the single Godhead appear by allusion or direct mention at the beginning and end of both the Old and New Testaments, i.e., from Genesis to Malachi and Matthew to Revelation.

- Genesis 1:26 – “us”
- Malachi
 - 2:15 – Holy Spirit
 - 2:16 – Father
 - 3:1–2 – Christ
- Matthew
 - 1:18 – Christ
 - 1:18 – Holy Spirit
 - 1:22 – Father
- Revelation
 - 22:17 – Holy Spirit
 - 22:18–19 – Father
 - 22:20–21 – Christ

As time passed beyond the canon of Scripture and the apostles, the early church fathers began to write in more detail. Please note these three examples.

Irenaeus (ca. 120–202):

And this is the drawing-up of our faith, the foundation of the building, and the consolidation of a way of life. God, the Father, uncreated, beyond grasp, invisible, one God the maker of all; this is the *first and foremost article* of our faith. But the *second article* is the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord, who was shown forth by the prophets according to the design of their prophecy and according to the manner in which the Father disposed; and through Him were made all things whatsoever. He also, *in the end of times*, for the recapitulation of all things, is become a man among men, visible and tangible, in order to abolish death and bring to light life, and bring about the communion of God and man. And the *third article* is the Holy Spirit, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs were taught about God and the just

were led in the path of justice, and who *in the end of times* has been poured forth in a new manner upon humanity over all the earth renewing man to God.¹

Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 330–389):

The Son is not Father; . . . yet he is whatever the Father is. The Spirit is not Son. . . . Yet whatever the Son is, he is. The three are a single whole in their Godhead and the single whole is three in personalities.²

Augustine (ca. 354–430):

Whatever . . . is spoken of God in respect to himself, is both spoken singly of each person, that is, of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and together of the Trinity itself, not plurally but in the singular.³

Not only were men writing as individuals, but groups began to compose creedal statements. Several of the more important included:

The Nicene-Constantinople Creed (ca. 381):

We believe in one God the Father Almighty; . . . And in one Lord Jesus Christ, . . . very God of very God, . . . And in the Holy Ghost, . . . who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified; . . .⁴

The (Pseudo) Athanasian Creed (ca. 875–925):

3. And the Catholic faith is this: That we worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity;
4. Neither confounding the Persons: nor dividing the Substance [Essence].
5. For there is one Person of the Father: another of the Son: and another of the Holy Ghost.
6. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost is all one: the Glory equal, the Majesty coeternal.⁵

Since the time of this creed, theologians have observed that at least seven lines of thought could be developed from the entire section (paragraphs 3–28).⁶

¹ Irenaeus, *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching*, trans. Joseph P. Smith (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1952), 50.

² St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ*, trans. Fredrick Williams and Lionel Wickham (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 122–23.

³ Augustine, *On the Trinity*, *NPNF*, 3:92.

⁴ Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1889), 2:58–59.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:66.

⁶ John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 438.

1. The Father is God.
2. The Son is God.
3. The Holy Spirit is God.
4. The Father is not the Son.
5. The Father is not the Holy Spirit.
6. The Son is not the Holy Spirit.
7. There is exactly one God.

Now with this brief survey as background, the following articles in this fall issue of *MSJ* will take you where most works on the triunity of God do not:

1. Trinitarianism and Creation
2. Trinitarianism and the Inspiration of Scripture
3. Trinitarianism and Eschatology
4. Trinitarianism and Early Church Doctrine

These essays come forth as expressions of worship through paeans of praise to our triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Moving from prose to poetry, Elizabeth Rundle Charles (1828–1896) extolled the unmistakable centrality of triune theology with her classic hymn, “Praise Ye the Triune God” (ca. 1858).

1. Praise ye the Father for His lovingkindness,
Tenderly cares He for His erring children;
Praise Him, ye angels, praise Him in the heavens,
Praise ye Jehovah!

2. Praise ye the Savior—great is His compassion,
Graciously cares He for His chosen people;
Young men and maidens, ye old men and children,
Praise ye the Savior!

3. Praise ye the Spirit, Comforter of Israel,
Sent of the Father and the Son to bless us;
Praise ye the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—
Praise ye the Triune God!

From the teaching of Scripture, the writings of the fathers, and the explanation of the creeds to the singing of truth concerning the triune God, every Christian’s response ought to be, “Amen!, Amen!, and Amen!”

Richard Mayhue
rmayhue@tms.edu