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# Axioms of the Trinity

by Kerry S. Robichaux

Beginning with this issue we consider the most fundamental of all Christian topics—the Triune God. The Triune God is uniquely the God of the Christians, for only Christians recognize, appreciate, and worship God in His Trinity. Yet historically the teaching of the Trinity, variously understood, has been a constant source of controversy among Christians since its first appearance. On the one hand, the propensity for misunderstanding and the possibility for error in this chief mystery of our faith tempts us to cautiously avoid the matter completely; on the other hand, the centrality of the Trinity to our Christian identity demands our full and most careful attention. Fortunately, the historical path through the truth of the Trinity has been long, and most, if not all, of the pitfalls have been discovered and marked. But sadly, when we cast a glance back on the historical path, it seems that a certain richness in the understanding of the Trinity has been lost to us moderns. For many today the Trinity lacks the vibrancy with which it once charged the early church and has become an arcane fundamental arousing little appreciation or even interest. This is lamentable because in the New Testament the Trinity is richly interwoven into the teaching of the apostles, and we can expect that it was richly interwoven as well into the life of the churches they served.

Unfortunately, after two thousand years of intense discussion on the subject, the teaching concerning the Trinity is now the stuff of theologians. Yet only the heartiest of them

have sounded the full depth of understanding that has developed throughout the ages, an understanding that respects the biblical record and embraces the truth of the Trinity in all its suprarational beauty. At the other extreme, Bible “answer-men” flood radio and television airwaves with descriptions of the Trinity that would shock the sensibilities of the historic church, while few of their listeners are even

slightly aware that anything is amiss in their presentations. Even popularizers of mainline theologies present systematizations of the Trinity that nullify the basic realizations of the historic church and so simplify who the Triune God is that the mystery of Him is all but eradicated. Ultimately, in the understanding of many Christians today, God is triune in name only, the deep and awesome revelation of Him having been abandoned and relegated to the sphere of the unknowable.

In their defense, we agree that God is unknowable in a full way. But this does not mean that He is fully unknowable. The common understanding of the Trinity held by many believers today is, we suggest, far short of what can be known of

God through the simple record of the Bible. We are poor stewards of the mysteries if we do not hold in full what has been made available to us by God through His Word. But sadly with many Christians (leaders and common believers alike) this is the case. It is our Christian duty to resist the shallowness of thought that we so easily fall back on and delve as deeply into the truth concerning the

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Trinity as the Bible and God-given resources allow us to do.

### The Biblical Pronouncement

The Old Testament certainly gives us a view of the Triune God but only in a way of type, figure, and shadow. The Old Testament saints had the Scriptures before them for centuries but never came to the realization that God is triune. It would require the coming of Christ to reveal this. When He came as man and as His ministry proceeded, the Lord began to unveil that God, who is one (Mark 12:29), is also triune. Particularly in the Gospel of John do we find statements concerning the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (e.g., John 5—6 and 14—16). Just prior to His ascension, however, He left to His disciples and to all the church across the ages a clear and distinct revelation of Himself: “Go therefore and disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28:19). With this the revelation of the Triune God, at least in fact, broke upon the earth. It would eventually change history and will ultimately change mankind itself.

Actually, in the words *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* a great deal of revelation concerning the Triune God is contained. At the most basic level, the words reveal that the one true God is in fact in some sense three. The apostles and the first churches did not concern themselves with how this could be, but simply accepted the revelation as fact. The writings of the apostles richly incorporate the revelation. Paul, for example, structures his extended praise in Ephesians 1:3-14 on the Trinity: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ...to the praise of the glory of His grace, with which He graced us in the Beloved; in whom we have redemption through His blood....in Him also believing, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of the promise, who is the pledge of our inheritance.” Peter also confesses a living acknowledgment of the Divine Trinity when he describes the believers as “chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father in the sanctification of the Spirit unto obedience and the sprinkling of the blood of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:2). In writing to the believers, the apostle John employs the revelation of the Trinity as well: “In this we know that we abide in Him and He in us, that He has given to us of His Spirit. And we have beheld and testify that the Father has sent the Son as the Savior of the world” (1 John 4:13-14). These are not isolated examples of occasional notice of the Trinity by the apostles; a full catalog of their frequent and free use of the Trinity is beyond the

scope of this article. (But see “A Biblical Overview of the Triune God” elsewhere in this issue.) If we look at the places where the apostles incorporated the Trinity into their utterance, we notice not casual but deliberate enunciations of this revelation given to them by the Lord. It seems that they took every opportunity to relate the persons of God to the message they delivered and so indicated a thorough and vital relationship with the Trinity. If at first glance the message of the New Testament concerns the saving actions of our God, upon closer inspection it concerns the actions of a Triune God who saves man according to and by the application of His triune being.

Further, the early church of the second and third centuries continued to develop the understanding of God as triune. During the first centuries after the apostles the proper interpretation of the Scriptures was defined by a strict adherence to a tradition of understanding handed down successively through the elders of the churches called the rule of faith (*regula fidei*). This was expressed in a number of places by such early writers as Irenaeus and Tertullian, and invariably the kernel of these expressions was the redemption of man through the saving actions of the Triune God. Generally, the structure was expressly trinitarian. Later, the rule of faith was codified more concretely into the early creeds (e.g., the Apostles’ Creed), and ultimately, the well-known creeds of the great councils emerged (e.g., Nicean and Chalcedonian). These are clearly statements of faith in the Triune God and owe their very structure to His triune being.

For many Christians all that can be said about the Triune God is that He is one and three. But the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* themselves indicate something about the identity and character of the Triune God. Here we want to examine some of the implications of these terms. We believe that *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* point to important aspects of God that should affect our faith in and appreciation and enjoyment of God. That God has chosen to reveal Himself to man through these terms indicates at least three things concerning Him: 1) that above all He is

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an organic Being; 2) that by virtue of His organic identity He is eternally three and yet one; and 3) that as an organic Being He exists as an eternal dispensing.

### Above All He is an Organic Being

Father, Son, and Spirit are organic terms expressing relationships in life. From these terms we should expect that the Triune God is, for lack of a better term, organic in His identity and character. Certainly in His actions He is a God of life, but more intrinsically, He is a Being of life. The distinctions in the Trinity are defined by relationships in life. As Father He is the source of divine life, as Son He is the expression of divine life, and as the Spirit He is the essence of divine life.

Some may argue that *father* is a natural term while God is above nature; hence, *Father* is more a metaphor than an indication of the reality of His being. But the distinctions between the Father and the Son and the Spirit are described precisely by these terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit*. In fact, it is not we humans who serve as the standard of a metaphor applied to God, but rather it is God as Father, Son, and Spirit who serves as the standard according to which we have human fathers and are human sons and possess human breath or spirit. He is the genuine Father, the genuine Son, and the genuine Spirit in existence; we are shadows of Him, not He of us. On the other hand, certainly we cannot understand these terms with every aspect of meaning that they can have. Gregory of Nazianzus, a fourth-century Christian teacher, wrote concerning the limits of these terms, defining the senses in which the terms could be properly understood with regard to the Persons of God. For example, *father* and *son* imply subordination, as a father is always greater than a son in at least the degree of honor. This meaning, however, should not be applied to the eternal Persons in the Trinity, according to Gregory. Likewise, the natural notions associated with human generation are not to be predicated to the Godhead. Thus, while begetting describes the relationship of the Father to the Son, the notion of a beginning or of a time before which the Son did not exist cannot be applied to God. Gregory further chides those who would understand any physical meanings associated with begetting: “Nay, I marvel that you do not venture so far as to conceive of marriages and times of pregnancy, and dangers of miscarriage, as if the Father could not have begotten at all if he had not begotten thus” (“The Third Theological Oration—On the Son” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. E. R. Hardy [Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1954], p. 162).

But apart from the physical meanings associated with them, the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* provide us a genuine understanding of who God is. The terms are not completely arbitrary or void of any of the senses that we

normally associate with them. And even prior to notions such as begetting, procession, expression, and so forth, the very first notion that strikes us in these revealed names is that these are terms related to life (certainly the eternal, divine life) and that therefore God is an organic Being. Again, some may find a similar complaint with the term *organic*, seeing in it associations too natural to be ascribed to the supernatural God. The same defense could be offered by saying that associations related to the life found in creation are to be excluded but that notions proper to the eternal life of God are to be applied. The Son declared that “just as the Father has life in Himself, so He gave to the Son to also have life in Himself” (John 5:26); thus, it is proper to speak of God as a God of life and to see Him as an organic Being.

Unfortunately, many theological systems overlook this most basic observation and, by doing so, overlook a major aspect of God’s work among mankind. The Protestant Reformation, for example, stressed a judicial view of salvation and focused on the imputation of righteousness. Certainly this view is not all wrong, but it cannot be completely right either, for a major revelation of the Triune God is lost in a purely judicial salvation, the revelation of God as a God of divine life. A merely judicial salvation little accounts for a Father, a Son, and a Spirit in the Trinity. The saving death and resurrection of Christ may point to a distinction between one and another of the divine Persons, but it does not require that one be a Father and the other a Son. A purely judicial view of salvation would be better served by a Trinity of Judge, Advocate, and Officer, or something to that effect. In such theological systems there is no real significance in *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* except as labels of distinction, devoid of any substantial significance.

When asked why God is Father, Son, and Spirit, adherents of a purely judicial view of salvation would be forced to say, “Simply because He is, and that’s all there is to it.” But the Scriptures clearly show an organic aspect to our salvation, and ultimately it is the organic view that better characterizes it. John announces that in Christ was life and the life is the light of the world (John 1:4; 8:12), that Christ came that we might have life (John 10:10), and that even his own writing is intended to bring us to life (John 20:31). It is well known that John stresses the divine life and that he characterizes salvation in terms of life. But even in Paul’s writing, where the judicial truth of our salvation is most clearly enunciated, the organic view is not lost; indeed, it is quite prominent. The banner verse of the Protestant Reformation declares not only the superiority of faith over works but also the centrality of life in a salvation by faith: “For the righteousness of God is revealed in it out of faith to faith, as it is written, ‘But the righteous shall have life and live by faith’” (Rom. 1:17; see also Gal. 3:11 and Heb. 10:38). Justification by faith

is not an end in itself; rather, it is for the enjoyment of the eternal life of God, as Paul indicates in referring to a “justification of life” (Rom. 5:18). Elsewhere Paul speaks of the inadequacy of the law to save us because of its inability to give life and implicitly states that life is the standard of salvation through justification by faith: “For if a law had been given which was able to give life, righteousness would have indeed been of law” (Gal. 3:21). The Greek words underlying *justification* (*dikaiosis*) and *righteousness* (*dikaïosune*) are closely related linguistically, the former referring to the act of making someone righteous and the latter referring to the condition of being righteous. For the believer righteousness comes through God’s act of justifying us, and in Paul’s view this is for our enjoyment of the eternal divine life of God.

Let no one misunderstand. We are not suggesting that justification is not by faith. Justification by faith is certainly the truth, but it is not the whole truth in that justification is not an end in itself. Justification by faith is for life, providing the judicial basis for our participation in the divine life of God. Thus, salvation is truly judicial, but it is charged with and gets its true character from the divine life of God. This organic aspect of our salvation is the greater one because it provides the essential basis for our salvation, the divine life and nature that makes us genuinely children of God.

This organic aspect of salvation better accords with who God is as Father, Son, and Spirit. Because of the organic aspect of salvation, we can know experientially that God is a God of life, and we can relate, in life, to what the basic revelation of the Triune God is, that He is Father, Son, and Spirit. We know the Father because He is now our Father in life and nature; we identify with the Son because now we too are sons; we enjoy the Spirit because we have Him within as the essence of the divine life that makes us sons. Actually, God saves us not only by what He is in righteousness but even more profoundly by what He is in His eternal being. The organic aspect of our salvation makes manifest that our Savior God is organic, that He is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

**By Virtue of His Organic  
Identity He is Eternally Three and yet One**

That He is Father, Son, and Spirit further points to the eternity of His threeness. It is axiomatic that the one God is eternal, but that the one God is eternally three is apprehended only by the revelation contained in the terms *Father, Son, and Spirit*. In declaring to us that He is Father, Son, and Spirit, He not only makes known the fact that He is three but also indicates how He is three eternally. Only by being three relationally is He necessarily three eternally. If He had revealed Himself as, let us say, Judge, Advocate, and Officer, His threeness would not be

bound eternally. A judge can exist without an advocate and an officer, and an advocate, without a judge and an officer. But because He is the Father, there must also be a Son, for there can be no father without a son. A father exists only because he has a son, and God exists as the Father only because He also exists as the Son.

Once we accept that He is Father, Son, and Spirit, we will ask, “In what way can the one God be three persons?” The Father, the Son, and the Spirit can be related to each other in only one of four ways. There could perhaps be three Gods, a Father God, a Son God, and a Spirit God. But this is denied by the belief, long held by Jew and Christian alike, that God is one (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4).

*In the language of the early church, the Son is said to be eternally begotten of the Father. The Son’s being begotten does not refer to an event before which He did not exist, but to a relationship which is eternal and which defines the identity of the persons of the Triune God.*

*Father, Son, and Spirit* do not declare, against our faith, that there are three Gods, even though many Christians hold to such a view, at least latently. Alternatively, the three could be temporal, successive modes in the existence of the one God. Thus, there would be a phase when the first alone exists without the other two, then at some point in time the first would become the second and cease to be the first; later in time the second would become the third and cease to be the second. This is commonly called modalism, which was first formally taught by Sabellius in the third century and further developed by Photinus in the fourth century. But, as we have seen above, if God is an eternal Father, then He must also be an eternal Son, and by analogy, He must also be an eternal Spirit. There can be no temporal modes of existence in the Godhead, much less successive ones. A third possibility is that the Father is the unique God, and the Son and the Spirit are merely His created offspring. This is the position of the Arian party at the Nicene Council, but it was met with a

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multitude of arguments that eventually caused it to be rejected. Suffice it to say here that if He begot something other than God, He would not be a Father in any more than a metaphorical sense. If He had brought forth a Son who was not God as He was God, that is, if He had brought forth something other than what He is Himself, He would actually be no more than a Creator and would have shown Himself to be untrue in claiming to be a Father. This position should be rejected as making God a liar or at least as depriving God of genuine Fatherhood. Historically, the Nicene Council rejected the notion that

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The Father is ever dispensing  
the divine essence into the Son  
and thereby begetting Him eternally;  
the Son is ever receiving and  
expressing that dispensing and is thus  
eternally begotten of the Father;  
the Spirit is ever dispensed as the  
divine essence by the Father  
and eternally proceeds from Him.

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the Son is not God in the same sense that the Father is God. That leaves us with only one possibility, that the Son and the Spirit are God Himself also and that the one God is somehow mysteriously and eternally three. This is the position that the church latently accepted from its first days and formally acknowledged in the fourth century. Hence, if God is the Father, as He says He is, God must also be the Son, as He also says He is. The orthodox party at the Nicene Council was fond of saying, “Always a Father; always a Son,” and so affirmed that Christ was as much God as the Father was.

Since God cannot change in His being and essence, He did not at some time become the Father—He did not at some time change from not being the Father to being the Father—but He is eternally the Father. This further implies that there was never a time when the Son did not exist, and in the language of the early church, the Son is said to be eternally begotten of the Father. The Son’s being begotten does not refer to an event before which He did not exist, but to a relationship which is eternal and which defines the identity of the persons of the Triune God. What is important to note in the distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit is not simply that the three of the Trinity are eternal but that the three are eternally relational. Each exists eternally in relation to the other two.

Thus, the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit*, which show His organic identity, further declare to us that the one God is eternally relationally three by virtue of His organic being.

The notion of three eternal relations in the Divine Trinity suggests a deep and intimate association among the three. The three do not exist merely in relation to each other, but they exist in an intimate relationship of love for each other. In fact, the Bible declares that God is love (1 John 4:8, 16). Love always requires an object because love is relational; hence, the eternal love that God is had an eternal object in the divine persons long before man was created as a temporal object of this love. The object of the eternal love can only be the eternal persons of the Trinity. In time man was created to make manifest that God is love, and the regenerated believers ultimately fulfill this basic calling. God as love was first manifested by man in the person of Jesus Christ: “In this the love of God was manifested among us, that God sent His only begotten Son into the world that we might have life and live through Him. Herein is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son as a propitiation for our sins” (1 John 4:9-10). But the believers also are to make God as love known by our love for one another: “Beloved, if God has loved us in this way, we also ought to love one another. No one has beheld God at any time; if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:11-12).

The relational aspect of the Godhead is further manifested by the Body of Christ in the new creation. The night before He was crucified, the Lord prayed for the believers in this way: “That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me. And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one” (John 17:21-22). The Lord’s prayer is not simply that the believers would be harmonious and conflict-free but that they would make manifest the intrinsic oneness of the Triune God Himself. This oneness among the believers is in practicality the love of the believers for one another. The proper organic oneness of the believers, manifested by the free and abundant love that we have for one another, expresses what kind of God He is.

#### **As an Organic Being He Exists as an Eternal Dispensing**

Father, Son, and Spirit also refer to a consubstantiality of essence among the three. By the end of the fourth century the church had settled on the notion that there is one single essence in the Godhead, which is fully resident in each

of the three of the Trinity. With regard to that essence, however, the three of the Godhead are distinct. For example, the Son is He who is begotten of the Father with the divine essence, while the Father is the one who begets the Son with the divine essence. (Again, we are speaking not of an event but of an eternal relationship.) Here lies an important implication: Within the eternal Trinity there is an eternal dispensing of essence. We normally think of the Trinity in static terms, but this view of an eternal dispensing leads us to think of the Trinity as a dynamic Being. The Father is ever dispensing the divine essence into the Son and thereby begetting Him eternally; the Son is ever receiving and expressing that dispensing and is thus eternally begotten of the Father; the Spirit is ever dispensed as the divine essence by the Father and eternally proceeds from Him. Because God is this way in His eternal existence, in time the economy of His salvation reflects this eternal, intrinsic trinitarian dispensing by being focused in the dispensing of Himself into His chosen believers. Actually, this word *economy*, used frequently in theological studies to refer to God's saving actions in time, derives from the Greek word *oikonomia*, meaning the entire management of the assets of a large household. Such a management involved to a large extent the proper dispensing of goods to the members of the household. Hence, an economy of God would suggest a dispensing of the divine provisions to the household of God.

The New Testament makes abundant mention of this dispensing. From the larger perspective, the incarnation itself is the dispensing of God into man for man's salvation. But more finely, the Lord speaks of coming to give life to man (John 10:10) and of the Spirit being within the believers as rivers of living water gushing forth unto eternal life (John 7:38-39). Paul speaks of Christ after His death and resurrection as "a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45b), and it is this Christ who becomes the very life of the believers (Col. 3:4). John says that Christ gives the Spirit not by measure (John 3:34) and that God loves man to such an extent that He gives him eternal life (3:15-16). Peter declares that we believers have become partakers of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). These passages, and many more like them, demonstrate that the believers enjoy a rich flow from God, a substantial and essential dispensing from God. The deeper we consider the saving actions of God and examine the real nature of His salvation, seeing it not as merely judicial but even more so as organic, we

find that the purpose of salvation is not merely to save man from his fallen condition but also to make manifest that God Himself is an eternal dispensing. He saves man by what He is in Himself not just by what He does externally. In his being saved from the fall, man fulfills God's intention in creating him, that is, to express what God is in His eternal, triune being.

Ultimately, through His salvation of man the Triune God will reclaim the full meaning of the words He spoke in creating man: "Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness" (Gen. 1:26). Since its first few centuries, the church has recognized in these words the triune identity,

and we suggest that God's purpose for man is not simply to express God but to express Him in His triune identity. We recommend that the full meaning of this verse be taken, that "Us" and "Our" be understood as describing man's purpose as much as "image" and "likeness" do. We believers understand that man is to manifest the existence of God by bearing His image and likeness. But there is more in this verse than this. The God we are to manifest is the Triune God, the "Us" and "Our" whose image and likeness we possess. All creation manifests that God exists but man alone bears the special honor of manifesting that the God who ex-

ists is triune. As the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, He is eternally an organic Being, and we believers make this known by having His life and nature within us through His Spirit, by being the many brothers of the firstborn Son of God, and by having Him as our very Father through our partaking of His divine life (1 John 5:12) and His divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). As the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, He is eternally, relationally three, and He exists as love among His three Persons. We believers, in showing brotherly love for one another, manifest that He is the eternal, divine love and hence that He is three. Finally, as the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, He is an eternal dispensing, and we believers demonstrate this by being recipients of His grace, which has flowed out in His incarnation, death, and resurrection, and indwells us as His Spirit. This much said concerning the mere implications of the words *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit*, we cannot help but worship, enjoy, and appreciate Him. We care to delve deeply into an understanding of the Triune God because we have become inextricably bound to Him who is triune, and we exist solely for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose, that He would be expressed by us in His new creation. To be sure, man exists because God is triune. AFC

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