

# KNOWING THE TRIUNE GOD AS REVEALED IN THE WORD OF GOD

*by Ron Kangas*

Concerning the knowledge of the Triune God revealed in the Word of God, the New Testament contains a prayer, a promise, a provision, and a proclamation. The prayer is recorded in Ephesians 1:17, where Paul invokes “the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory” to give us “a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him.” Paul expressed a similar desire in Colossians 1:9-10, where he prayed that we would “be filled with the full knowledge of His will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding” and grow “by the full knowledge of God.” The promise is given in Hebrews 8:11: “They shall by no means each teach his fellow citizen and each his brother, saying, Know the Lord; for all will know Me from the little one to the great one among them.” The provision is mentioned in John 17:3: “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ.” The proclamation is made in 1 John 5:20: “We know that the Son of God has come and has given us an understanding that we might know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life.” With these and other verses as the basis, we may be assured that, as believers in Christ, we can know the true and living Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

The Bible further shows us, in various and sundry ways,

that if we would know the true God both in outward, objective knowledge and according to the inward, subjective consciousness of the divine life within us as genuine children of God begotten of Him, we must fulfill certain requirements, or prerequisites. Actually, these prerequisites are the ways in which we come to know the Triune God. In a two-part article we will endeavor to present the crucial requirements for knowing the full truth regarding

the Triune God unveiled and unfolded in the Word of God. These numerous requirements, which can be covered here only in an introductory and elementary way, fall into three basic categories: the Bible, the Triune God, and our person. Knowing God therefore entails a dynamic triangular interaction among the Word of God, the Triune God, and the person of those who earnestly seek the truth of God and the God of truth. In addition, we will see that this triangular interaction takes

place in a very particular context—the reality of the Body of Christ.

## **The Pure Word and the Complete Truth**

God has spoken, and the Triune God’s speaking has become His written word—the Holy Scriptures. Apart from God’s word, His speaking, we cannot know God, for His word is His expression, definition, and explanation. We

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can know Him only as He has explained, defined, and expressed Himself in, by, and through His word. If we want to know God, we must know the Scriptures.

The Scriptures teach us the things of God and the things concerning God. Furthermore—this may come as a surprise to many Bible readers—the Scriptures actually teach us God Himself. The more we realize this, the more we will come to the Bible not merely to learn about God but to learn God. There is a great difference between knowing about God and knowing God. Those who are dissatisfied with the former and desire the latter will begin to read the Bible not only as a theological text replete with propositional truths but as the written revelation of the true and living God.

If we would know the Triune God revealed in the Word of God, we need to rely not on traditional terms, teachings, and expressions but on the pure word of the Bible. We must honor the Word of God in its intrinsic purity, not mixing it with human opinion or speculation. This means that our stand with respect to the Trinity should be the Holy Scriptures, not according to traditional interpretations but according to the pure word of God. “Every word of God is pure... Add thou not unto his words, lest he reprove thee, and thou be found a liar” (Prov. 30:5a, 6, KJV). Adding to God’s word is most serious and is strictly proscribed in Deuteronomy 4:2 and 12:32 and in Revelation 22:18.

What does it mean, in a practical way, to add to the Word of God? The Lord Jesus provides a clear answer when He says to His disciples: “Watch and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 16:6). Leaven is something added to dough to produce fermentation (cf. Matt. 13:33). Since the disciples were unable to understand His word, the Lord Jesus went on to ask them: “How is it that you do not understand that it was not about bread that I spoke to you? But beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees” (Matt. 16:11). His further word must have made them clear, for the next verse reads: “Then they understood that He did not say to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.” The Lord Jesus Himself likens the teachings (i.e., the doctrines taught) of the Pharisees and the Sadducees to leaven. In Matthew 15:6 He told the scribes and Pharisees: “You have deprived the word of God of its authority because of your tradition.” Therefore, quoting Isaiah, He could say: “In vain do they worship Me, teaching as teachings the commandments of men” (v. 9). When we put all these verses together, we see that the leaven of the Pharisees is the traditional teachings and commandments of men. According to the Lord Jesus if these are added to the word of God, or held equal to it, God’s word is deprived of its authority. As those who would honor God’s word in its purity and receive it in faith and obedience, we must reject the

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leaven of human opinion, concept, and tradition, or, at least, distinguish between it and the divine revelation embodied in and conveyed through the Bible.

As we consider the revelation of the Triune God in the Bible, we wish to uphold the purity of God’s word and not blindly adhere to traditional terms, concepts, systems, and theological formulations. Although, due to the poverty of our language, we need to use certain terms, we must be on guard not to equate them with, much less allow them to replace, the word of the Bible. We would do well to heed the words of E. W. Bullinger: “If we confine ourselves to the Word of God, and that alone, both the writer and reader may, and will, all learn together what God has revealed concerning Himself” (*Selected Writings*, p. 45).

In order to know the truth concerning the Triune God in a full, complete, and balanced way and to maintain a testimony faithful to the whole truth of God’s revelation in the Scriptures, we need to see the principle of the twofoldness of divine truth. As a help in understanding this principle, let us quote several portions from *The Twofoldness of Divine Truth*, a booklet by Robert Govett, a meticulous and perceptive student of the Word of God. Govett says:

The twofoldness of truth as offered to our view in Holy Writ is one strong argument of its not being the work of man. It is the glory of man’s intellect to produce *oneness*. His aim is to trace different results to one principle, to clear it of ambiguities, to show how, through varied appearances, one law holds. Anything that stands in the way of the completeness of this, he eludes or denies (p. 3).

“But,” as Govett continues, “it is not so with God. In nature He is continually acting with two seemingly opposed principles” (p. 3). Therefore, Govett says, “It is not then to be wondered at, if two seemingly opposed principles are found placed side by side in the Scripture. ‘Unity in plurality, plurality in unity’ is the main principle on which both the world and the Scripture are constructed” (p. 4).

Regarding the apparently irreconcilable statements in God's Word, Govett remarks: "It is not necessary to reconcile them before we are bound to receive and act upon the two. It is enough that the Word of God distinctly affirms them both" (p. 6). "Their claim on our reception," Govett goes on to say, "is not that we can unite them, but that God has testified both" (p. 8). If we see this, we will realize that many debates regarding the truth in the Bible

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are unnecessary, for, in Govett's words, "Opposite views of truth arise from different parts of the subject being viewed at different times" (p. 9). Govett not only articulates the twofoldness of divine truth but also expresses forthrightly what the attitude of the Christian should be toward the truth of God's revelation:

Thus does God try His people. Will they trust Him when He affirms that view of truth which runs counter to their temperaments and intellectual bias? or will they trample on one of His sayings in their zeal for the other? The humble, child-like saint will acknowledge and receive both; for his Father, who cannot err, testifies to each alike...Will they receive both His statements on His simple assertion? Most will not, for they are one-sided. They will force everything to unity....They ignore all evidence that tells against their views....The Lord give us a single eye, and the teaching of His Holy Spirit that each part of His Word may leave its due impression on our judgments, our hearts, and our conduct! (pp. 11, 20, 23).

Govett specifically applies the principle of twofoldness of divine truth to the nature of God:

The same twofoldness of truth appears in the Scripture statements concerning the nature of God. It affirms His unity....But the Scripture as plainly affirms the distinction of persons in the Godhead. 'Unity in plurality and plurality in unity' is the assertion here. This master-truth, which takes its rise in the nature of the Godhead, flows out into all His works (p. 12).

Note Govett's statement that this "master-truth...takes its rise in the nature of the Godhead." In other words, God's revelation of Himself in the Scriptures, being twofold, is an expression of the nature of God. The two aspects of God's intrinsic being—that He is three being one and one being three—are testified by the twofoldness of the truth of His revelation in the Scriptures. "From this twofoldness of truth *designed* difficulties arise. Thus does God try mankind. Thus does He try His people" (p. 20). And thus does He try not only every theological system and school of thought but also everyone who seeks to know the Triune God.

Many of today's believers have been tried and found wanting, for they fail to maintain without bias and distortion the twofoldness of the truth regarding the Trinity. Christians easily lapse into an emphasis on God's being three. Recognizing that this tendency is common among believers, Stuart Olyott expresses concern:

It is probably true to say that many Christians, in their heart of hearts, tend to think of God more in terms of His three-ness than His one-ness. They think of Him more easily as Three than as One-in-three and Three-in-one. Such people...nurture an error in their hearts which keeps them from thinking of God as they should (*The Three Are One*, p. 87).

Recognizing that the truth concerning the Triune God is twofold is a requirement for knowing God in His trinity. This twofoldness of the truth is embodied in the word *triune*, a Latin word composed of *tri-*, meaning three, and *-une*, meaning one. To say that God is triune is to testify that He is three-one. He is uniquely one, yet He is distinctly and inseparably three. In the Godhead the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct but inseparable. In God's being one there is no separation among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and in God's being three there is a distinction among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The three of the Trinity cannot be separated, yet there is a distinction among them. This is the twofoldness of the truth concerning the Triune God.

**A**nother prerequisite for knowing the Triune God revealed in the Word of God is holding to the complete truth revealed in the Bible and not merely to the incomplete truths summarized in the creeds. The word *creed* denotes a succinct statement of belief which epitomizes the central points of the Christian faith. As concise, formal statements of crucial elements of Christian doctrine, the ecumenical creeds serve a useful function. In the view of G. W. Bromiley, the creeds "form a succinct basis of teaching, safeguard pure doctrine, and constitute an appropriate focus for the church's fellowship in faith" (*Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, p. 284). The problem with

allegiance to and reliance upon creeds, however, is that creeds can be (and, in practice, often are) superimposed on the Bible and thereby hinder, if not actually prevent, one from seeing the full revelation of the Triune God contained therein. Moreover, by their very nature creeds are incomplete, unable to embody the totality of the divine revelation. J. N. D. Kelly remarks: "It cannot be too often repeated that, in the proper sense of the terms, no creed, confession or formula of faith can be found in the New Testament...What is manifest on every page is a common body of doctrine, definite in outline and regarded by everyone as the possession of no individual but of the Church as a whole" (*Early Christian Creeds*, pp. 24-25).

**M**uch of this "body of doctrine" is not included in the ecumenical creeds. The Nicene Creed, for example, although fundamental and scriptural, is incomplete. This incompleteness is a cause of concern, for matters crucial to our knowing and experiencing the Triune God are ignored. This creed does not mention the all-inclusiveness of Christ—the truth that Christ is signified by and is the reality of every positive thing in the universe (Col. 2:16-17). Nor does this creed speak of five major points concerning the Spirit: that the Spirit was "not yet, because Jesus had not yet been glorified" (John 7:39); that "the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45); that "the Lord is the Spirit," the transforming Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17-18); that the Spirit is the compound Spirit, signified by the anointing oil, the compound ointment (Exo. 30:23-25); and that the Spirit, as "the seven Spirits" (Rev. 1:4; 4:5; 5:6), is the sevenfold intensified Spirit. Furthermore, the Nicene Creed does not speak of the Triune God being life to His children (John 1:12-13; 1 John 5:11-12); nor of Christ as the embodiment of the Triune God (Col. 2:9) and the expression of the Father (John 14:9); nor of the all-inclusiveness of Christ's death—that in His death He crucified the flesh of sin (Rom. 8:3a), condemned sin and took it away (Rom. 8:3b; John 1:29), destroyed the devil (Heb. 2:14), judged the world and its ruler (John 12:31), crucified the old man and terminated the old creation (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20a; 6:14), abolished the law of commandments in ordinances (Eph. 2:15a), and released the divine life (John 12:24); nor of the deeper significance of Christ's resurrection—that in resurrection He became the firstborn Son of God (Acts 13:33; Rom. 1:4; 8:29), regenerated God's chosen ones to be His brothers and God's sons (1 Pet. 1:3; Heb. 2:10; Rom. 8:29), and became the life-giving Spirit

(1 Cor. 15:45); nor of Christ's heavenly ministry as the Intercessor, the Mediator of a better covenant, the Advocate with the Father, the High Priest according to the order of Melchisedec, the Ruler of the kings of the earth, and the Administrator executing the decrees of God's government (Heb. 7:25; 8:6; 1 John 2:1; Heb. 5:10; 8:1; Rev. 1:5; 5:5); nor of Christ's indwelling, His being with our spirit, and His making home in our heart (2 Cor. 13:5; Col. 1:27; 2 Tim. 4:22; Eph. 3:17); nor of the Spirit—as the Spirit of God (Gen. 1:2), the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), and the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19)—being the all-inclusive Spirit; nor of the believers' being born of the Spirit in their spirit and of their having the witness of the Spirit with their spirit that they have become children of God who are now one spirit with the Lord (John 3:6; Rom. 8:16; 1 Cor. 6:17); nor of the Body of Christ, the organism of the Triune God for His expression and move (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4, 12, 16); nor of the New Jerusalem, the ultimate consummation of the operation of the Triune God in His economy to complete His eternal purpose for the fulfillment of the desire of His heart (Rev. 21:2, 10; 3:12; Gal. 4:26; Heb. 11:10; 12:22; Eph. 3:9-11; 1:9).

In view of the foregoing, we surely have a sound basis for preferring the full truth of the Bible over the partial truth of the creeds. Although the use of creeds should not be opposed, as believers in Christ we are not obliged to recite them nor to base our teaching on them, and although we believe what is stated in them, we need not be limited by them. Anyone who desires to know, experience, and enjoy the Triune God would do well to advance in spiritual understanding beyond what is summarized in the creeds and to consider seriously and thoroughly the complete truth concerning the Triune God revealed in the Word of God.

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In the Word of God there is a balance between objective and subjective truths. With respect to God, the term *objective truths* denotes truths related to the being, nature, attributes, and activities of God as these exist in themselves apart from human experience; the term *subjective truths* denotes truths related to God's living and

operating in us and to our experience and enjoyment of Him. God is eternal, self-existing, infinite, transcendent, and immutable. This is an objective truth, a truth concerning God in Himself apart from human perception or experience. But in John 6 this very God, embodied in



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Christ the Son, is our real food—bread for us to taste, eat, digest, and assimilate. This is a subjective truth, a truth concerning what God is to us in our personal spiritual experience. Several pairs of objective and subjective truths may be listed: Christ at the right hand of God (Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1) and Christ in us (Rom. 8:10; Col. 1:27); God's love in sending His Son (1 John 4:9; Rom. 5:8) and God's love poured out into our hearts (Rom. 5:5); our crucifixion with Christ as an accomplished fact (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20) and our experience of being conformed to His death (Phil. 3:10); Christ's resurrection as a once-for-all event (1 Cor. 15:4) and as a power for our daily experience (Phil. 3:10); sanctification as outward separation (Heb. 13:12) and as inward dispositional change (Rom. 6:19, 22; 1 Thes. 5:23); the *parakletos* as the Advocate with the Father (1 John 2:1) and as the Comforter within us (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7); regeneration as accomplished by God in the resurrection of Christ (1 Pet. 1:3) and as experienced by us in our spirit (John 3:6). This is only a representative sampling of the biblical balance of objective and subjective truths.

The truth in the Bible is balanced, and to know this truth we also must be balanced. Regrettably, many Christians are not balanced. Some, especially those enamored with systematic theology, emphasize the objective truths, almost to the exclusion of the subjective truths. Such believers fear and revere the sovereign God in His absolute lordship and government, but they seem not to acknowledge the Lord who is with their spirit (2 Tim. 4:22). God rules and lives forever in the heavens, but He seems not to live and rule within them. They eschew subjectivity. Others, obviously at the opposite extreme, are naturally subjective and care only to cultivate their religious sentiments, having no interest in any truth that transcends their personal consciousness. Neither of these extremists can know the Triune God. The former have an abundance of doctrine; the latter, an abundance of sensations. Neither knows God in reality.

According to our study and observation, traditional trinitarian theology tends to overemphasize objective truths and deemphasize subjective truths. For the most part, the God of the theologians is an objective God—the God “out there” who is the object of worship and study. The Bible, on the contrary, reveals God not only objectively but also subjectively. To employ an apt expression, the Word of God testifies to the reality of *the subjective God*. The subjective God is the true and living God becoming inwardly real to us in our spiritual experience, that is, the Triune God as the indwelling One becoming life and everything to us for our experience and enjoyment of Him. The Triune God eternally and objectively coexists and co-inheres in Himself, yet He now lives within us, the believers in Christ. The Father is in us (Eph. 4:6); the Son is in us (John 14:20; Col. 1:27; 2 Cor. 13:5); and

the Spirit is in us (John 14:17). This Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—is the God who is now operating in us (Phil. 2:13) and moving within us as the anointing (1 John 2:20, 27). When such a God enters into us for our experience and enjoyment, He remains the One on the throne (Rev. 22:1), yet He becomes our life and life supply.

It is a marvelous fact that the objective Sovereign has become our inner life. Now we need to know Him both objectively as the One on the throne in heaven—the One outside of us in whom we believe and whom we worship—and subjectively as the One in our spirit—the One who dwells in us and who is making His home in our heart (Eph. 3:17). How sad that those who are occupied with traditional doctrines, historic creeds, and theological systems often neglect, and sometimes even oppose, the subjective aspects of the truth! The Triune God both transcends us and indwells us, and thus we need to know Him in a balanced way.

**I**n knowing the Triune God revealed in the Word of God, it is imperative that we continue steadfastly in the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42). The apostles' teaching is not merely part of the New Testament but the entire teaching of the New Testament. This teaching is God's speaking in the Son to His New Testament people (Heb. 1:1-2). God's speaking in the Son was first the direct teaching of the Lord Jesus recorded in the four Gospels. God's speaking in the Son is also the teaching of the Spirit of truth (John 16:12-15) through the apostles. This speaking was completed through Paul and John (Col. 1:25-26; Rev. 22:18-19). In brief, the teaching of the apostles consists of the teaching of the Lord Jesus in the Gospels, the teaching of the apostles in Acts, and the teaching of the apostles in the Epistles from Romans through Revelation.

The teaching of the apostles includes the unique divine revelation concerning three mysteries: the mystery of God—Christ (Col. 2:2-3, 9); the mystery of Christ—the church (Eph. 3:3-11); and the great mystery—Christ and the church (Eph. 5:32). The apostles' teaching is also the contents of the full gospel of God (Rom. 1:1-4) and the constituents of the Christian faith (Jude 3; 1 Tim. 1:19b; 6:12; 2 Tim. 4:7). Any teaching different from this unique revelation and any belief besides the unique faith are not allowed by the apostles (1 Tim. 1:3-4; 2 John 9-11; Gal. 1:7-9). All teachings different from the unique teaching of the apostles were regarded by the apostles as winds of teaching (Eph. 4:14) which seduce the believers into accepting a system of error and which carry the believers away from the centrality of the divine revelation unfolded through the apostles' teaching. If we would know the Triune God according to His revelation in the New Testament, positively we must follow the teaching of the

apostles, and negatively we must be careful regarding those teachings, even ones supposedly derived from the Scriptures, that distract us from knowing, experiencing, and enjoying the Triune God.

### Spiritual Vision and Spiritual Life

“I have heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear, / But now my eye sees Thee” (Job 42:5). Job had accumulated

much knowledge about God, but it was not until he saw God that he began to know God. This indicates that knowing God requires a spiritual vision of the Triune God revealed in the Word of God. Information is not enough—we must have a heavenly vision (Acts 26:19).

Such a vision has three fundamental elements: revelation, light, and sight. The canon of Scripture is complete and closed, and nothing—no further revelation—can be added

## *The History of God and the Divine Romance*

If we would know the Triune God revealed in the Word of God, we need to read the Bible in a very particular way—as the history of God. To be more specific, the Bible is the history of God in His move with, among, and in humanity. We may also say that, as God’s history, the Bible is God’s autobiography, a book about God written by Himself through many different writers who were moved by the Holy Spirit. The living, purposeful, and active God deserves a biography, a written account of His history. The Bible is such a record. If we see this, we will realize that to study the Bible is to study the history of God.

The whole Bible is the history of the Triune God, and in this history, especially in the narratives involving His relationship with people, God is revealed in multifarious ways. Take, for example, the account of God’s coming to Abraham and His dealing with Lot with respect to the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. According to Genesis 18 the Lord, having appeared to Abraham in a most remarkable manner, indicated that He would not hide from Abraham what He was about to do. The Lord then made known to him the impending destruction of these two wicked cities. In a lengthy intercessory response Abraham said to the Lord, “Would You also destroy the righteous with the wicked?...Far

be it from You to do such a thing as this....Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (vv. 23, 25, NKJV). Whereas the Lord was the righteous Judge in destroying Sodom, He was merciful in sending angels to rescue backsliding Lot from Sodom. Lot lingered, even in the face of imminent destruction, but the angels “took hold of his hand, his wife’s hand, and the hands of his daughters, the Lord being merciful to him, and they brought him out” (19:16, NKJV). Here, in the course of the narrative, we see the Lord in both His righteousness and His mercy. We may have the terms *righteous* and *merciful* and believe that these are attributes of God, but we may not know how God is righteous and merciful. These attributes are exhibited in His history. Through countless stories such as this one in Genesis, God is manifested and shown to us. Now we need to read the Bible as His history, His autobiography, that we may not only have information about Him but truly know Him.

The most wonderful aspect of the Bible as the history of God is that, in the most pure and holy sense, the Bible is the record of a divine romance. This is the romance of what we may call a universal couple. The “male,” the Bridegroom and Husband, of this couple is the Triune God embodied in Christ, and the “female” is a corporate hu-

man being—God’s redeemed people, including all the Old Testament and New Testament saints—ultimately consummating in the New Jerusalem as the bride. This couple is the secret of the universe, the central thought of the Bible, and the fulfillment of the desire of God’s heart.

This divine romance is revealed progressively throughout the Bible. Immediately after the record of God’s creation, we see the first marriage, with Adam typifying Christ as the Husband and Eve typifying the church as the wife (Gen. 2:21-25; Eph. 5:22-32). Several times in the Old Testament God refers to Himself as the Husband and to His people as His wife (Isa. 54:5; 62:5; Jer. 2:2; 3:1, 14; 31:32; Ezek. 16:8; 23:5; Hosea 2:7, 19). The married life God desired with His people in the Old Testament is fulfilled in the New Testament. In the Gospels Christ is presented as the Bridegroom coming for the bride (Matt. 9:15; Mark 2:19; Luke 5:34; John 3:29); in the Epistles Christ and the church are portrayed as Husband and wife (2 Cor. 11:2); and in Revelation Christ is unveiled as having a wedding, and the New Jerusalem is revealed as His wife (19:7; 21:2, 9). If we would know the Triune God, therefore, we must know Him as our Husband through reading the Bible as a holy, heavenly love story.

to it. Nevertheless, we still need revelation: not a revelation in addition to the Word but a revelation of what is in the Word. A revelation is an unveiling, the removing of a veil. If we would receive revelation of what is disclosed concerning the Triune God in the written Word of God, we must face the fact that as we read the Bible, our heart may be covered with veils (2 Cor. 3:14-15). We may read but may not see because we are veiled. Thus, we need to be unveiled; we need revelation. Recognizing this, Paul prayed that the Father of glory would give us “a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him” (Eph. 1:17). Yet revelation, unveiling, is not sufficient; we also need light, the illumination that dispels our darkness, and sight, the capacity to see divine things. Realizing this, Paul went on to pray that the eyes of our heart would be enlightened (v. 18). Those who are in spiritual darkness or who are spiritually blind cannot know God. To know Him we need revelation in our spirit and light and sight in our heart.

Sadly, many Christians today, even theologians, are like Job before God appeared to him. They have information without revelation. Further, they may mistake mere doctrinal knowledge about God for genuine spiritual knowledge of God. If we would be rescued from the former and ushered into the latter, we must have spiritual vision, a combination of revelation, light, and sight.

In addition, we need to come to the Word of God for life. “You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that testify concerning Me. Yet you are not willing to come to Me that you may have life” (John 5:39-40). This frank word, uttered by the Lord Jesus to the Jewish religionists, reveals at least four crucial things: that the Scriptures testify concerning Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God; that we may search the Scriptures without coming to the Lord; that we should come to the Lord whenever we come to the Word; and that when we come to the Lord as we come to the Word, we receive life. We should never separate the Word of God from the God revealed in the

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Word. If we contact Him whenever we contact the Word, we will receive Him as life, and in this life we will know Him (John 17:3). “To come to the Scriptures and to know all the letter of them is of no avail unless through them we are led to the crucified Saviour to receive life from Him” (Law, *The Power of the Spirit*, p. 45).

In John 6:63 the Lord Jesus says, “It is the Spirit who gives life...the words which I have spoken to you are spirit and are life.” On the one hand, we should interpret and understand the Bible as literally as possible. This means that in our study of the Word, we should seek to understand the thought of God strictly and accurately according to the letter of the words. On the other hand, we need to touch the Word as spirit and life. If we fail to do this, we may have the knowledge about God in letters, but we will not know the Triune God Himself, for He is a God of life, and His Word is the Word of life (1 John 1:1). To know Him, we should understand the thought of God recorded in the letter of the Word and also receive the life of God conveyed in the spirit of the Word.

**T**he Scripture is life because it is the breath of God, because it is the breathing out, the exhaling, of God. This is proved by Paul’s word in 2 Timothy 3:16a: “All Scripture is God-breathed.” The Bible is God’s breath, and God’s breath is the Spirit of God, for God is Spirit (John 4:24). To say that all Scripture is God-breathed is to say that the Bible is the breath, the breathing out, of the very God who is Spirit. What God breathes out we should breathe in by reading the Bible prayerfully with much exercise of spirit. Then we will receive the Word not only as God’s thought but also as God’s breath. The more we receive the Triune God by receiving His breath through the God-breathed Word, the more we will learn Him and know Him.

According to Paul’s exhortation in Ephesians 6:17-18 we should receive the sword of the Spirit, which Spirit is the word of God, by means of “all prayer,” that is, by means of all kinds of prayer. When we receive the word of God by prayer, exercising our spirit, we breathe in God’s breath and we touch the spirit and life in the Word. By reading we grasp the thought of God; by praying as we read we receive the life of God. If this kind of “pray-reading” becomes our daily practice, we will see the revelation of God contained in the Word and will contact the very God revealed in the Word. This is a crucial aspect of knowing the Triune God revealed in the Word of God.

The Bible often speaks of feeding on the Word of God, of receiving it as our life supply. A striking testimony of this is offered by the prophet Jeremiah: “Thy words were found, and I ate them, / And Thy words became for me a joy and the delight of my heart” (Jer. 15:16). Here we have three things: finding God’s words, eating the words

we find, and the words becoming to us the joy and rejoicing of our heart. To eat God's words is not only to taste them but also to masticate them, digest them, and assimilate them with the result that we are constituted with them and live by them (Matt. 4:4). We agree with Andrew Murray that in Jeremiah 15:16 eating is central. In his exposition of this verse, Murray comments on the difference between finding and eating the words of God:

Eating is here the central thought. It is preceded by the searching and the finding: it is accompanied and followed by the rejoicing. It is the only aim and use of the one; it is the only cause and life of the other....How much depends on this—I did eat them!

To realize the difference between this and the finding of God's words, compare the corn [wheat] a man may have stored in his granary, with the bread he has on his table....The fact of being occupied with, and possessing good wholesome corn, will not nourish a man. The fact of being deeply interested in the knowledge of God's word will not of itself nourish the soul....The corn which the husbandman had grown and rejoiced in as his very own, could not nourish his life, until he took it up and ate it, and so completely assimilated it, that it became a part of himself, entering into his blood, forming his very bone and flesh....This is eating the word, taking it into our inmost being, that it becomes a constituent part of our very life....

You see at once how the two points of difference between the corn in the granary and the bread on the table, cover all your Bible study. The gathering of Scripture knowledge is one thing. The eating of God's word, the receiving it into your very heart by the power of the life-giving Spirit, is something very different (*The Inner Chamber*, pp. 109-112).

If we daily enjoy this "something very different"—eating the words of God—we will know Him by tasting that the Lord is good (Psa. 34:8; 1 Pet. 2:2-3).

### A Balanced View of the Trinity

If we would know God, we need to have a proper regard for Him and His truth and a balanced view concerning Him and His revelation. We should aspire to know Him not in a narrow, sectarian way but in a broad, comprehensive way, appreciating Him both for what He is in Himself and for what He is to us in the divine economy.

The God of the Bible is a living, personal reality, and a primary goal of a believer's spiritual seeking should be to know and experience Him as such. Concerning this, 1 John 5:20 says that "we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." *This* refers to the God who, having come through incarnation,

has given us the ability to know Him and be one with Him organically in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true, the genuine and real, God to us, God as a living, personal reality.

In verse 21, the concluding word to his Epistle, John warns us to guard ourselves from idols. Here idols refers not only to heretical substitutes for and counterfeits of the true God but to anything that replaces the real God. If a theological system replaces God, even as it purports to explain Him, that system is an idol. If a concept of God, even a biblically based one, replaces God Himself, that concept, that appealing religious notion, is an idol. Theologians can easily become idolaters, for what they love is often not God Himself but a cherished concept of God or a traditional formulation of carefully selected aspects of the truth of God. For them, God is an object of theological inquiry and metaphysical speculation. This is the danger of systematic theology—mistaking knowledge about God, even human opinion regarding God, for God Himself. By the Lord's mercy, we cannot be satisfied with doctrines and theology. Concepts, notions, systems, formulations—these are not our interest. Our goal is the true and living God Himself.

If we would know the truth regarding the Triune God revealed in the Word of God, and if we would avoid theological systems which truncate and distort the truth of God, we need to have a balanced view concerning the Trinity. To have such a balanced view is to recognize in full the twofoldness of the truth concerning the Triune God in the Scriptures. Acknowledging this twofoldness of the truth will have a twofold result: We will embrace the truth that God is triune both essentially and economically, and we will avoid the heresies of tritheism and modalism.

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According to the Scriptures, God is triune both essentially—in His inner being—and economically—in the outworking of His purpose with His chosen and redeemed people. However, so-called “historic Christianity,” having an unbalanced view, has emphasized the essential Trinity but has paid less than adequate attention to the economical Trinity.

The essential Trinity refers to the essence of the Triune God for His existence. Essentially the Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist and coinhere eternally at the same time and in the same way without succession. Among the three of the Godhead, there is distinction but no separation. The Father is distinct from the Son and the Spirit; the Son is distinct from the Spirit and the Father; and the Spirit is distinct from the Father and the Son. However, we cannot, and we must not, say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are separate, for they coinhere, that is, they dwell in one another. In their coexistence the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinctly three, but in their coinherence they are inseparably one. Because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist in the way of coinherence, they are distinct but not separate.

The economical Trinity refers to the Triune God in the steps, or stages, of His move to carry out His economy for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose. In God’s economy, God’s administrative arrangement, the Father has purposed in the Son and with the Spirit (Eph. 1:4-6—the first step); the Son has accomplished the Father’s purpose by the Spirit and with the Father (vv. 7-12—the second step); and the Spirit, with the Father and the Son, applies what the Son has accomplished according to the Father’s purpose (vv. 13-14—the third step). While God’s economy is being carried out in these three successive steps by the economical Trinity, the essential Trinity—the eternal coexistence and coinherence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the Godhead—remains intact and is not jeopardized.

If we would have a proper understanding of the Trinity, we must avoid two great trinitarian heresies—modalism and tritheism. According to the modalistic concept of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not eternally coexistent and coinherent in the Godhead but are merely three temporary and successive modes of God’s activity. Modalism thus denies that God is triune in His inner being, insisting that God’s revealing Himself as Father, Son, and Spirit in no way corresponds to anything in the ultimate nature of the Godhead (Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, p. 87). For the modalists the Father, the Son, and the Spirit refer only to the way in which God reveals Himself but bear no resemblance to His inner being (F. F. Bruce, *The Spreading Flame*, p. 256). In contrast to modalism, the Bible reveals that, from eternity to eternity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit exist essentially in their coinherence and coexistence, even during the

three stages of their economical work for the carrying out of God’s purpose.

**A**s a sharp contrast to modalism, tritheism is the belief in three Gods. Whereas modalism stresses the side of God’s being one to a heretical extreme by denying the eternal coexistence and coinherence of the three of the Godhead, tritheism stresses the side of God’s being three to a heretical extreme by teaching that the three of the Godhead are three Gods. The Bible clearly and emphatically teaches that there is only one God (1 Cor. 8:4; Isa. 44:6, 8; 45:5-6, 21-22; 46:9; Psa. 86:10). This foundational truth is jeopardized by Christian theologians who claim that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are *three separate persons*. If the distinctions among the three of the Godhead are pressed to the point of separateness, as is commonly done, the result will be tritheism. Regarding the use of the term *person* we should listen to W. H. Griffith Thomas:

Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism. While we use the term to denote distinctions in the Godhead, we do not imply distinctions which amount to separateness, but distinctions which are associated with essential mutual co-inherence or inclusiveness (*The Principles of Theology*, p. 31).

In his article on the Trinity printed in *Nelson’s Introduction to the Christian Faith*, Klaas Runia voices a similar concern:

The term ‘person’ is not adequate....In recent years it has been increasingly criticized. Today this term has a meaning different from in the days of the church fathers. In the first centuries it was a rather neutral word, pointing to a personal relationship. Today a ‘person’ is a self-conscious, autonomous individual. But if you apply this to the Trinity it sounds as if you are speaking of three Gods....What today we mean by the word ‘person’ applies to the divine Being Himself rather than to the divine distinctions within the divine Being. There are not three individual personalities in God. There is only one divine Personality, which contains a threefold distinction (p. 116).

As we endeavor to know the Triune God revealed in the Word of God, we must acknowledge the twofoldness of divine truth concerning the Divine Trinity and follow the Scriptures to take a middle way by believing in and teaching a balanced Trinity. If we are faithful in this matter, we will testify that God is triune both essentially and economically, and we will castigate and repudiate the heresies of both modalism and tritheism.

### **God’s Economy and the Believers’ Experience**

In the New Testament particular emphasis is placed on the revelation of the Triune God in His economy

(Eph. 1:10; 3:9; 1 Tim. 1:3-4). The word *economy* is a transliteration of the Greek word *oikonomia*, which is composed of two Greek words: *oikos*, meaning “house,” and *nomos*, meaning “law.” *Oikonomia*, therefore, denotes household regulations or household management. This word is used in the New Testament to denote God’s household management, His administrative arrangement to carry out His purpose for His good pleasure (Eph. 1:4-6, 9-11). God’s good pleasure is the desire of His heart, and God’s will is of this desire. According to His will God, in a council among the Divine Trinity, made a counsel, a determined will. Then according to this counsel, this determined will, God made a purpose, and this purpose has become His economy, His plan or arrangement.

In the New Testament the Triune God is revealed primarily in relation to the divine economy. If we would know Him, we must know Him in His economy. As indicated above, in God’s economy, in God’s administrative arrangement, the Father takes the first step (purposing), the Son takes the second step (accomplishing), and the Spirit takes the third step (applying). God’s economy is developed *from* the Father, *in* the Son, and *through* the Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14). Here we see that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, while coexisting and coinhering eternally in the Godhead, pass through three stages, all the while coexisting and coinhering, in the process of the divine economy. This is the Triune God in His economy.

Whereas God’s economy is His plan and arrangement according to His desire and purpose, God’s dispensing is His imparting of Himself to us according to His plan and arrangement. Actually, God’s goal in His economy is to dispense Himself, as the Father in the Son through the Spirit, into His chosen and redeemed people. This means that God desires to dispense Himself into—to distribute and impart Himself to—His people as their life, their life supply, and their everything.

God’s dispensing is carried out through the Father’s choosing and predestinating (Eph. 1:4-5), through the Son’s redeeming (v. 7), and through the Spirit’s sealing (v. 13). The Spirit’s sealing, which continues “unto the day of redemption” (4:30), applies the entire Trinity to our inner being, causing us to be permeated and saturated with the life and element of God. Through this dispensing

we first experience regeneration in our spirit (John 3:6); then transformation in our soul (Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18); and finally, at the coming of the Lord, the redemption, the transfiguration, of our body (Phil. 3:21). This is the Triune God imparted to us for the fulfillment of His economy.

**T**he desire of the Triune God to dispense Himself into us can be seen in the biblical references to living water. In this divine dispensing the Father is the fountain, the Son is the spring, and the Spirit is the flow. As the source, the origin, the Father is the fountain of living waters (Jer. 2:13). As the embodiment and expression of the Father, the Son is the spring of water that gushes up in the believers into eternal life (John 4:14). As the flow, the Spirit is the river of water of life (Rev. 22:1; John 7:37-39). This is the Triune God in His dispensing—God the Father as the source, God the Son as the course, and God the Spirit as the flow dispensing Himself into us.

Many portions of the New Testament clearly indicate that, in His economy and dispensing, the Triune God is not for doctrinal analysis but for experience and enjoyment. In Matthew 28:19 the Lord Jesus says, “Go therefore and disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Note the word *name*, which signifies the totality of the person of the Divine Being, and the word *into*, which indicates union. To baptize people into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is to immerse them into all that the Triune God is and to usher them into an organic union with Him. Concerning this M. R. Vincent offers the following vivid testimony:

Baptizing into the name of the Holy Trinity implies a spiritual and mystical union with Him....The name is the expression of the sum total of the Divine Being....When one is baptized into the name of the Trinity, he professes to acknowledge and appropriate God in all that he is and all that he does for man. He recognizes and depends upon God the Father as his Creator and Preserver; receives Jesus Christ as his only Mediator and Redeemer, and his pattern of life; and confesses the Holy Spirit as his Sanctifier and Comforter (*Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:84-85).

A strong proof that the Triune God is revealed not for

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systematic theological understanding but for a dispensing which results in spiritual experience is in 2 Corinthians 13:14: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” This is the Triune God dispensed into us for our experience and enjoyment. The love of God the Father is the source; the grace of Christ the Son is the outflow, the course, of the love of God; and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit is the flowing into us of the grace of the Son with the love of the Father. Day by day we may enjoy the Triune God by participating in the love of God the Father, in the grace of Christ the Son, and in the fellowship of God the Spirit.

In Ephesians 3:14-17 Paul prayed to the Father of glory that He would grant us, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit into the inner man, that Christ may make His home in our hearts through faith. This prayer, which is related to our experience of the Triune God, involves the Father as the source, the Spirit as the means, and the Son as the goal. The Father as the source and the Spirit as the channel do something for the Son as the aim, and what the Father and the Spirit do involves our heart, our inner being. This is the Triune God becoming subjectively real to us in our experience of Him.

Knowing God is a matter of life, a function of the divine life within the believers. We cannot truly know the Triune God unless we know Him in the way of life. In doctrine we can know about God, but only in life can we know Him. The Triune God is a God of life. The Father has life in Himself (John 5:26); the Son has life in Himself and even is life (John 5:26; 14:6; 1 John 5:11-12); and the Spirit is the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2). As believers in Christ, we have been born of God, regenerated (John 1:12-13), to be His children

possessing His life. That the divine life has the special function of knowing God is indicated by the words of the Lord Jesus in John 17:2-3: “You have given Him [the Son] authority over all flesh to give eternal life to all whom You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Him whom You have sent, Jesus Christ.” To be sure, the life of God is able to know God. Because as believers we have been born of the divine life and now have the divine life, we are able to know God in the divine life. The life of God, which is actually the Triune God Himself as life, has been dispensed into us and has given us the ability to know God.

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Furthermore, 1 John 2:20, 27 reveals that we, the believers in Christ, have “an anointing from the Holy One,” that this anointing teaches us concerning all things, and that therefore we all “know.” What is this anointing and what does it teach us? In brief, the anointing is the moving of the indwelling Triune God experienced and enjoyed by us. According to the whole context of 1 John, the things which the anointing teaches us are the things concerning the Triune God. This means that the Triune God is teaching us Himself by moving within us as the anointing. The more we are anointed by Him—that is, the more the Triune God anoints Himself into us—the more we know Him. This is the subjective knowing of the subjective God through the subjective anointing. To know God, therefore, is to experience His anointing Himself into our being. Apart from this inner anointing with its teaching concerning God, the Triune God will remain for us a mere doctrine, not a living, experienced reality in the divine dispensing according to the divine economy. We should never be satisfied with doctrine but should desire and aspire to know the Triune God Himself in the divine life and by the inner anointing. **AF**

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Points of truth however interesting, scriptural knowledge however profound and extensive, Biblical criticism however accurate and valuable, may leave the heart barren and the affections cold. We want to find Christ in the Word; and having found Him to feed on Him by faith. — C. H. Mackintosh

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