

SOURCES OF TRINITARIAN DEVIATIONS

by Ron Kangas

The revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God is balanced and complete. Failure to receive this divine revelation in its fullness results in what we may call trinitarian deviations. These deviations assume a variety of forms: attempting to systematize the divine revelation, thereby diminishing it; mixing worldly philosophy with the divine revelation, thereby corrupting it; receiving the divine revelation selectively according to one's disposition, thereby misapplying it; placing an extreme emphasis on one aspect of the divine revelation, thereby distorting it; ignoring a vital element of the divine revelation, thereby vitiating it. All these deviations deserve critique.

Deviations Related to Systematization

It is commonly supposed, mainly by professional systematic theologians (e.g., James Oliver Buswell, Charles Hodge, William G. T. Shedd), that systematic theology is a necessary and beneficial enterprise: necessary because, allegedly, the divine revelation concerning the Divine Trinity requires systematization before it can be rightly understood; beneficial because, allegedly, the results of systematization are regarded as spiritually enriching to believers in Christ. It is not widely recognized, however, that all attempts at systematizing the biblical truth concerning the Triune God lead to some kind of deviation from the truth. Furthermore, such attempts are doomed because they presume to perform the impossible task of systematizing the truth regarding a reality—the true and living Triune God Himself—which is not subject to systematization. Since a systematized theology of the Trinity

cannot embrace the complete divine revelation of the Triune God in a full, balanced way, systematized theologies of the Trinity are inherently flawed.

In the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* Bruce A. Demarest offers the following definition of systematic theology: “An attempt to reduce religious truth to an organized system” (p. 1064). Consider the elements of this definition. *Attempt* suggests trying or endeavoring without certainty of success. *Reduce*, in its primary denotation, means to diminish in extent, amount, or degree. *Religious truth*, a generic term which refers in a general way to belief in a supernatural power, surely differs from expressions such as *divine truth* and *revealed truth*, which refer to the truth of God disclosed for human understanding. *Organized* signifies that which is put together into a formally structured whole, often with a hierarchical arrangement. A *system*, according to the *The American Heritage Dictionary*, may be understood as “an organized set of interrelated ideas or principles.” The word *reduce* requires further comment. To reduce the truth of the

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divine revelation concerning the Divine Trinity is, in effect if not by intention, to diminish, to lessen, to subtract from, this truth. Systematic theology is actually a reductionist intellectual activity which entails the denial or diminution of particular elements. This is especially serious when the denied or

diminished elements are aspects of the truth concerning the Triune God.

In keeping with Demarest's definition, the goal of this reduction of religious truth is an *organized system*. The

systematic theologian, taking the precious truth mercifully revealed by God in the Word, first reduces it to manageable units and then forms them into an organized system of ideas, concepts, and doctrines. What begins as a revelation from God passes through a process of reduction leading to the construction of an organized system—a system which, more often than not, is a transmutation of the original revelation into a form that pleases the natural man and that appeals to the inveterate system-building tendency of the natural mind. For systematic theologians the procedure of reduction and transmutation produces a system. By the Lord's gracious enabling, we prefer simply to receive the revelation of the Triune God without fashioning it into an organized system.

Let not the reader suppose that by questioning the validity and necessity of theological system-building we are suggesting that Christians ought not to engage in serious thought about the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God. We surely must exercise our renewed mind to think clearly and soberly, and we must earnestly pray for spiritual understanding. However, it is one thing to use our intellectual faculties to comprehend the divine revelation, and it is a very different thing to use them to reduce the truth concerning the Trinity to an organized system of doctrine.

Organized theological systems, especially as they pertain to the Divine Trinity, are deviant because they are contrary to God's way of revealing Himself in the Bible. Here we would draw attention to an obvious fact: The revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God is not given systematically. God did not inspire the authors of holy Scripture to write a systematic theology. The divine revelation is, therefore, asystematic, having been unveiled in varying degrees and in different aspects through a number of writers. If we would understand this divine unfolding, what we need is not a humanly devised system of theology but divine enlightenment. Paul did not pray that his readers would take the revelation seen by him in spirit and fashion it into a system (Eph. 3:3-5). Rather, warning against "a system of error" (4:14), he prayed that "the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of glory," would give us "a spirit of wisdom and revelation in the full knowledge of Him," the eyes of our heart having been enlightened (1:17-18). How, then, can anyone insist on the *necessity* of systematizing the revelation concerning the Divine Trinity? In knowing the Triune God, what is necessary is not a course in systematic theology but a spirit of wisdom and revelation to understand what God has disclosed regarding Himself.

The Bible reveals the Triune God in a complete way, unveiling both the essential Trinity and the economical Trinity. According to the Scriptures the true and living God is one, yet three; the three of the Godhead are

coexistent, yet coinherent. Our God is immutable, yet processed; transcendent, yet indwelling; sovereign, yet respectful of human freedom; strictly just, yet merciful; infinitely great, yet able to be our spiritual air, water, and food. In the opinion of Gordon H. Clark, these should be regarded as "samples of the material which must be logically arranged so as to formulate an intelligible doctrine of the Trinity" (*The Trinity*, p. 8). It is wrong for Clark or any theologian to say—altogether without scriptural warrant—that biblical material *must* be formulated into a so-called "intelligible doctrine," as if to suggest that this is the only way to make it intelligible. Instead of trying to systematize the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God, we should simply believe it and receive it. "It does not need first to be reduced to system and brought under the arrangement of a theory" (Robert Govett, *The Twofoldness of Divine Truth*, p. 21).

Charles Hodge, an esteemed systematic theologian of the previous century, disagrees:

It may be asked, why not take the truths as God has seen fit to reveal them, and thus save ourselves the trouble of showing their relation and harmony?

The answer to this question is...that it cannot be done. Such is the constitution of the human mind that it cannot help endeavoring to systematize the facts which it admits to be true....The students of the Bible can...little be expected to be thus satisfied. There is a necessity, therefore, for the construction of systems of theology. Of this the history of the Church affords abundant proof. In all ages and among all denominations, such systems have been produced (*Systematic Theology*, 1:2).

Hodge is partially right in claiming that the human mind cannot help forming theological systems, for this is true of the unrenewed, natural mind, but it is not true of the renewed, spiritual mind (Eph. 4:23; Rom. 12:2), which can receive the complete divine revelation without trying to systematize it. Hodge is altogether wrong in asserting that believers cannot "take the truths as God has seen fit to reveal them." We bear witness to the fact that this can be done and that, by the grace of God, we are doing it. We can receive, and by the mercy of God we are receiving, the divine revelation as a living, organic whole without following religious tradition and without acquiescing to the cravings of the fallen, natural mind. Hodge is, therefore, mistaken in saying that "the construction of systems of theology" is a necessity. Consider, as a sharp contrast to Hodge, the words of W. H. Griffith Thomas:

There is obvious danger in every attempt at systematizing Christian truth, as we may see from the great works of men like Aquinas and Calvin....General lines of Christian truth are far safer....This method prevents teaching from becoming

hardened into a cast-iron system which cannot expand....an absolute, rigid system of doctrine from which there is no relief and of which there is no modification (*The Principles of Theology*, p. xxiv).

Not only is systematic theology unnecessary; its alleged benefit is subject to serious question for several reasons.

Reliance upon a system of theology can cause one to compromise his loyalty to the truth. Commitment to a theological system may hinder one from recognizing and accepting the complete divine revelation in the Word of God. In their reading and study of the Bible, adherents of a particular system—Calvinism, for example—may impose a system upon the Word of God and by so doing make it extremely difficult for them to see in the Scriptures any aspects of the truth—the economical Trinity, for example—which do not fall within the field of their preferred system. They wear “blindness” whenever they read the Bible. For instance, Lorraine Boettner, insisting that “Christianity comes to its fullest expression in the Reformed faith” and advocating “the framework of the Five Points of Calvinism,” reads the Bible through this framework (*The Reformed Faith*, p. 24). The same practice is exhibited in the motto of *The New Geneva Study Bible*: “Bringing the Light of the Reformation to Scripture.” By *Reformation* is meant “a summary of Reformed theology,” that is, Calvinism. It surely is audacious to claim that Scripture—the Word of God, which is light—needs “light” brought to it from a manmade system of theology. Such an assertion implies that in some sense Scripture is devoid of light and needs to be illumined by “the light” of Calvinism.

Devotion to a theological system may lead to an unacceptable practice concerning the truth—the practice of regarding as false any statement that does not comport with or is not compatible with a system of doctrine to which one is committed and of accepting as true only what is in harmony with one’s system. This leads to a denial of important elements of the divine revelation because they do not fit (or cannot be forced to fit) one’s theological system. The result is that, in actuality if not in theory, a theological system is regarded as equal to, or is given priority over, the Word of God. For example, J. I. Packer, a participant in the attempt to bring “the light” of Reformed theology to the Word of God, fails to recognize the divine truth concerning the human spirit and rejects the biblical distinction between soul and spirit, arguing that “the view of man as body, soul, and spirit...leads to a crippling anti-intellectualism whereby spiritual insight and theological reflection are separated” (*The New Geneva Study Bible*, p. 10). In addition to being false, this statement illustrates both the danger of imposing a systematized theology on Scripture and the presumption of bringing “the light” of Calvinism to the Bible instead of bringing the light of the Word of God to Reformed theology.

A theological system may be revered to such an extent that for some adherents it may even replace God Himself. Whenever a theological system is allowed to become a replacement of God, that system becomes an idol. If a theologian loves his system instead of God, or even more than God, that theologian is an idolater. The command of the apostle John is relevant here: “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21). In this verse *idols* denotes anything—including ideas, concepts, and systems of thought—that replaces the true and living God. Pagans may fashion idols of wood and stone; theologians may fashion idols of thought and concept. We respect J. I. Packer’s word concerning this: “Imagining God in our heads can be just as real a breach of the second commandment as imagining him by the work of our hands” (*Knowing God*, p. 47). To imagine God, to conceive of God, in a way contrary to His revelation of Himself is to make an idol. To dote on our image or concept of God is to worship the idol we have made. “All speculative theology, which rests on philosophical reason rather than biblical revelation is at fault here....To follow the imagination of one’s heart in the realm of theology is the way to remain ignorant of God, and to become an idol-worshipper—the idol in this case being a false mental image of God, made by one’s own speculation and imagination” (p. 48). The principle also applies to the more subtle procedure of misconceiving and misrepresenting God through systematizing the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God or of allowing a system of doctrine to replace the reality of God. William Law recognized this in relation to the systematizing of Calvinistic teachings: “Images of wood and clay will only be exchanged for images of doctrines. Grace, works, imputed sin, imputed righteousness, and election will all have their worshipping advocates, dividing the body of Christ in the very zeal to defend their own good opinions about Scripture doctrines” (*The Power of the Spirit*, ed. Dave Hunt, p. 28).

Systematic theology may also arouse a lust for knowledge resulting in spiritual death. The subtle, satanic seduction of the human race began with a question uttered by a serpent: “Has God said...?” (Gen. 3:1). Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls this “the first theological question,” and he is right. This was the first question designed to induce speculation concerning God, to incite man to lust for knowledge, and to alienate man from God, who desires to impart Himself into man as the divine life for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose. Lest we be tempted to think that the scenario in Genesis 3 is ancient history which cannot be reenacted today, we should pay attention to Paul’s word of intimate concern: “I fear lest somehow, as the serpent deceived Eve by his craftiness, your thoughts would be corrupted from the simplicity and the purity toward Christ” (2 Cor. 11:3). As the context makes clear, the agents of this corruption were religious men who, in their rebellion against God, became purveyors of a system of religious thought and were utilized by Satan to lead the

believers astray from Christ, their true Husband (v. 2). Are we less vulnerable today? Certainly not! In his craftiness Satan continues to use religious thinkers to arouse in the believers a lust for theological knowledge and thereby to lure them away from the reality of the Triune God. William Law had a clear perception of this danger:

Corruption, sin, death, and every evil of the world have entered into the Church, the spouse of Christ, just as they entered into Eve, the spouse of Adam, in Paradise. And in the very same way, and from the same cause: namely, a desire for knowledge other than that which comes from the inspiration of the Spirit of God alone. This desire is the serpent's voice in every man, doing everything to him and in him which Satanic deception did to Eve in the garden. It carries on the first deceit, it shows and recommends to him that same beautiful tree of human wisdom, self-will, and self-esteem springing up within him, which Eve saw in the garden. And this love of human wisdom and knowledge so blinds man, that he cannot see that he is eating of the same forbidden fruit and keeping up in himself all the death and separation from God which the first hunger for knowledge brought forth....Let then the clever architect of words, the opinion-broker, the worshipper of human reason, and every zealous builder of religious systems be told that the thirst and pride of being learnedly wise in the things of God is keeping him grossly ignorant of divine truth (*The Power of the Spirit*, pp. 52-53).

Furthermore, the pursuit of theological knowledge can lead to a reliance upon reason instead of an exercise of faith. "God does not demand a faith that is unreasonable," William Law remarks, "but He does demand a faith that goes beyond the limits of human reason. And thus there is a point where faith and reason divide the human race into two kinds of men fully distinct from each other" (p. 106). What will we be—a man of reason or a man of faith? Will we exercise our faith within the limits of our reason or beyond these limits? Will our reason confine our faith or will our faith transcend our reason? To transcend reason by faith is not to be irrational in our mental life—it is to be normal in our spiritual life.

The economy of God is in faith (1 Tim. 1:4); the revelation of God is "out of faith to faith" (Rom. 1:17); and the operation of the mysterious Triune God is according to faith (Heb. 11). Those who are one with God for the carrying out of His economy exercise faith to receive the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God. Those who are devoted to systematic theology for the sake of religious interest rely upon reason to systematize the divine revelation in the Word.

Reason may be helpful in erecting theological systems, but it is "helpless in the spiritual realm; it is neither

Faith Bringing in Reality

Faith brings the reality of the gospel into us and brings us into the reality of God. "By faith Abraham, being called, obeyed to go out...and he went out, not knowing where he was going" (Heb. 11:8). Apparently he was going out to a promised land; actually he was embarking on a journey that would take him into the Triune God. If we would know the Triune God as He is revealed in the Word of God and not be frustrated by traditional, systematic theology, we also must be able, in the obedience of faith, to go beyond what we know (or think we know). Reason retains us in the sphere of speculation and theory; faith ushers us into the realm of revelation and reality. To see this is to realize that two paths are set before us—the path of reason and the path of faith. The former is the way of knowing; the latter, the way of not knowing, the way of believing.

"If God leads you to walk a way that you know, it will not benefit you as much as if He would lead you to take the way that you do not know. This forces you to have hundreds and thousands of conversations with Him, resulting in a journey that is an everlasting memorial between you and Him" (Watchman Nee, *Collected Works*, 7:1144). It is a great mercy and a marvelous blessing to be brought by God through faith into the way that we do not know, for the more we walk in this way, the more we experience the Triune God in His all-inclusive reality and enjoy Him as our all-sufficient supply.

seeing, tasting, touching, smelling, nor hearing the things of the Spirit of God" (Law, p. 101). Likewise, to reason about God is not to know God. "To think that reasoning about God from Scripture words is to know Him, is just as sensible as to think that reasoning about food is the same as to eat it" (p. 101). Whereas the theologian reasons about God, the man of faith, in compliance with the revelation in John 6, partakes of God in Christ as spiritual food and drink. By the Lord's grace he has been made to realize that "to reason about life cannot communicate it to the soul, nor can a religion of rational notions and opinions logically deduced from Scripture words bring the reality of the gospel into our lives" (p. 103).

There is yet another reason to question the benefit of systematic theology—the tendency of theologians to deny the reality of and the necessity for the subjective, spiritual experience of the indwelling Triune God. Gordon Clark exemplifies this tendency: "The New Testament does indeed

teach a mutual indwelling of Christ and the believer. There is a very real sense in which minds interpenetrate....Christ dwells in us and we in him by our thinking and believing his doctrines" (*First John: A Commentary*, p. 120). In Clark's opinion, Christian experience is equal to studying theology: "If anyone studies theology...it is a Christian experience" (p. 117). For Clark to have intimacy with God is merely a matter of theology: "This intimate fellowship consists of having the same ideas, of thinking alike, of being in extensive agreement. Hence, intimacy with God, too, consists in knowing what God thinks. That is to say, in knowing a good bit of theology" (p. 143).

At the end of his life, Thomas Aquinas repented of such an outlook and came to recognize the necessity of living, experiential contact with God. Shortly before he died in a Cistercian monastery, Aquinas, "who had searched all his life to know

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Word of God,
apply this revelation
in faith and love,
comprehend this revelation
with a renewed mind
according to the spiritual
wisdom and understanding
granted by God in answer
to prayer, and live out
this revelation in our
regenerated spirit for the
fulfillment of the
eternal purpose of God
(*Eph. 3:9-11*).

God," knelt for a while in prayer. "He reported to his secretary, Brother Reginald, that he had learned more theology on his knees in those fifteen minutes than from all the theology that he had ever studied or written about in his many tomes" (George Maloney, *A Theology of "Uncreated Energies,"* p. 5). Only in his final moments did he enjoy union with the Triune God. "That happened just before the veil was torn, before God would finally show Him as He really is" (p. 7).

Surely it is not God's desire that we spend our entire life learning about Him without experiencing and enjoying Him. According to the Scriptures the three of the Divine Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—are all in us for us to enjoy in our spiritual experience (*Eph. 4:6; John 14:20; Col. 1:27; 2 Cor. 13:5; John 14:17*). God's intention in revealing Himself as the unique Triune God is not that we might formulate systematized theologies of the Trinity and then engage in endless debate about them. On the contrary, God's intention in unveiling Himself is to prepare the way for Him to dispense Himself into us according to His economy. As those who accept with simplicity the entire scriptural revelation of the Triune God, we desire to turn to Him, open to Him, receive Him, experience Him, and enjoy Him as our life and our everything.

In his book *The Pentecostal Reality*, J. Rodman Williams advocates a position with which we heartily agree:

The Scriptures nowhere suggest that to believe in God as Trinity, or Triune—or to 'think God' in such and such a manner (often leading to speculation and abstractness)—is really the important thing. The concern is that people be introduced into the reality of God as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is primarily a matter of the life to be lived, not a teaching or doctrine to be held....The purpose of that part of the Great Commission, 'Go therefore...baptizing,' is not to make learners out of people in regard to God, but to introduce them into life lived in the reality of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit....For these disciples [the early Christians], clearly, a statement about God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, was not dogma, nor was it an abstruse teaching that they had to accept for salvation. It was rather the reality of God wrought into their lives. It was not creed yet, or theology (such as 'one God in Trinity and Trinity in Unity'). It was that which precedes all significant theology: event, happening, experience....Thus, what is vital in talking about the Holy Trinity is not that it is simply a doctrine to be embraced but a reality to be lived (pp. 101, 102, 104, 105).

Williams is correct in emphasizing the experience of the Triune God. The believers in Christ should not be content with a mere objective knowledge about God, much less with a systematized theology of the Trinity. Rather, we all

should hunger and thirst for the reality of the Triune God to fill, permeate, and saturate our whole being. For this we need to exercise faith in the Word of God and open ourselves to the Lord that we might experience Him in a subjective way.

Our last observation regarding those who promote the systematizing of the revelation concerning the Triune God is to point out that they often succumb to the temptation to regard the Trinity as a puzzle to be solved, an enigma to be studied, or a riddle for theological play, rather than a mystery to be revered and a reality to be enjoyed. All who presume to participate in the questionable enterprise of systematizing the divine truth should hearken to Philip Schaff: "All speculation on divine things ends in a mystery...before which the thinking mind must bow in humble adoration" (*History of the Christian Church*, 3:671). The words of Robert Leighton, a Puritan writer, are even more emphatic:

As to the mystery of the Most-Holy Trinity...I have always thought it was to be received and adored with the most humble faith and reverence, but by no means to be curiously searched into, or perplexed with the presumptuous questions of the schoolmen. We fell by an arrogant ambition of knowledge; by simple faith we rise again and are reinstated. And this mystery indeed, beyond all others, seems to be a tree of knowledge prohibited to us while we sojourn in these mortal bodies (*Lectures and Addresses*, pp. 126-127).

Systematizing the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God is neither necessary nor beneficial, for it is defective and deviant both in procedure and in product. The way to be sound, healthy, regarding the truth of the Divine Trinity is to receive in simplicity the complete divine revelation in the Word of God, apply this revelation in faith and love, comprehend this revelation with a renewed mind according to the spiritual wisdom and understanding granted by God in answer to prayer (Col. 1:9), and live out this revelation in our regenerated spirit for the fulfillment of the eternal purpose of God (Eph. 3:9-11).

Deviations Related to Philosophy

Serious deviations from the truth concerning the Divine Trinity occur whenever worldly philosophy is mixed with divine revelation. Philosophy, as "the over-all interpretation of the universe from a particular viewpoint"

(Kenneth S. Kantzer), involves the attempt to "synthesize all knowledge into a coherent, consistent system" (S. R. Obitts). The problem is that the viewpoint, the synthesis, and the system are of the world and not of God (1 John 2:15-17). By *world* we mean "the sum-total of human life in the ordered world, considered apart from, alienated from, and hostile to God, and of the earthly things which seduce from God" (M. R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament*, 1:389). The world system is inspired by the *Zeitgeist*, "the spirit of the age," which R. C. Trench defines as "all that floating mass of thoughts, opinions, maxims, speculations, hopes, impulses, aims, aspirations, at any time current in the world" (cited by Kenneth S. Wuest, *In These Last Days*, p. 126). To join worldly philosophy and divine revelation is actually an attempt to produce fellowship between light and darkness and concord between Christ and Belial (2 Cor. 6:14-15). Such fellowship and concord are impossible because divine revelation and worldly philosophy are fundamentally incompatible and irreconcilable.

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This is supported by the fact that in the New Testament the word *philosophy* is used only once, and that in a negative sense: "Beware that no one carries you off as spoil through his philosophy and empty deceit, according to the tradition of men, according to the elements of the world, and not according to Christ" (Col. 2:8). Paul's concern

was that philosophy would be used by God's enemy to make a prey of the believers, to carry them off as spoil, or booty, gained in war. Paul goes on to say that philosophy is *empty deceit*. The Greek work rendered *empty* denotes what is devoid of truth, futile, fruitless. "It is used of things that will not succeed, that are to no purpose, that are in vain" (Wuest, *Colossians*, p. 200). "The danger was that of a pretended knowledge," W. H. Griffith Thomas observes, "the emptiness of purely abstract thought" (*Studies in Colossians and Philemon*, p. 85). Paul makes it emphatically clear that philosophy—empty deceit with its subtle reasonings and vain, profitless speculation—is *not according to Christ*. Calling this phrase "the sacred watchword," H. C. G. Moule remarks:

Not on His line, not measured by Him, not referred to Him; not so that He is Origin, and Way, and End, and All. The "philosophy" in question would assuredly include Him somehow in its terms. But it would not be "according to Him." It would take its principles, and draw its inferences...and then bring Him in as something to be harmonized and assimilated, as far as might be. But this

would be a Christ according to the system of thought, not a system of thought according to the blessed Christ (*Colossian and Philemon Studies*, p. 85).

Actually, no system of philosophy, including so-called Christian philosophy, is truly according to Christ. We may have a philosophical system or we may have Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God, but we cannot have both.

The Christian faith—"the faith once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3)—is not a philosophy, and it cannot be harmonized with worldly philosophy. Griffith Thomas says, "There is a great deal in current thought that is attractive, even fascinating, but when properly examined it is seen to be 'not after Christ.' This is the test of movements, of institutions, of books: are they 'after Christ?'" (p. 85). Colin Brown explains that one danger of aligning the divine revelation with a particular philosophical system is that "the Christian faith has to be manipulated to make it fit. Some things have to be stretched, while others have to be lopped off or at least discreetly ignored" (*Philosophy and the Christian Faith*, p. 270). In his essay "The Need for a Scriptural, and Therefore a Neo-Classical Theism" Clark Pinnock insists that "revelational norms" must "exercise control over any and all philosophical influences" (*Perspectives on Evangelical Theology*, ed. Kenneth S. Kantzer and Stanley N. Gundry, p. 42). Pinnock then goes on to say:

Philosophical ideas have to be rigorously subordinated to scriptural revelation or else they will tend to take over in theology....Philosophical borrowings can easily come to rival scriptural teachings and become idols that compete with God's self-disclosure....But *if we do make use of them* [philosophical ideas], let us exercise the greatest of care not to twist the Scriptures on their behalf. Our motto ought to be, Let God be God! (p.42).

If we truly let God be God and if we subject all philosophical notions to the divine revelation, we will avoid two serious deviations from the truth concerning the Divine Trinity—one related to God's being and the other, to God's becoming—and we will affirm the twofold biblical truth that the Triune God is immutable in His essence and processed in His economy.

The Bible reveals that the Triune God is immutable. The word *mutable* means liable or subject to change or alteration; capable of change or being changed in form, quality, or nature; given to changing or constantly changing; hence, fickle, inconstant. In contrast, *immutable* (not mutable) means not capable or susceptible of change; unchangeable, unchanging, invariable, unalterable. To say that the Triune God is immutable is to say that He is not subject to change, that He is unchanging, invariable, in

His essence and nature. James 1:17 says, "All good giving and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variation [or, variability] or shadow cast by turning." Because God is immutable, unchangeable, Hebrews 6:17 speaks of "the unchangeableness of His counsel." For God to be immutable means that "no change is possible in God, whether of increase or decrease, progress or deterioration, contraction or development" (Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology*, p. 257). Hodge agrees: "God is absolutely immutable in His essence and attributes. He can neither increase nor decrease. He is subject to no process of development or self-evolution" (p. 390).

We wish to receive the biblical truth concerning God's immutability, but we cannot accept a doctrine of divine unchangeability that is a mixture of divine revelation and Greek philosophical notions. Such a doctrine, in Pinnock's words, has been "forged out of materials both biblical and philosophical" and is therefore "a *synthesis* of revelational and rational elements" (p. 38). This synthesis involves mixing with the divine revelation two unacceptable philosophical concepts: that God is an "Unmoved Mover" and that God is impassible.

As the so-called Unmoved Mover—an idea derived from Aristotle—God is the impersonal First Cause of the universe who "cannot think about anything in the changing and imperfect world," the "only perfect thing worthy of God's attention" being Himself, and whose "only activity is contemplation of his own nature" (Ronald N. Nash, *The Concept of God*, pp. 20-21). John Sanders informs us that actually "Aristotle's supreme God...has no need of entering into relations with others....God is literally apathetic toward the world and he has no concern or feelings toward it" (*The Openness of God*, p. 66). This God is immutable not in the biblical sense but in the sense of being inert, aloof, disinterested, and unconcerned about the world or anything in it. The supposed *impassibility* of God is the "doctrine that God is not capable of being acted upon or affected emotionally by anything in creation" (G. R. Lewis, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell, p. 553). Impassibility is a dubious doctrine "because it suggests that God does not experience sorrow, sadness or pain. It appears to deny that God is touched by the feelings of our infirmities, despite what the Bible eloquently says about his love and his sorrow" (Pinnock, *The Openness of God*, p. 118). The biblical revelation of the living God thus has been transmuted into the notion of a static deity.

This mixture of Greek philosophical concepts with the truth regarding the immutability of God revealed in the Bible leads not to clarity but to confusion. What purports to be an explanation of God's eternal being is actually an insult to His person and a departure from His self-disclosure. In this attempt to combine divine

revelation and worldly philosophy, “two visions of reality”—that of the Bible and that of Greek philosophy—are brought together, with the result that “biblical teaching becomes warped and twisted and the resultant synthesis doctrinally objectionable” (Pinnock, *Process Theology*, p. 41). This is a vivid illustration of the incompatibility of revelation and philosophy.

Another illustration is afforded by the attempt of today’s “process theologians,” including John Cobb, David Ray Griffin, and Norman Pittinger, to combine the divine revelation concerning God’s becoming with a philosophical system, articulated by Alfred North Whitehead, which views both God and the universe as existing in a state of perpetual process, evolution, and development. In process theology, reality is regarded essentially as an ongoing evolutionary process, and God is viewed as part of the process. This entails the concept of a changing God—a God without an immutable nature who is changing, learning, growing, and developing along with the world. Instead of “I Am,” God is now “I am becoming.” The following is Ronald N. Nash’s description of the God of process theology:

The classical Christian doctrine of divine immutability is replaced by a notion of a changing God....God literally experiences and exemplifies process....God’s perfection is being attained successively; God is continually growing and developing in perfection....Process thinkers insist that God actually receives something from the world; the world adds something to God, something which He would otherwise lack....God is involved in an endless process of change (Nash, *Process Theology*, pp. 16-18, 20).

The immutable God of the Bible is replaced with an evolving deity. This evolving deity is not triune. Within the being of this God there cannot be found the eternally coexistent and coinherent three-one—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Two well-known process theologians claim that the doctrine of the Trinity is “a source of distortion, and an artificial game that has brought theology into justifiable disrepute” (John Cobb and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*, p. 109). They hasten to add that “process theology is not interested in formulating distinctions within God for the sake of conforming with traditional Trinitarian notions” (p. 110). Even when process theologians use Trinitarian language, “their conception is modalistic: God acts in three or more different ways or there are different aspects of the creative process” (Donald G. Bloesch, “Process Theology and Reformed Theology,” in *Process Theology*, ed. Nash, p. 42). Carl F. H. Henry states the issue with force: “Process theologians deny the Christian doctrine of the Trinity according to which three persons—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—exist eternally and coequally within the one divine essence”

(“The Stunted God of Process Theology,” in *Process Theology*, p. 362).

Mixing philosophy with revelation has produced two extremely serious deviations from the truth concerning the Divine Trinity—the notion of a static God and the concept of an evolving God. The way to avoid these deviations is to repudiate all philosophical speculation and receive the biblical truth regarding the immutability and process of the Triune God.

According to the Bible the Triune God is immutable in His essence, attributes, promises, and purpose. God’s immutable essence is unalterable; it remains forever the same. The God who reveals Himself as I Am—the ever-existing, self-existing One (Exo. 3:14)—speaks of Himself as the One who is, who was, and who is to come (Rev. 1:4). “There never was a time when He was not; there never will come a time when He shall cease to be. God has neither evolved, grown, nor improved. All that He is today, He has ever been, and ever will be” (Arthur W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p. 37). God’s immutable essence is in contrast to the changeable, perishing creation spoken of in Psalm 102:25-27. As God is immutable by His nature, creation is mutable by its nature. “Herein,” says Pink, “we may perceive the infinite distance which separates the highest creature from the Creator” (p. 38).

God is immutable in His attributes. He is perfect and unchanging in His life, light, love, holiness, righteousness, glory, wisdom, knowledge, power, grace, compassion, love, mercy, and in all other attributes. “Whatever the attributes of God were before the universe was called into existence, they are precisely the same now, and will remain so forever....The attributes of God can no more change than Deity can cease to be” (Pink, p. 37). The divine attributes are subject neither to development nor to deterioration.

God is immutable in His promises. God is not capricious; there is no fickleness, inconstancy, or arbitrariness in Him. Because God is immutable in His promises, with Him there is no variation or shadow caused by turning. God’s immutable promises are included in the “unchangeable things” mentioned in Hebrews 6:18. The God who is immutable in His promises always keeps His word and honors His covenant.

Finally, God is immutable in His purpose. Psalm 33:11 says, “The counsel of the Lord stands forever, / The plans of His heart from generation to generation.” This is confirmed by Isaiah 14:24: “The Lord of hosts has sworn, saying, ‘Surely, just as I have intended so it has happened, and just as I have planned so it will stand.’” Elsewhere in Isaiah the Lord declares, “I am God, and there is no other; / I am God, and there is no one like Me, / Declaring the end from

the beginning / And from ancient times things which have not been done, / Saying, 'My purpose will be established, / And I will accomplish all My good pleasure'" (46:9-10). What God has purposed in Christ (Eph. 3:11) will be accomplished, no matter how much the enemy of God may try to frustrate it.

Although the Triune God is immutable, He is neither static nor inactive. "The notion that God's immutability is a complete inactivity, a timeless mental and spiritual immobility, is found in the writings of some of our best theologians, but is nowhere supported by the Scriptures"

(Bus-well, p. 52). The Bible often likens God, in His "dynamic immutability," to a flowing river. In Revelation 22:1-2 we have a picture of the immutable, yet active, Triune God. Out of the throne of God and of the Lamb flows the river of water of life. No doubt, this river is a symbol of the Spirit of the flowing God (John 7:37-39). Our God is the fountain of living waters (Jer. 2:13). The Father as the fountain is in the Son, and through the death and resurrection of Jesus

Christ, the Son of God, the living waters have been released (John 19:34). When we come to the Lord Jesus in faith, believing into Him (3:15-16) and drinking of the living water which He alone can give us (4:14; 7:37), this water becomes in us a spring of water gushing up into eternal life. Eventually, it becomes rivers of living water proceeding out from our innermost being (7:38). For eternity the Spirit as the river of water of life will proceed out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. On the one hand, the perpetual existence of the river signifies the immutability of the Triune God; on the other hand, the flowing of the river signifies the ceaseless, vital activity of the Triune God in dispensing

In Christ
the Triune God
has been
processed,
and now this
processed,
yet immutable,
One can
enter into us
as the
all-inclusive
life-giving Spirit
to be our life,
our life supply,
and our
everything.

Himself into His redeemed and regenerated people as their eternal life and life supply.

Concerning the immutability of the Triune God, the divine truth in the Bible is twofold. In Himself God is unchanging, for His essence is immutable. His nature is unalterable; He can never become either more or less than what He is. Nevertheless, this eternal, immutable, unchanging Triune God has, in Christ, passed through a process in time in order to dispense Himself into man for the accomplishment of His eternal purpose. Apart from this process, there is no way for the Triune God to come into man.

Although this process involves a sequence in time, it absolutely does not involve any change in the immutable essence of God. Whereas God's immutability is related to His *being*, God's process is related to His *becoming*. Henry rightly says, "The Bible does affirm a 'becoming' within the Godhead. But it does so on its own terms and in its own way: the eternal Logos becomes flesh (John 1:14), that is, becomes the God-man by assuming human nature in the Incarnation" (p. 362). This indicates that a balanced view of the Divine Trinity demands that we accept the biblical testimony both of God's being and of His becoming. This does not require compromise with process theology. "In the Christian view divine becoming... contrasts at once with ancient Greek notions of abstract being and becoming, and with modern process theology's misconceptions of divine becoming that postulate change in the very nature of God" (Henry, p. 369). According to the Bible we believe in the immutability of the Triune God; according to the Bible we believe also that in Christ the Triune God has passed through a process for the carrying out of His economy.

The word *process* may be defined as a series of progressive and interdependent steps by which a goal is reached or an end is obtained. In the New Testament we have a full and complete revelation of the steps of the process through which the Triune God has passed. Through incarnation the very God became a man. By incarnation divinity was brought into humanity and was mingled with humanity in the person of the God-man Jesus Christ, although neither divinity nor humanity lost any of its respective properties. This God-man, the complete God and perfect man, lived a human life on earth for thirty-three and a half years, expressing God in humanity. As the next step of the process, the God-man was crucified, dying a substitutionary death for our redemption and releasing the divine life for our regeneration. The process continued with Christ's resurrection. On the one hand, Christ was resurrected with a body of flesh and bones (Luke 24:36-43); on the other hand, through resurrection He became a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45b). Finally, as the culmination of His process, the God-man,

with an uplifted human nature, ascended to the right hand of the Majesty on high, where He was enthroned and made the Lord and Head of all. Although the eternal, immutable God has not changed and cannot change in His essence or in His Godhead, there is now a glorified Man on the throne of God in the heavens exercising God's administration in the universe. From all this we see that in Christ the Triune God has been processed, and now this processed, yet immutable, One can enter into us as the all-inclusive life-giving Spirit to be our life, our life supply, and our everything.

The fact that the Triune God has passed through a process for the carrying out of His economy is indicated by certain terms used in the New Testament to describe the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:14): "the Spirit of Jesus" (Acts 16:7), "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9), "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19), "the Spirit of life" (Rom. 8:2), "the Spirit" (John 7:39; Gal. 3:14; Rev. 22:17), and "the seven Spirits" (Rev. 1:4). According to the Greek text, John 7:39 says that the Spirit was "not yet" because "Jesus had not yet been glorified." This does not mean, of course, that the Spirit of God did not exist eternally. It means that with respect to the process of the Triune God, the Spirit as the all-inclusive Spirit of Jesus Christ was "not yet" until Christ was glorified through His resurrection (Luke 24:26). Andrew Murray, a man of unimpeachable orthodoxy concerning the Trinity, came to realize something of God's process in His economy and wrote about it in his classic *The Spirit of Christ* (see the extended excerpt on the next page). According to the Scriptures, we affirm that the Spirit of God, who exists eternally as a distinct person within the Godhead, enters into believers today as the all-inclusive Spirit of Jesus Christ. To make such an affirmation is to affirm that the Triune God is both immutable in His essence and processed in His economy.

Deviations Related to Disposition

Dr. Louis Evans, Jr. once delivered a lecture at Princeton Theological Seminary entitled "Our Theologies as Psychobiographies." His thesis was that our psychological makeup inclines us toward a particular kind of theology. Our theology, therefore, may be a reflection of our personality. For instance, one who is aloof and withdrawn may be inclined toward a theology which presents God as transcendent, "wholly other," and virtually untouchable. One with an authoritarian personality may prefer

a theology which emphasizes God's sovereign control over everything and everyone. This indicates that a subjective, psychological element may be involved in the formation of competing theological systems. The theologian G. C. Berkouwer muses openly upon this:

Such a variety of differing and mutually exclusive 'interpretations' arose—all appealing to the same Scripture—that serious people began to wonder whether an all-pervasive and seemingly indestructible influence of subjectivism in the understanding of Scripture is not the cause of the plurality of confessions in the Church. Do not all people read Scripture from their own current perspectives and presuppositions? Do they not cast it in the form of their own organizing systems, with all kinds of conscious or subconscious preferences, ways of selection which force the Scripture into one particular direction? (*Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture*, p. 106).

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These preferences and ways of selection often are related to a person's disposition. *Disposition* denotes "the prevailing tendency, aspect, mood, or inclination of one's spirits"; "the complex of attitudes, proclivities, and responses conditioning conduct." It thus refers to "one's accustomed attitudes and moods in reacting to life around one" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*). Realizing that disposition is "usually the most intractable of all the departments of man's complete personality" and the "slowest to yield to any radical change," A. T. Pierson explains that *disposition* "literally means the peculiarity of character which 'disposes' in any given direction....It conveys the thought of a natural bent, inclination, or susceptibility" (*Godly Self-control*, p. 31). One's disposition, which

is altogether natural, innate, inborn, "indicates what one *is*, in the inmost being" (p. 45). Furthermore, our disposition is influenced by our fallen, sinful nature. Recognizing this, Pierson says that the "need for renewal of disposition is *universal*. Every natural disposition evinces to some degree the perversion of sin, and, therefore needs the conversion of grace" (p. 33).

Central to our purpose here is the extremely significant fact that our disposition affects, even determines, our view of and attitude toward the divine revelation, for we may be "disposed" in favor of certain aspects of the truth or toward particular theological formulations. If dispositional doctrinal tendencies go unchecked, the result will be deviation. Pierson writes:

Disposition doubtless affects our *views of the truth*. No

little doctrinal divergence may be traced to it; for it constitutes a *medium* through which truth is seen, by which it may be refracted, distorted, colored, as through a lens. He who is arbitrary, vindictive, irascible, will naturally misconstrue the character of God, as autocratic, revengeful, wrathful. He will unconsciously color his conceptions of divine things by seeing them in the lurid light of his own unsanctified temper (p. 44).

If we would know the truth of God, we need to acknowledge the power of disposition to lead us astray.

Disposition can lead us astray in the matter of biblical interpretation by introducing subjective, personal biases which affect our understanding of the Word. In *The Psychology of Biblical Interpretation*, which explores “the impact of the subjective world of the interpreter on the reading of the Bible,” Cedric B. Johnson contends that “conflicting theological positions are in part due to the fact that we all approach a text, sacred or secular, with our strong subjective biases....The biblical data are sometimes distorted through the ‘spectacles’ of our personality” (pp. 10, 42-43). Hence, Johnson says that the “subjective world of the interpreter expressed

through the mind” can distort the truth (p. 10). In this way our “subjective world”—the realm of our disposition—becomes a source of deviation.

Disposition can even make us willfully selective with respect to divine truth. Dominated by his disposition with its biases, a believer may exercise self-will in receiving or rejecting the divine revelation. Evidence for this is found in the meaning of the Greek word rendered *heresies* in 2 Peter 2:1 (*hairesis*—used also in Acts 5:17; 15:5; 24:5, 14; 26:5; 28:22; 1 Cor. 11:19; and Gal. 5:20 and, in the adjectival form, in Titus 3:10). W. E. Vine’s exposition is helpful:

“a choosing, choice...then, that which is chosen, and hence, an opinion, especially a self-willed opinion, which is substituted for submission to the power of truth, and leads to division and the formation of sects...such erroneous opinions are frequently the outcome of personal preference or the prospect of advantage” (*An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words*, p. 217).

The Greek word thus refers to “self-chosen doctrines, alien from the truth” (Henry Alford).

“The Spirit of the Glorified Jesus”

The Holy Spirit *was not yet*; because Jesus *was not yet* glorified. The expression: the Spirit was not yet, has appeared strange, and so the word *given* has been inserted. But the expression, if accepted as it stands, may guide us into the true understanding of the real significance of the Spirit’s not coming until Jesus was glorified.

We have seen that God has given a twofold revelation of Himself, first as God in the Old Testament, then as Father in the New. We know how the Son, who had from eternity been with the Father, entered upon a new stage of existence when He became flesh. When He returned to Heaven, He was still the same only-begotten Son of God, and yet not altogether the same. For He was now also, as Son of Man, the first-begotten from the dead, clothed with that glorified humanity which He had perfected

and sanctified for Himself. And just so the Spirit of God as poured out at Pentecost was indeed something new....When poured out at Pentecost, He came as the Spirit of the glorified Jesus, the Spirit of the Incarnate, crucified, and exalted Christ, the bearer and communicator to us, not of the life of God as such, but of that life as it had been interwoven into human nature in the person of Christ Jesus....And of this Spirit, as He dwelt in Jesus in the flesh, and can dwell in us in the flesh too, it is distinctly and literally true; the Holy Spirit was not yet. The Spirit of the glorified Jesus, the Son of man become the Son of God—he could not be until Jesus was glorified.

This thought opens up to us further the reason why it is not the Spirit of God as such, but the Spirit of Jesus, that could be sent to dwell in us. Sin had not only

disturbed our relation to God’s law, but to God Himself....Christ came not only to deliver man from the law and its curse, but to bring human nature itself again into the fellowship of the Divine life, to make us partakers of the Divine nature....From His nature, as it was glorified in the resurrection and ascension, His Spirit came forth as the Spirit of His human life, glorified into the union with the Divine, to make us partakers of all that He had personally wrought out and acquired, of Himself and His glorified life....And in virtue of His having perfected in Himself new holy human nature on our behalf, He could now communicate what previously had no existence—a life at once human and Divine....Of this Spirit it is most fully true, ‘The Spirit was not yet, because Jesus was not yet glorified.’ (From *The Spirit of Christ* by Andrew Murray)

To exercise self-choice, accepting the truth selectively according to disposition, is to rebel against God and His revelation. As believers in Christ, we are required to live in the obedience of faith. We have no right to be selective concerning God's revelation, receiving what matches our disposition and rejecting what does not. All selectivity must be abandoned. Knowing the truth of God requires a particular kind of denial—the denial of disposition with its inclinations and preferences.

Denying our disposition entails a personal, subjective experience of the cross of Christ (Rom. 6:6; Gal. 2:20). This source of deviation—disposition—is subjective, and the solution—the experience of the cross—must also be subjective. The more we apply the cross to our disposition, the more we will be delivered from its domination and saved from this source of deviation.

Deviations Related to Heretical Extremes

The revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God is balanced in its twofoldness, showing us that God is uniquely one yet three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. There are, therefore, two aspects to the Divine Trinity: the aspect of the one-three and the aspect of the three-one. To push either aspect to an extreme results in heretical distortion of the truth. Modalism is an extreme on the side of the three-one, and tritheism is an extreme on the side of the one-three. Both are deviations and both are heretical.

In supplementing what we have written previously in this issue concerning modalism (p. 30), it may be helpful to define some terms. According to its philosophical meaning a *mode* denotes the appearance or form assumed by a thing, the manner of arrangement of some underlying substance. The adjective *modal* specifies the mode of a thing as distinguished from its substance or essence. *Modalism* is the theological doctrine that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three distinct persons in the Godhead but rather three modes or forms of activity in which

God reveals Himself. According to the modalistic concept of the Trinity, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not equally and eternally coexistent and coinherent but merely successive manifestations of God, or three temporary modes of His activity. Modalism appears today in the heretical teaching of the Oneness Pentecostals, who insist that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not “real, distinct, coequal persons in the eternal Godhead, but are only different roles that one divine person temporarily assumes” (Gregory A. Boyd, *Oneness Pentecostals and the Trinity*, p. 9).

The most notorious modalist in the ancient church was Sabellius. According to Sabellius the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all one and the same, being the three names of the one God who manifests Himself in different ways according to the situation. As the Father He is Creator, Governor, and Lawgiver; as the Son He is incarnate as the Redeemer; and as the Spirit He is the Regenerator and the Sanctifier. For Sabellius, He is the one and the same God, the one and the same divine person, who acts in these ways, appearing in successive and temporary manifestations, with the one and the same God appearing now as the Father, now as the Son, and now as the Spirit, but never all at the same time (Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, pp. 69-70). Sabellius's fundamental thought is that the unity of God

unfolds in the course of the world's development in three periods of revelation, and after the completion of redemption returns again to unity. Therefore, the Trinity of Sabellius is not a Trinity of essence, of the inner being of God, but only of revelation (Schaff, 2:581-583). Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are simply designations of three different phases under which the one divine essence reveals itself (J. F. Bethune-Baker, *An Introduction to the Early History of Christian Doctrine*, p. 105).

Sabellius's denial that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit eternally coexist in the inner being of God and his insistence that they are merely temporary and successive

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and one-three and that
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and economically,
in His dispensing,
and in our
experience of Him.

manifestations of God are contrary to the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God. According to God's revelation of Himself, the one God is eternally three-one: the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, all of whom are God (1 Pet. 1:2; Eph. 1:17; John 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Heb. 1:8; Acts 5:3-4), all of whom are eternal (Isa. 9:6; Heb. 1:12; 7:3; 9:14), and all of whom exist at the same time (John 14:16-17; Eph. 3:14-17; 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Cor. 12:4-6). Modalism, a heresy on the extreme of the three-one, is a serious deviation from the divine revelation and must be repudiated.

Tritheism, a contrasting deviation, a heresy on the extreme of the one-three, must also be repudiated. Tritheism is the belief in three Gods. Such a belief may arise when the distinctions among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are pressed too far or when the term *person* is used vaguely or imprecisely in relation to the three of the Trinity (see p. 30). A form of tritheism appeared in the teaching of Johannes Philoponus, who pushed the distinction among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit to an extreme, claiming that there were three essences in the one common essence of the Godhead (R. S. Franks, *The Doctrine of the Trinity*, p. 119). A similar form of tritheism is held today by those who teach that there are three personalities in the Godhead, or who speak of the Father, Son, and Spirit as being not only distinct but also *separate*, or who believe that the Godhead is a family consisting of three individual members. E. Calvin Beisner provides an example of contemporary tritheistic tendencies when he says, "There is one God who is a being composed of three individuals" (*God in Three Persons*, p. 24). Another example is the following: "There are three separate and distinct Persons in the Godhead" (Paul E. Little, *Know What You Believe*, p. 32). To say that the Father, Son, and Spirit are *individuals* or that they are *separate*—meaning to "set or keep apart" or "existing as an independent entity" (*American Heritage Dictionary*)—goes beyond the divine revelation and is dangerously close to a tritheistic doctrine of the Trinity. Many who are not tritheists in doctrine are tritheists at heart. Regarding those who "nurse an error [tritheism] in their hearts," Stuart Olyott says, "Many Christians, in their heart of hearts, tend to think of God more in terms of His three-ness than His one-ness" (*The Three Are One*, p. 87). All forms of tritheism are condemned by the Bible, which clearly, emphatically, and repeatedly tells us that God is uniquely one.

True to the principle of balance in God's creation and to the principle of the twofoldness of divine truth, the Bible is balanced. The Bible stands apart from the heretical extremes of modalism and tritheism to testify that God is three-one and one-three and that He is triune in His essence, in His economy, in His dispensing, and in our experience of Him.

Deviations Related to Not Caring for God's Economy

We have pointed out that the Bible reveals that God is triune both essentially and economically, that God is triune both in His inner being and in His economy (cf. pp. 21, 29). Whereas the essential Trinity refers to the essence of the Triune God for His eternal existence as Father, Son, and Spirit, the economical Trinity refers to the stages, the steps, of the Triune God for the carrying out of His economy. The New Testament revelation emphasizes the Divine Trinity in the divine economy. This means that in the New Testament the Triune God is revealed mainly in relation to His economy. Those who know neither God's economy nor the Triune God in His economy are bound to deviate from the completeness of the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God. Deviation commonly takes the form of regarding the Trinity merely in an objective way or as a theological abstraction and thereby denying God's dispensing and the believers' experience of the Triune God in His dispensing. Sometimes deviation takes the less common but much more extreme form of confusing the biblical revelation of the Triune God in His economy and dispensing with the idea of "evolution into God"—the preposterous notion that the Godhead is subject to alteration and increase and that human beings, creatures of God, can become God in the sense of attaining the Godhead and being objects of worship.

The Triune God's dispensing is His imparting Himself in Christ into His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people as their life and everything for the producing and building up of the church as the Body of Christ. The Father is the source of the divine life; the Son is the expression of the divine life; and the Spirit is the transmission of the divine life. When Christ, the embodiment of the divine life (1 John 5:11-12), was crucified, "He laid down His life on our behalf" (3:16) in order to release the divine life from within Him. Now in resurrection He, as the life-giving Spirit, imparts, dispenses, this released divine life into us, first for our regeneration (1 Pet. 1:3) and then for our gradual growth in life unto maturity (Eph. 4:13). According to Romans 8 the Triune God is dispensing Himself as life into the tripartite man, causing our spirit and soul to become life and imparting life into our mortal body (vv. 10, 6, 11). Through this marvelous dispensing the Christ who is "sitting at the right hand of God" (Col. 3:1) becomes the indwelling Christ who is "our life" (1:27; 3:4).

The Triune God is also dispensing Himself into us as spiritual food. In John 6 the Lord Jesus, the Son of God, the very God Himself, reveals that He is bread: the true bread (v. 32), the bread of God (v. 33), the heavenly bread (vv. 41, 50), the bread of life (vv. 35, 48), and the living bread (v. 51). Unless we eat Him, we do not have life within ourselves (v. 53); that is, we do not have Him as our life supply. Only by eating Him can we live: "He who eats Me, he also

shall live because of Me” (v. 57). To eat the Lord is to receive Him, digest Him, and assimilate Him in order to be constituted with Him. This metabolic process is an issue of the dispensing of the Divine Trinity.

In addition, the Triune God is dispensing Himself into us as love and grace. The book of Romans speaks of the love of God (8:39), the love of Christ (v. 35), and the love of the Spirit (15:30). This love, which is actually the Triune God Himself, has been dispensed into us, “because the love of God has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (5:5). Now we should believe “the love which God has in us” and abide in the Triune God, who is love (1 John 4:16).


Grace, like love, is the Triune God Himself. The New Testament speaks of “the God of all grace” (1 Pet. 5:10), “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor. 13:14), and “the Spirit of grace” (Heb. 10:29). The fact that grace is imparted to us is indicated by the phrase *grace to you* at the beginning of Paul’s Epistles (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col. 1:2; 1 Thes. 1:1; 2 Thes. 1:2). To Paul, this phrase was declaratory as well as salutatory. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, which is with our spirit (Gal. 6:18; Phil. 4:23), confirms our heart (Heb. 13:9) and becomes our all-sufficient supply (2 Cor. 12:9). As we receive “grace upon grace” (John 1:16) and as this grace is dispensed into us, we become what God wants us to be: “By the grace of God I am what I am” (1 Cor. 15:10). This is the grace of God—the Triune God dispensed into us as grace—becoming the constituent of our inner being.

Since Christ is the embodiment of the Triune God, the more Christ is wrought into us, the more we are filled, permeated, and saturated with the Triune God. Paul writes

concerning Christ revealed in us (Gal. 1:15-16), Christ living in us (2:20), Christ being formed in us (4:19), Christ making His home in us (Eph. 3:17), Christ being magnified in us (Phil. 1:20), and Christ being all and in all (Col. 3:11). As Christ, who is unsearchable in His riches and immeasurable in His dimensions, makes His home in our hearts, we are filled “unto all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:8, 18-19).

This indicates that the divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity has a glorious issue—the church, the Body of Christ, as the corporate expression of the Triune God. That this is God’s goal in His economy is emphatically revealed in the New Testament. The dispensing of the Triune God as life produces the Body of Christ (Rom. 12:4-5). The dispensing of the all-inclusive Christ as the

life-giving Spirit, who is now one with our spirit (1 Cor. 15:45b; 6:17), produces the Body of Christ as the corporate Christ (12:12). The transmission of the Triune God into the believers produces “the church, which is His Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:22-23). The Father’s strengthening us with power through His Spirit into our inner man so that Christ may make His home in our hearts produces the church as the fullness, the expression, of the Triune God (3:14-21). When the Triune God is dispensed into and mingled with the believers, the outcome is the Body of Christ, which is building up itself in love (4:4-6, 16). To know the Triune God, therefore, is to

know Him not only as He exists eternally in Himself but also as He is revealed in His economy and dispensing for producing the Body of Christ as His corporate expression. To know Him in this way is to be rescued from deviation and to return to the purity, fullness, and completeness of the revelation of the Triune God in the Word of God. 

The divine dispensing of the Divine Trinity has a glorious issue—the church, the Body of Christ, as the corporate expression of the Triune God.

In the Father we have the unseen God, the Author of all. In the Son God revealed, made manifest, and brought nigh....In the Spirit of God we have the Indwelling God.

Andrew Murray

The transcendence in the Deity is expressed by the Father; the expression of the Deity is represented by the Son; while the truth of the immanence of the Deity for man’s moral and spiritual life is that for which the Holy Spirit stands.

W. H. Griffith Thomas

As the source, God is the Father. As the expression, He is the Son. As the transmission, He is the Spirit. The Father is the source, the Son is the expression, and the Spirit is the transmission, the communion. This is the Triune God.

Witness Lee