

# Three Persons

As stated earlier, many Christians, without knowing it, hold a false view of the Trinity simply due to their inability to articulate the difference between believing in one *Being* of God and three *persons* sharing that one Being. As a result, even orthodox Christian believers slip into an ancient heresy known by many names: modalism, Sabellianism, Patripassionism. Today this same error is called Oneness or the "Jesus Only" position. Whatever its name might be, it is a denial of the Trinity based upon a denial of the distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It accepts the truth that there is only one true God, and that the Father, Son, and Spirit are fully God, but it denies that the Bible differentiates between the persons. Instead, advocates of this position either believe that the Father is the Son, and the Son is the Spirit, and the Spirit is the Father (the old actor on the stage example, wearing different masks to "play" different parts, but always being the same person), or they make the Son merely the "human

nature" of Christ (hence denying His eternal nature). Jesus then becomes two "persons," the Father and the Son, the Father being the deity, the Son the human nature.

Most other groups who deny the Trinity do so thinking that orthodox Christian believers actually embrace some form of modalism. That is, many times Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses will attack the Trinity on grounds that are really only relevant to the Oneness or modalistic position. They will point to the baptism of Jesus and say, "Well, was Jesus a ventriloquist or something?" The Oneness position is, in fact, liable to all sorts of refutation on the basis of Scripture, so it is easy to see why many who wish to deny the Trinity *prefer* to attack this perversion of it rather than the real thing. Christians who love the Trinity must be very quick to correct those who think that orthodox believers embrace a form of modalism—one *what*, three *whos*. That is the issue.

Scripture leaves no room for confusing the Father, Son, and Spirit. A brief survey of some of the more blatant ways in which this is confirmed will suffice for our purposes here. But do not think the brevity of the review indicates the issue is unimportant. As John taught,

Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. (1 John 2:23)

Such a passage not only clearly differentiates between the Father and the Son, but it warns us how important God considers the truth about His nature.

## **FATHER, SON, AND SPIRIT**

The scriptural truth that the Father is not the Son, nor the Son the Spirit, is rather easily demonstrated. We begin with the fact that the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father—actions incomprehensible outside of recognizing that the Father is a separate divine person from the Son:

"The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand" (John 3:35).

"For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself is doing; and greater works than these will He show Him, so that you will marvel" (John 5:20).

Just as the Father loves the Son, so the Son loves His disciples. The disciples are separate persons from the Son; hence, the Father is a separate person from the Son as well:

"Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love" (John 15:9).

"I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:23-24).

Certainly the best known example of the existence of three persons is the baptism of Jesus recorded in Matthew 3:16-17:

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

Here the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is being baptized (and is again described as being the object of the Father's love, paralleling the passages just cited from John), and the Spirit is descending as a dove. Jesus is not speaking to himself but is spoken to by the Father. There is no confusing of the persons at the baptism of the Lord Jesus.

The transfiguration of Jesus in Matthew 17:1-9 again demonstrates the separate personhood of the Father and the Son:

While he was still speaking, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and behold, a voice out of the cloud said, "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him!" (Matthew 17:5).

The Son's true preexistent glory is unveiled for an instant in the presence of the Father in the cloud. Communication again takes place, marked with the familiar love of the Father for the Son. Both the deity and the separate personhood of the Son are clearly presented in this passage. The Father spoke to the Son at another time, recorded in John 12:28:

"Father, glorify Your name." There came then a voice out of heaven: "I have both glorified it, and will glorify it again" (John 12:28).

Again, the distinction of the person of the Father and of the Son is clearly maintained. This is a conversation, not a monologue.

Some of the most obvious passages relevant to the Father and the Son are found in the prayers of Jesus Christ. These are not mock prayers—Jesus is not speaking to himself (nor, as the Oneness writer would put it, is Jesus' humanity speaking to His deity)—He is clearly communicating with another person, that being the person of the Father. Transcendent heights are reached in the lengthiest prayer we have, that of John 17. No one can miss the fact of the communication of one person (the Son) with another (the Father) presented in this prayer. Note just a few examples of how the Son refers to the Father as a separate person:

Jesus spoke these things; and lifting up His eyes to heaven, He said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify Your Son, that the Son may glorify You, even as You gave Him authority over all flesh, that to all whom You have given Him, He may give eternal life. This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (John 17:1-3).

The usage of personal pronouns and direct address puts the very language squarely on the side of maintaining the separate personhood of Father and Son. This is not to say that their unity is something that is a mere unity of purpose; indeed, given the background of the Old Testament, the very statements of the Son regarding His relationship

with the Father are among the strongest assertions of His deity in the Bible.

Striking is the example of Matthew 27:46, where Jesus, quoting from Psalm 22:1, cries out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" That the Father is the immediate person addressed is clear from Luke's account, where the next statement from Jesus in his narrative is "Father, into your hands I commit My spirit" (Luke 23:46).<sup>1</sup> That this is the Son addressing the Father is crystal clear, and the ensuing personhood of both is inarguable.

Jesus' words in Matthew 11:27 almost seem to be more at home in the gospel of John than in Matthew:

"All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal *Him*" (Matthew 11:27).

Here the reciprocal relationship between the Father and Son is put forth with exactness, while at the same time dictating the absolute deity of both. Only God has the authority to "hand over all things," and no mere creature could ever be the recipient of the control of "all things" either. Jesus "reveals" the Father to those He wills to do so. Obviously, two divine persons are in view here.

It is just as clear that the Lord Jesus Christ is never identified as the Father by the apostle Paul but is shown to be another person besides the Father. A large class of examples of this would be the greetings in the epistles of Paul. In Romans 1:7 we read, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." The same greeting is found in 1 Corinthians 1:3; 2 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:3; Ephesians 1:2; and Philippians 1:2.

## **A COUPLE OF MISUSED PASSAGES**

There are only a few passages that can be appealed to in the attempt to confuse the persons of the Father and the Son. Most are found in the gospel of John where the full deity of Christ is so strongly emphasized. Yet that Gospel is tremendously clear in its witness to the exis-

tence of three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. One of the most often cited passages is from Jesus' words in John 14:

Jesus said to him, "Have I been so long with you, and *yet* you have not come to know Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how *can* you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on My own initiative, but the Father abiding in Me does His works" (John 14:9-10).

Some insist that when Jesus says, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father," this is the same as saying, "I am the Father." But this ignores the very words that follow, where the Lord distinguishes himself from the Father by saying the Father abides in Him and does His (the Father's) works through Him. The truth that Jesus teaches here, however, does support the full deity of Christ, for no mere creature could ever say, "He who has seen Me has seen the Father." Jesus' words here do not make Him the Father, but they do tell us that the unity that exists between Father and Son is far more than a mere unity of purpose or intention. The Son reveals the Father, or to use the words of John himself, "He has explained<sup>2</sup> Him" (John 1:18).

The single most popular passage cited in defense of modalism, however, is one that is often cited in defense of the deity of Christ:

"I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

In this context, the assertion would be that the Father and the Son are one person. Yet this is not what the passage says at all. In fact, the simple citation of the passage, without due regard to its context and meaning, neither proves the modalistic viewpoint *nor* the deity of Christ! Its witness to the truth about Christ comes from the context, which is most often ignored.

Literally, the passage reads, "I and the Father, *we* are one." The verb translated "are" is *plural* in the Greek. Jesus is not saying, "I am the Father." The distinction between the Son and the Father remains even in the verb He uses. And in context, He is making specific reference

to the oneness He shares with the Father in the redemption of His sheep:

“And I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father’s hand” (John 10:28–29).

This is the context of Jesus’ statement, “I and the Father are one.” They are one in giving eternal life, they are one in protecting the sheep, they are one in the covenant of redemption. All this must be said simply to be honest with the passage. And once we see what Jesus is speaking about, we can understand how this passage does, in fact, teach the deity of Christ, for no creature could claim this kind of oneness in redemption with the Father. Eternal life is divine life, and Jesus gives it to His own. God’s people are in the Son’s hand and are likewise in the Father’s hand (cf. Colossians 3:3), and hence are safe and secure in their almighty grip. The Father has given a people to the Son and will not suffer any of them to be lost (cf. John 6:37–39). Here is the oneness that exists between the Father and the Son—a oneness in redemption. Yet since redemption is a divine act, here we have the testimony to the deity of Christ, for no apostle, no prophet, can be said to be “one” with the Father in saving believers in the way announced here. No mere creature can have this kind of perfect unity of purpose and action. No, Jesus Christ must be perfect deity to be able to say of himself in reference to redemption, “I and the Father are one.”

### **JESUS CHRIST: ONE PERSON WITH TWO NATURES**

If Jesus Christ is truly God and truly man, we are tempted to begin asking all sorts of questions concerning just how the “God-man” could exist. Thankfully, the Scriptures safeguard this unique and special act of the Incarnation and do not bow to our inordinate desire to know things God has not chosen to reveal. Instead, we are only given certain guidelines, certain truths that help us to avoid wandering off into error. We can say that the early church was correct in coming to the conclusion (at the Council of Chalcedon in A.D. 451) that Jesus Christ is one

person with two natures, divine and human. He is not two persons, nor are His natures somehow mixed together so that He is not *truly* divine or *truly* man. He is both, concurrently, because He has both natures.

As we noted above, the prayers of Christ are very important in recognizing the separate person of the Son from the Father. Jesus was not "talking to himself" in His prayers, but was talking to the Father. In the same way, the Scriptures do give us at least some indication of the unipersonality of the Son while at the same time revealing to us His two natures. I briefly note one passage that is often referred to at this point, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians:

... *the wisdom* which none of the rulers of this age has understood; for if they had understood it they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Corinthians 2:8)

This passage represents a group of Scriptures that instructs us to view Jesus as one person with two natures. How so? Because of the phrase "crucified the Lord of glory." Obviously the "Lord of glory" has reference to the divine nature of Christ, yet Jesus was crucified as a man. Crucifixion is only meaningful with reference to his human nature (you cannot crucify the divine nature). When Paul speaks of the crucifixion of the Lord of glory, he is speaking of Christ as one person with two natures. The one action of crucifixion is predicated of one *person* though that *person* had two natures, divine and human.

Just as it is with the Trinity, so it is with the one act of revelation, wherein the Trinity is the most clearly revealed, the Incarnation of Christ: both present to us *unique* truths about God that defy our creaturely categorization. Just as we cannot present any one analogy that "grasps" the Trinity (due to the absolutely unique way in which God exists), so, too, the Incarnation defies our attempts to wrap our limited minds around all it means. God only became incarnate once in the Son; therefore, there is nothing else in the created order to which we can compare either the Incarnation or the resultant God-Man, Jesus



Christ. Instead of fretting over questions the Triune God has not chosen to answer in His revelation in Scripture, we should stand amazed at the *motivation* that brought the eternal Son into human flesh: His tremendous love for us!

# A Closer Look

The biblical verdict is clear: the three foundational truths we presented at the beginning of this work are definitely the teachings of Scripture. We can now see how richly this truth is found in the very fabric of Scripture itself. Take a moment to slowly read through the following passages, and in light of what has come before, consider what they communicate:

... constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, *His* choice of you; for our gospel did not come to you in word only, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction; just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. (1 Thessalonians 1:3-5)

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren

beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. (2 Thessalonians 2:13)

For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith would not rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:2-5)

Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. (1 Corinthians 6:11)

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord. There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*. (1 Corinthians 12:4-6)

Now He who establishes us with you in Christ and anointed us is God, who also sealed us and gave *us* the Spirit in our hearts as a pledge. (2 Corinthians 1:21-22)

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. (2 Corinthians 13:14)

For the kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. For he who in this *way* serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. (Romans 14:17-18)

... to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, ministering as a priest the gospel of God, so that *my* offering of the Gentiles may become acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit. (Romans 15:16)

... which has come to you, just as in all the world also it is constantly bearing fruit and increasing, even as *it has been doing*

in you also since the day you heard *of it* and understood the grace of God in truth; just as you learned *it* from Epaphras, our beloved fellow bond-servant, who is a faithful servant of Christ on our behalf, and he also informed us of your love in the Spirit. (Colossians 1:6-8)

For through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:18)

... that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. (Ephesians 3:16-17)

*There is one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.* (Ephesians 4:4-6)

Do you see how the faith of the New Testament is an implicitly *Trinitarian* faith? None of these passages say, "Now, the doctrine of the Trinity is this..." Nor do they need to. When you write to a friend, you don't start every letter by introducing yourself and going back over every shared experience you've had. No, there is an entire body of shared experiences and beliefs that form the background of such a letter to a close friend. In the same way, the early believers spoke easily of Father, Son, and Spirit without giving the slightest indication that they found anything strange in joining these divine persons in the one work of salvation and in the edification of the church. It was simply natural for them to speak in this way. That is why B. B. Warfield wrote, "The whole book is Trinitarian to the core; all its teaching is built on the assumption of the Trinity; and its allusions to the Trinity are frequent, cursory, easy and confident."<sup>1</sup>

## THE REVELATION OF THE TRINITY

Warfield, one of my favorite theologians, had an insight into this subject that few have ever shared. In his article on the Trinity, he dis-

cusses how the Trinity has been revealed to us. Some of his insights simply cannot be phrased any better, so I draw heavily from him in attempting to communicate a very important element of how we are to understand the Trinity.

When we ask, "How was the Trinity revealed to us?" many answers are given. Some would assert that it is revealed in the Old Testament in the scattered allusions to the deity of Christ or the use of the plural pronoun "us" with reference to God (Genesis 1:26). But Warfield was right in noting,

The Old Testament may be likened to a chamber richly furnished but dimly lighted; the introduction of light brings into it nothing which was not in it before; but it brings out into clearer view much of what is in it but was only dimly or even not at all perceived before. The mystery of the Trinity is not revealed in the Old Testament; but the mystery of the Trinity underlies the Old Testament revelation, and here and there almost comes into view. Thus the Old Testament revelation of God is not corrected by the fuller revelation which follows it, but only perfected, extended and enlarged.<sup>2</sup>

So when was it revealed? Many insist it developed over time "in the consciousness of the church," so that the Trinity does not become "doctrine" until well into the church age. But this is to confuse men's *knowledge* and *understanding* of God's revelation with the revelation itself. The Trinity as a doctrinal truth has *always* been true. But when did it become *knowable* to men? What "revealed" it to the human race?

The answer to that question is simply the Incarnation and the coming of the Holy Spirit. That is, the Trinity is revealed by the Son coming in the flesh and the Spirit descending upon the church. Therefore, the Trinity is revealed not in the Old Testament, or even in the New Testament, but rather *in between* the testaments, in the ministry of Christ and the founding of the church. These events are recorded for us in the New Testament, but they took place before a word of the New Testament was written. Warfield again puts it well:

We cannot speak of the doctrine of the Trinity, therefore, if we

study exactness of speech, as revealed in the New Testament, any more than we can speak of it as revealed in the Old Testament. The Old Testament was written before its revelation; the New Testament after it. The revelation itself was made not in word but in deed. It was made in the incarnation of God the Son, and the outpouring of God the Holy Spirit. The relation of the two Testaments to this revelation is in the one case that of preparation for it, and in the other that of product of it. The revelation itself is embodied just in Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is as much to say that the revelation of the Trinity was incidental to, and the inevitable effect of, the accomplishment of redemption. It was in the coming of the Son of God in the likeness of sinful flesh to offer Himself a sacrifice for sin; and in the coming of the Holy Spirit to convict the world of sin, of righteousness and of judgment, that the Trinity of Persons in the Unity of the Godhead was once for all revealed to men.<sup>3</sup>

To grasp this reality is truly exciting! The Trinity is a doctrine not revealed merely in words but instead in the very action of the Triune God in redemption itself! We know who God *is* by what He has *done* in bringing us to himself! The Father, loving His people and sending the Son. The Son, loving us and giving himself in our place. The Spirit, entering into our lives and conforming us to the image of Christ. Here is the revelation of the Trinity, in the work of Christ and the Spirit.

This explains why we don't find a single passage that lays out, in a creedal format, the doctrine of the Trinity. Warfield continues:

We may understand also, however, from the same central fact, why it is that the doctrine of the Trinity lies in the New Testament rather in the form of allusions than in express teaching, why it is rather everywhere presupposed, coming only here and there into incidental expression, than formally inculcated. It is because the revelation, having been made in the actual occurrences of redemption, was already the common property of all Christian hearts.<sup>4</sup>

The disciples were, indeed, "experiential Trinitarians." They had walked with the Son, heard the Father speak from glory, and were now

indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Those early believers, hearing the testimony of the first followers of Christ, could not help but speak of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. So it follows that

Precisely what the New Testament is, is the documentation of the religion of the incarnate Son and of the outpoured Spirit, that is to say, of the religion of the Trinity, and what we mean by the doctrine of the Trinity is nothing but the formulation in exact language of the conception of God presupposed in the religion of the incarnate Son and outpoured Spirit.<sup>5</sup>

### THAT CLOSER LOOK

The following section is meant to provide a base from which those who wish to "dig deeper" can begin. It is only meant as a starter. A number of works exist that can help the believer dig deeper into the many questions that have been asked, and answered, on the doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>6</sup>

Over the years, Christian theologians have struggled with these issues and, as a result, have produced expanded, more specific definitions of the Trinity that help us to more clearly understand how the truths presented in Scripture relate to one another.<sup>7</sup> It should be remembered that no matter how technical we become in our definition, we are still giving the same definition we gave in the first chapter: "Within the one Being that is God, there exist eternally three coequal and coeternal persons, namely, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit." We expand upon the definition for the sake of clarity (believe it or not!), and we become more technical so as to exclude certain errors that have been promoted down through the history of the church. I will use the definition provided by Dr. Louis Berkhof in his *Systematic Theology*:

1. There is in the divine Being but one indivisible essence (*ousia*, *essentia*).
2. In this one divine Being there are three persons or individual subsistences, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

3. The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons.
4. The subsistence and operation of the three persons in the divine Being is marked by a certain definite order.
5. There are certain personal attributes by which the three persons are distinguished.
6. The church confesses the Trinity to be a mystery beyond the comprehension of man.<sup>8</sup>

The "simpler" definition is really merely a "boiled down" version of what we have here. This longer rendition will help us to understand why we use the specific terms we do in defining the Trinity.

1. *There is in the divine Being but one indivisible essence (ousia, essentia).* This is Foundation One: monotheism. Yet, as we can see, it goes beyond the mere statement that there is only one true God numerically speaking. It makes a further statement: the divine Being is "indivisible." That is, you can't chop God up into parts. He is "simple," in the sense that He is not made up of different "parts." God's being is either entire, whole, or it is not God's being at all.

We struggle to express ourselves clearly here, for how does one describe the "being" of God? Terms have been used down through the centuries, such as *essence*, or in Greek, *ousia*, or in Latin, *essentia*. It's the "stuff of God." I like to say it is that "which makes God, God." Because He is unique, His being is unique as well. Whatever the "being" of God is, creatures don't have the same thing. Our biggest problem is that we think very physically. We want to think of being as something you can put under a microscope or weigh on a scale. But it isn't, especially since we know that "God is spirit." He can say through Jeremiah, "'Can a man hide himself in hiding places so I do not see him?' declares the LORD. 'Do I not fill the heavens and the earth?' declares the LORD."<sup>10</sup> And Solomon reminds us of this truth when he says of God, "Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain You; how much less this house which I have built."<sup>11</sup> God's being is not limited by time and space but is eternal and without bounds, omnipresent.

2. *In this one divine Being there are three persons or individual sub-*



*sistences, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.* This is Foundation Two. Yet we note the fact that another term is offered to help define the word "person," that being "subsistences." Why suggest this term? Because we are wont to read into the term "person" all sorts of physical limitations that should not be thought of at all when speaking of the Trinity. Many people, when they hear of "three persons," visualize three men standing side by side. Yet this is not at all what we are talking about when we speak of "person." But then again, does "subsistence" mean anything to most of us? What we are talking about are *personal distinctions* in the divine Being. We are talking about the "I, You, He" found in such passages as Matthew 3, where the Father speaks from heaven, the Son is being baptized, and the Spirit descends as a dove. While trying to avoid the idea of separate *individuals*, we are speaking of the *personal self-distinctions* God has revealed to exist within the one, indivisible divine essence.<sup>12</sup> Theologians speak of each of these subsistences as being marked by particular "incommunicable attributes." What we mean is that you can tell the Father from the Son, and the Son from the Spirit, by how they are related to each other, and by what actions they take in working out creation, salvation, etc.<sup>13</sup> We will talk more about this below. For now we emphasize the fact that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinguished from one another, and yet these distinctions do not lead to a division in the one *Being* that is God. This leads us to the next point:

3. *The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons.* This is Foundation Three. The statement asserts that the Father is in full possession of the entirety of the divine essence; the Son is in full possession of the entirety of the divine essence; and the Spirit is in full possession of the entirety of the divine essence. There are not three different *essences*, nor is the one essence divided equally into thirds. Each divine person is in full possession of the entirety of the divine nature. But the statement also goes beyond this to assert Foundation One again, for it reemphasizes the unity of the divine nature with its insistence that it is "undivided."

Right here we stumble, for in our experience *being* can only be shared fully by one *person*. Let's think about this. What is the difference

between "being" and "person"? Everything that exists has being. A rock has the being of a rock,<sup>14</sup> a tree the being of a tree, a dog the being of a dog, and man is a human being. That which exists has being, but not everything that has being is personal. A rock is not personal. You can insult a rock all-day long, and it won't really mind, since it is not personal. Same with a tree. My dog couldn't care less what I say to her, too—she's only concerned about *how* I say it, the tone of my voice. I might say, in a limited sense, that she has a "personality," but I don't mean that in the technical or specific sense I am using when discussing the Trinity. A dog is not a person in that sense, for my dog does not view herself as one dog over against all other dogs, nor does she understand the idea of "dog kind," nor does she work for the betterment of "dog kind."

Biblically speaking, there are three kinds of *beings* who are personal: God, men, and angels. I have being: I exist. Yet I am personal. My being is limited and finite. It is limited to one place geographically speaking, and one time temporally speaking. Despite all the Star Trek scenarios to the contrary, I am limited to one place at one time. Such is the essence of being a creature. My *being* is shared by only one *person*: me. My *being*, since it is limited, cannot be distributed among two, three, or any more *persons*. One being, one person: that's what it is to be a human.

What we are saying about God is that His being is not limited and finite like a creature's. His *Being* is infinite and unlimited, and hence *can*, in a way completely beyond our comprehension, be shared *fully* by three *persons*, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The divine Being is one; the divine *persons* are three. While the Father is not the Son, nor is the Son the Spirit, each is fully and completely *God* by full and complete participation in the divine Being. Unless we recognize the difference between the terms *being* and *person*, we will never have an accurate or workable understanding of the Trinity.<sup>15</sup>

It is the full and equal participation in the divine Being that is most often denied by heretical and unorthodox religious groups. The truth of this claim is found in the scriptural witness to the deity of Christ and of the Holy Spirit.

4. *The subsistence and operation of the three persons in the divine Being is marked by a certain definite order.* To get a firm grasp on this concept, we need to define two terms that are often used in this discussion. The first is *ontological*. *Ontology* is the study of being. When we speak of the "ontological Trinity," we speak of the Trinity *as it exists in and of itself*. In contrast with this is the term *economical*. In this case, when we speak of the *economical Trinity*, we speak of the *operations and workings* of the Trinity, what the three persons *do* in creation and salvation. Obviously, the Father, Son, and Spirit have taken different roles in creation and in redemption. Hence, we find different relationships between them in the *economical Trinity* as we see them working out redemption and bringing about salvation. We must be *very* careful to distinguish between relationships *as we observe them outwardly* and the eternal relationship that exists between the persons *inside* the triune nature of God, that is, the *ontological Trinity*.

The "order" that is observed biblically is the Father first, the Son second, and the Spirit third. But immediately our time-bound minds hit a pothole and often jump the track. When we think of someone being "first" and someone else being "second," especially in relationships, we immediately begin to import time elements. "If the Father is *first*, then He must be *before* the Son." We need to dismiss this concept *immediately*. When we speak of the "order" of the Persons, we are not talking about an order *of being*. It is not an order *in time*. It does not refer to dignity or participation in the divine Being. The first is not "bigger" than the second or the third. The order is one of relationship. Stick with me here, for we are discussing aspects of God's nature that are very difficult and challenging. But the reward for the labor invested is well worth it.

When we speak of the relationship shared by the Father, Son, and Spirit, we use the terms *begotten* and *procession*. Again I sound the warning, "Define these terms within the context in which they are being used." That is, don't think of "begotten" in human terms, but divine; don't think of "procession" in a finite, creaturely sense, but in an eternal, unlimited, timeless sense. We must do so, for we are talking about the infinite, timeless being of God.

We use the term *begotten* of the relationship of Father and Son. The Son is *eternally* begotten by the Father. The Father is begotten by no one. Automatically we place this relationship within time and think of the Father *originating* the Son at a point in time. Most definitely not. The term as we use it here speaks of an eternal, *timeless*<sup>16</sup> relationship. It had no beginning, it will have no ending. It has always been. C. S. Lewis<sup>17</sup> likened it to a book that is lying on top of another. We say the top book owes its position to the bottom one. It wouldn't be where it is without the one on the bottom. Now, if you can, imagine this relationship as *always having been*. There never was a time when the top book was not where it was, never a time when the bottom book was alone. This is what we mean when we speak of the Father *begetting* the Son. The *relationship* of the first person of the Trinity to the second person is that of *begetting*.

The relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son<sup>18</sup> is described by the term *procession*. He is said to "proceed" from the Father and the Son on the basis of such passages as John 15:26 and John 16:7.

5. *There are certain personal attributes by which the three persons are distinguished.* This refers back to the preceding point. Looking internally at the Trinity, these actions are called the *opera ad intra* and would be "generation" for the Father, "filiation" for the Son, and "procession" for the Holy Spirit. Because of the *relationship* the persons bear to one another, we cannot confuse them. Only the Father generates; only the Son bears the relation of Son to the Father (filiation); and only the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

6. *The church confesses the Trinity to be a mystery beyond the comprehension of man.* This is *not* a statement that the doctrine is inherently contradictory or irrational. It is *not* an excuse to ignore biblical passages or believe things not taught in Scripture. It is an admission that Deuteronomy 29:29 is true: there are certain secret things that belong only to the Lord. He has not chosen to reveal everything there is to know. Indeed, when it comes to the eternal relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit, could we even begin to grasp the eternal, perfect, infinite union that is theirs, even if we tried? Are not our finite

minds far too limited for such a task? The statement that the Trinity is a mystery beyond the comprehension of man does not differ from stating that how God exists eternally, outside the realm of time, is likewise a mystery beyond the comprehension of man. It is a statement about *our limitedness* over against the greatness of God's being, nothing more.

### THE GREAT TRINITARIAN PASSAGE

We close our examination of the wonderful truth of God's triune nature with the single passage of the Bible that comes the closest to providing a "creedal" statement:

And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age" (Matthew 28:18-20).

The Lord is about to ascend into heaven. His words are measured and solemn. His disciples are listening very closely. He gives the entire church her charter, commanding believers of all ages to make disciples. Who is a disciple? One who has been baptized and taught. Baptized in whose name? There is only one name mentioned (the word "name" is singular here): that of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. B. B. Warfield again touches the very heart of the truth by saying of this monumental passage,

He could not have been understood otherwise than as substituting for the Name of Jehovah this other Name "of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost"; and this could not possibly have meant to His disciples anything else than that Jehovah was now to be known to them by the new Name, of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost. The only alternative would have been that, for the community which He was founding, Jesus was supplanting Jehovah by a new God; and this alternative is no less than

monstrous . . . We are not witnessing here the birth of the doctrine of the Trinity; that is presupposed. What we are witnessing is the authoritative announcement of the Trinity as the God of Christianity by its Founder, in one of the most solemn of His recorded declarations. Israel had worshipped the one and only true God under the Name of Jehovah; Christians are to worship the same one and only and true God under the Name of "the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Ghost." This is the distinguishing characteristic of Christians; and that is as much as to say that the doctrine of the Trinity is, according to our Lord's own apprehension of it, the distinctive mark of the religion which He founded.<sup>19</sup>

We see, then, why baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit is so important: because this is baptism in the name of our God, the triune God we worship and serve and adore, the triune God who has saved us. The Father—source of all, eternally gracious. The Son—Redeemer who left the glory of heaven to save His sheep. Spirit—indwelling Comforter who makes the truths of the Christian faith alive in our hearts. What other name would we wish to bear than the triune name of Father, Son, and Spirit? As the hymn writer so eloquently put it:

*Holy, Holy, Holy! Lord God Almighty!*  
*All thy works shall praise thy Name*  
*In earth and sky and sea;*  
*Holy, Holy, Holy! Merciful and Mighty!*  
*God in three Persons, blessed Trinity!*