

The Doctrine of the Trinity



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The Doctrine of the Trinity

The Trinity is clearly revealed to us in the New Testament.

- Matt. 28:19, Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.
- 2 Cor. 13:14, May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Understanding the Trinity

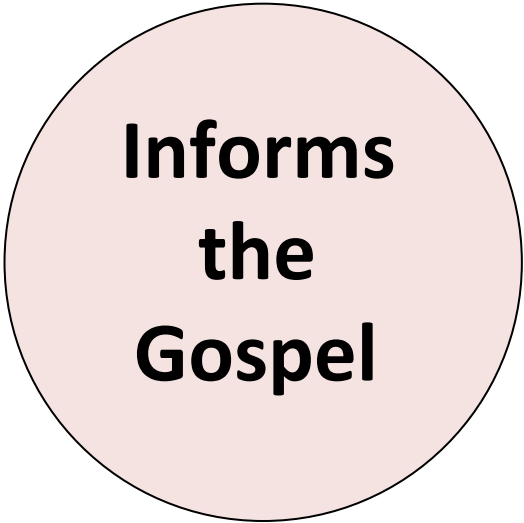
- 96% Of professing evangelicals said they believe in the Trinity.
- 88% said they believe Jesus is fully God and fully man.
- 22% said that God the Father was more divine than Jesus. 9% weren't sure.
- 16% said that Jesus was the first creature created by God while 11% weren't sure.
- 51% said the the Holy Spirit was a force not a person while 7% weren't sure.

Understanding the Trinity

- There are obviously misunderstandings evident among professing Evangelicals.
- The doctrine is often treated as an appendage to the Christian faith/life rather than something significant and integral.
- But the reason to study the Trinity is much deeper and personal than memorizing a set of statements to define it.

The Significance the Trinity

The Trinity . . .



**Informs
the
Gospel**



**Shapes
our
Prayers**



**Grounds
our
Worship**

The Trinity informs the Gospel

The Trinity is necessary for a coherent understanding of the Gospel and redemption:

- The **Father** sends the Son to offer a sacrifice that satisfies the Father's wrath against sin and extend the Father's love and mercy to repentant sinners.
- The Incarnate **Son** is able to provide this atonement because he is both God and man. The God-man conquers death and sin through his glorious resurrection from the dead.
- The **Holy Spirit** is directly responsible for uniting us with Christ, our new birth in Christ (regeneration), and the believer's life journey of sanctification.

The Trinity shapes our Prayers

Prayer is entering into divine dialogue with our Triune God:

- There is a ‘double movement’ to it: God gives himself to us, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit. We respond with our praise, confession, and petition made in the Spirit, through the Son, to the Father.
- Jesus Christ is the means by which we have access to the Father in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- When we pray in the Spirit, we pray past ourselves and beyond ourselves.
- “For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words.”

The Trinity Grounds our Worship

- Both the ground of worship and the proper expression of worship are tied necessarily to the oneness and threeness of God.
- Worship finds its **necessary grounding** in God himself, in his being and his character.
- Worship finds its only **rightful expression** in response to the revelation of the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- In worship, our Triune God desires to draw us into communion with Him.

The Significance of the Trinity

- The Bible describes the existence of one true God, yet attributes the characteristics of this God to the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- The Biblical evidence maintains the singularity of God as well as the deity of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, individually.
- The doctrine of the Trinity is not a creative whim. It is the teaching of Scripture, formalized in the ecumenical creeds.

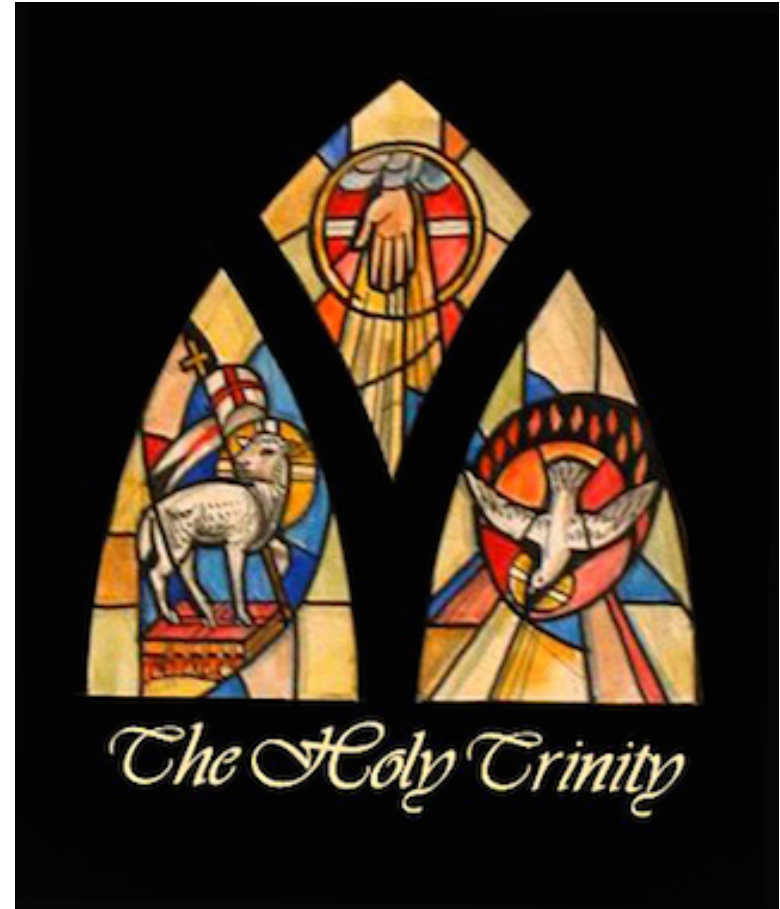
The Significance of the Trinity

The Trinity accounts for and upholds the deity of Christ.

- All deviations from historical Trinitarianism have compromised the eternal divine nature of Jesus Christ. **It's that simple.**
- In these deviations, Christ is either demoted, subordinated, or subjugated as a lesser being.
- When the full deity of Jesus Christ is denied, the Trinity is lost or abandoned.

The Trinity – A Brief Definition

- There is but one God,
- This one God eternally subsists in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each of whom is fully God.
- The Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from both.



Using the word “Person”

- “Person” is an imperfect word to denote the distinctions in the Godhead.
- Because, in our way of thinking, a person is a distinct individual being.
- I.e. Every person is a distinct individual with his own personalized human nature and will.
- But in God there are not three beings alongside or separate from one another.

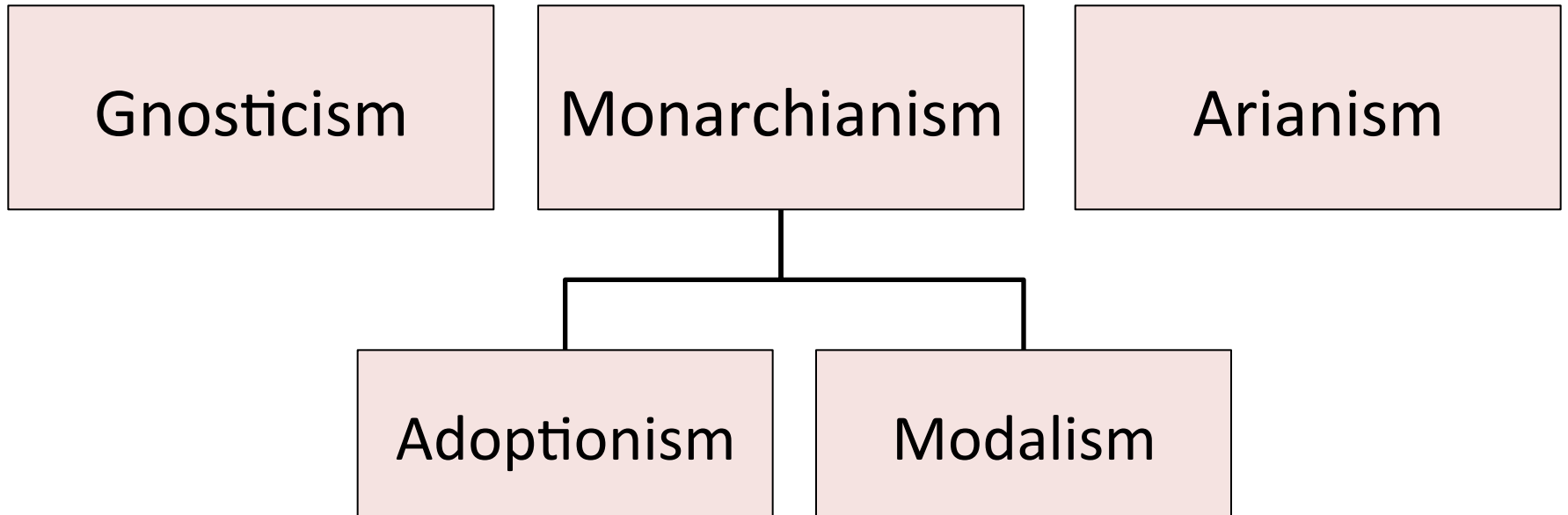
Using the word “Person”

- Our Triune God is **one** being, with one divine nature, one essence, one mind, and one will.
- There are three manners of subsistence, but each “person” is of the one divine substance and nature.
- We do see personal self-distinctions within the Trinity, indicating relations, yet they are generically and numerically one Divine Being.
- Self-distinctions in the Divine Being are evident as they refer to each other as “I” and “you”, and “he”; yet there is only one God.

Motive for Doctrinal Development

- Clarification and formalization of the early church's Trinitarian theology was required by interaction with heretical ideas popping up in various places.
- Heretical teachings threatened the true nature of God and Jesus Christ, essential to the faithful articulation of the gospel.
- But, the ability to effectively combat heretical teaching was inhibited by the political environment.

Early Heresies



Gnosticism

Gnosticism – The teaching that matter is either evil or does not really exist.

- From the Greek word *gnosis* (knowledge).
- Those teaching it professed a special “hidden” or “higher knowledge” of transcendence arrived at by internal, intuitive means (experiential).
- Chief denial was the incarnation of the Son of God. In this view, the “Logos” could not be united to human flesh (matter).
- Developed their own gnostic Christian “Scriptures”.

NT against Incipient Gnosticism

- Jn. 1:14 And the Word **became flesh** and dwelt among us,
- 1 Jn. 4:2 By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ **has come in the flesh** is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God.
- 1 Tim. 6:20 Avoid the irreverent babble and contradictions of what is falsely called “**knowledge**,” for by professing it some have departed from the faith.

Monarchianism

- From the Greek indicating the monarchy of a single sovereign.
- Fiercely sought to protect monotheism.
- Insisted that God was one in essence *and* personhood.
- Could not accept any idea of more than one person in the Godhead.
- Manifested itself in a couple of different forms, Adoptionism and Modalism.

Adoptionism

- Emphasized that God is one being and one person.
- Teaches that Jesus was born as any other human.
- Judged righteous enough to be adopted as God's Son and granted a portion of the divine nature.
- The Holy Spirit was a divine force or presence.

Modalism

- God is one being, and again, *one person*.
- The Father, Son, and Spirit are but the three modes or forms of revelation.
- Sometimes God **manifests** himself to us as Father, sometimes as the Son, etc.
- Also known as Sabellianism where the OT Father became the NT Son, and then became the HS at Pentecost.

Modalism

- In modalism, God is one divine person.



- The Father, Son, and Spirit are different *manifestations* of the one divine person; like God putting on different masks.
- But, in orthodox Christianity, we have one divine being who exists in three persons.

Arianism

Arius of Alexandria (c. 310) rejected modalism but was influenced by Adoptionism. He taught that the Father alone is without a beginning. Jesus was not God but an entity created by God in order that he might create the world.

- Arius famously said, “There was a time when the Son was not.”
- In his view, Christ is neither God nor is He man, but something in between. There is God and there is the Son and there is the rest of creation.

Arianism was a stubborn heresy

Originally rejected at the Council of Nicaea in 325 AD.

- Arianism continued in the Eastern churches with many adherents.
- Continued to have proponents for another half-century spawning variations of itself.
- Athanasius of Alexandria (298-373) rose up as its chief opponent.
- Arianism was more emphatically rejected at the Council of Constantinople in 381 AD.

The Heresies Continue Today

Gnosticism

- Christian Science,
- Religious Science,
- New Age Movement,
- A number of eastern groups (e.g. the Theosophical Society).

Adoptionism

- Mormonism
- Unitarianism

The Heresies Continue Today

Modalism

- United (Jesus Only) Pentecostals,
- Oneness Pentecostals (e.g. TD Jakes),
- The Local Church (Witness Lee).

Arianism

- Jehovah's Witnesses,
- Christadelphianism,
- Unitarianism (in its various denominations).

The Heresies Continue Today

Understanding of the doctrines of “Trinity” and the “Person of Christ” provides the ground necessary to discern heretical or unorthodox teaching in today’s post-modern environment.

The Nicene Creed

- The doctrine of the Trinity was first formalized by the church at the Council of Nicaea (325 AD)
- The focus was on correcting erroneous teaching regarding the person of Christ.
- It was later revised and expanded as a result of the Council of Constantinople (381 AD)
- The Nicene Creed used today is the revised version of 381 AD.

The Nicene Creed of 381 AD

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, **begotten of the Father** before all worlds; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made.

Who, for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried;

The Nicene Creed of 381 AD (cont'd)

And the third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father; from thence He shall come again, with glory, to judge the quick (living) and the dead; whose kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life; who **proceeds from the Father and the Son**; who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets.

In one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. AMEN.

The Nicene Creed

- The one God subsists in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- The three are distinguished by eternal relations of origin - begetting and proceeding - and not otherwise.
- The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit together are to be worshiped and glorified.

Unfathomable but Knowable

- We cannot completely comprehend it or fully plumb the depths of the Trinity.

“For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.” Isa. 55:9

- God has communicated with man truly but not exhaustively.

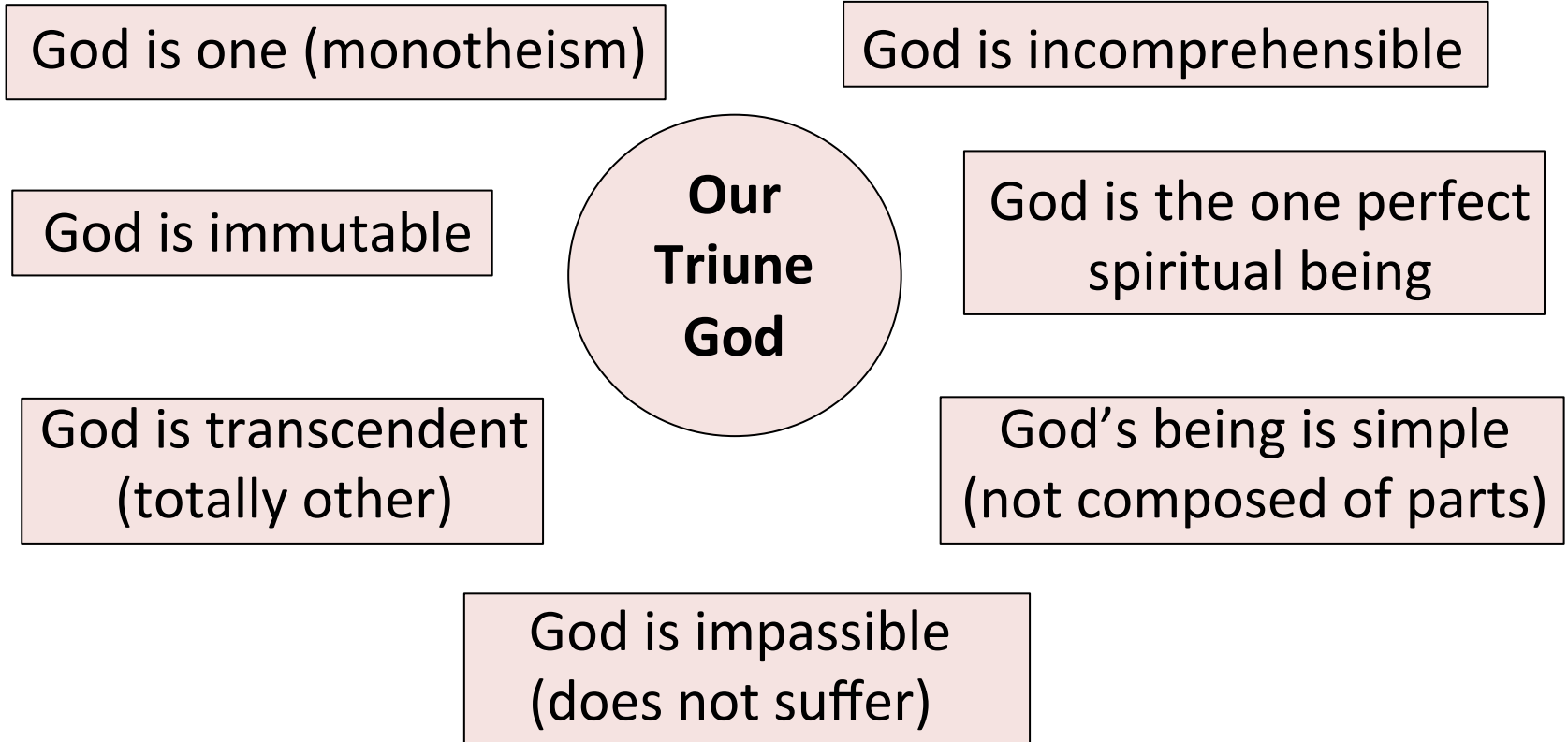
“The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things that are revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may do all the words of this law.” Deut. 29:29

Unfathomable but Knowable

- The doctrine of the Trinity is part of the revelation of God (who is infinite) to those who are finite.
- The Trinity ultimately remains a mystery.
- However, the biblical evidence presents us with a Triune God.
- If the Scriptures teach it, we can know it is true even if we cannot fully comprehend it.

The Doctrine of God

The Doctrine of God forms the framework and presuppositions for development of orthodox Trinitarian doctrine.



Ontology vs. Economy

When addressing **what God is**, in his essence and being, we are speaking “Ontologically”, *ad intra*. Also referred to as the “imminent” Trinity.

- Ontologically, the three persons of the Trinity are equally divine, holy, unchanging, sharing one essence/being.

When addressing **what God does** in regard to creation, we are speaking of his operations in the “Economy”, *ad extra*.

- How the Father, Son, and Spirit relate to creation/world especially in the work of redemption.

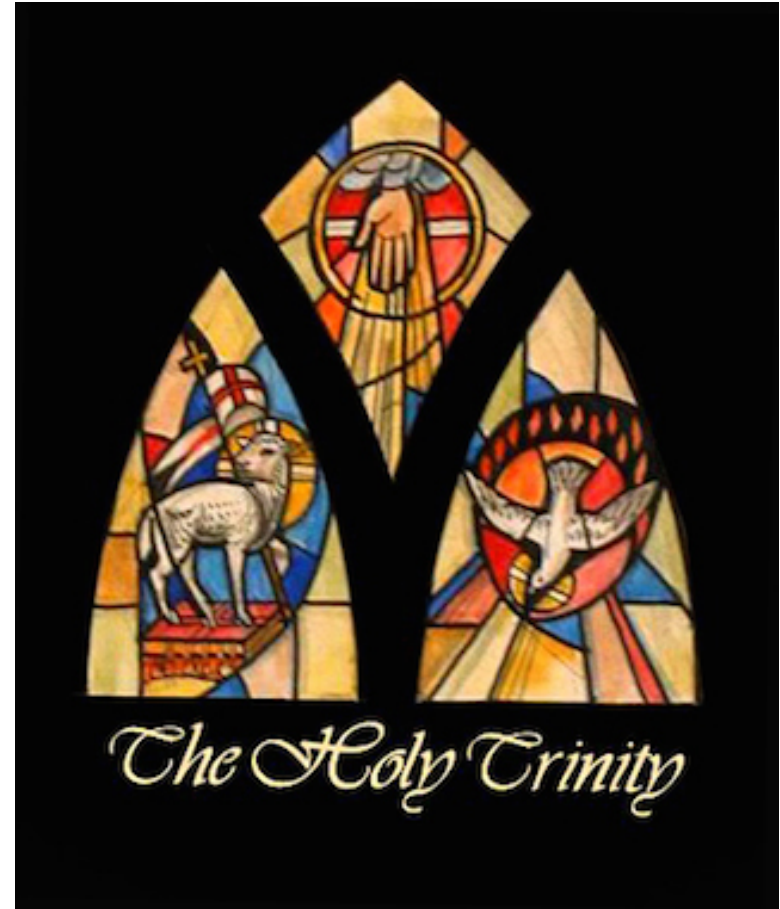
The Doctrine of the Trinity Part 2

Last week:

- The significance of the Trinity
- The word “person” in reference to the Trinity
- Early heresies prompting the Councils of Nicaea (325 AD) and Constantinople (381 AD)
- The Nicene Creed – formalized Trinitarianism
- Ontology (ad intra) vs. Economy (ad extra)

The Trinity in The Nicene Creed

- There is but one God,
- This one God eternally subsists in three persons: the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each of whom is fully God.
- The Father is unbegotten, the Son is eternally begotten, and the Spirit eternally proceeds from both.



Personal Properties within the Trinity

- The Father is unbegotten, the Son is begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.
- These personal properties distinguish the three and establish their “relations of origin” *ad intra*.
- However, these relations are eternal, spontaneous, and necessary to the very nature and being of God.
- I.e. God didn't will the Son and the Spirit into existence. They are of his very being.

Personal Properties within the Trinity

- **Paternity** is the unbegotten Father's personal property because he and he alone is father to the Son.
- **Filiation** (or sonship) is the begotten Son's personal property because he and he alone is son of the Father.
- **Procession** (or Spiration) is the personal property of the Spirit because he and he alone proceeds from the Father and the Son.
- Because these personal properties are what distinguish the three, we may define the divine persons as "subsisting relations."

Personal Properties within the Trinity

- God exists essentially and actually as God *the Father* of the Son, as God *the Son* of the Father, and as God *the Holy Spirit* who proceeds from them both.
- God has no concrete existence apart from his threefold subsistence as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
- While each divine person is *really distinct from* the others on the basis of his personal property, each divine person *is identical with* the self-existent being and essence of the one true God.
- God is three persons all the way down.

Personal Properties within the Trinity

- The eternal relations *ad intra* are reflected in the Trinity's mission in the economy *ad extra*.
- It was fitting for the unbegotten Father to send the begotten Son into the world to accomplish redemption.
- It was fitting for the Spirit who proceeds (Lit. *is breathed forth*) from the Father and the Son to be sent to apply redemption and sanctify God's elect.

Inseparable Operations

- In his external works of creation, providence, and redemption, the Triune God is undivided.
- In every work or operation of God, the three persons of the Trinity, having one mind and one will, participate and work together inseparably.
- The unity of the three persons in the external works of the Trinity (*ad extra*) stems from the unity of being/essence of the Triune God in eternity (*ad intra*).

Inseparable Operations

- While the external works of the Trinity are undivided, specific works may be predicated of one person or another.
- The Father creates (Isaiah 44:24), the Son redeems (Gal. 3:13), and the Holy Spirit sanctifies (Rom. 15:16).
- However, it is the one Triune God that creates, redeems, and sanctifies.
- "As the Father and Son and Holy Spirit are inseparable, so do they work inseparably."
Augustine

Balancing Unity and Diversity

- If you overemphasize God's oneness, you can end up saying something like the three persons are simply three manifestations of a single divine person (modalism).
- If you overemphasize the threeness, you end up with three gods (the heresy of tritheism) or a senior "God" and two lesser "gods" (Arianism or Monarchianism).
- The truth of the Nicene Creed precludes both extremes.

The Providence of God

- The early Creeds are not verbally inspired or infallible like Scripture.
- They are to be recognized and endorsed only insofar as they agree with Scripture, which was the consensus of the early church fathers.
- Also, it's also hard to believe that God would allow an assembly of bishops representing virtually all of Christendom to conclude erroneous teaching.
- This is God's providential care of the church.

Christology and the Trinity

- We now turn to some specific doctrinal considerations regarding Jesus Christ, the God-man.
- The early heresies specifically questioned the person of Jesus Christ in relation to God.
- Therefore the clarification of the doctrines of the Trinity and Christology go hand-in-hand.

The Incarnation

- In the incarnation, the Word (the eternal Son of God) became flesh and dwelt among us, John 1:14.
- To borrow a phrase from the puritan Thomas Goodwin: **Heaven kissed earth when God became man.**
- The Son of God took on a human nature that was created/conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary.

The Incarnation

- The *divine* Son of God took to himself a *human* nature and was born Jesus, the Christ, the God-man.
- Aberrant teachings arose regarding the person of Christ, contrary to the orthodox understanding.
- This led to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD attended by 520 bishops and their representatives.

Chalcedonian Creed

The purpose of the Chalcedonian Creed was to formalize orthodox doctrine regarding the Incarnation and the person of Christ.

- In doing so, it precluded:
- Eutychianism - That Christ had *only one nature*, a mixture of human and divine.
- Nestorianism – That *two persons*, one divine and one human, inhabited the one body of Jesus Christ.

Chalcedonian Creed of 451 AD

“We, then, following the holy Fathers . . . ,
teach men to confess one and the same Son,
our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in
Godhead and also perfect in manhood; truly
God and truly man, . . . in all things like unto
us, without sin; **begotten before all ages** of
the Father according to the Godhead, and in
these latter days, for us and for our salvation,
born of the Virgin Mary according to the
Manhood;

Chalcedonian Creed (cont'd)

one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only begotten, **to be acknowledged in two natures**, inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably; the distinction of natures being by no means taken away by the union, but rather the property of each nature being preserved, and **concurring in one Person and one Subsistence**, not parted or divided into two persons, but one and the same Son, and only begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ . . .

The Hypostatic Union

- This union of two natures (one divine and one human) in the person of Jesus Christ is called the Hypostatic Union.
- From the Greek: *hypostasis*, which came to mean “individual reality” or “person”.
- The technical term “Hypostatic Union” in Christology is used to describe the union of Christ's humanity and divinity in one *hypostasis*, i.e. one person.

The Hypostatic Union

- In the incarnation, the divine nature of the Son was forever joined to the human nature of man in the God-man Jesus Christ.
- He is not half God and half man. Jesus Christ is 100% God and 100% man.
- The 2nd person of the Trinity remains **one person** but now **has two natures** (human and divine) which remain distinct in the one person Jesus Christ.

The Hypostatic Union

- Does this imply that in the incarnation God changed? Isn't God immutable?

The Hypostatic Union

- As to Jesus' divine nature, He is unchanging. As to His human nature, He is changeable.
- As God, Jesus is unchangeable, infinite, ever-supreme in every way.
- But as to His human nature, He is changeable, subject to weakness, able to suffer, able to die.
- He is simultaneously divine and human. He is the God-man.

The Hypostatic Union

- The Son of God did not change His nature at the Incarnation. God did not change.
- The divine nature did not “blend” with the human nature—that would have required change.
- Rather, the divine nature resides *with* the human nature in the Person of Christ. The Incarnation means that Jesus can lay claim to both His divine nature and His human nature.

The Hypostatic Union

- In John 17:5, Jesus prays to the Father, “Glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began.”
- Both of Jesus’ natures are evident in this request.
- He refers to His pre-existence with God in which He has always shared the Father’s glory, evidence of His divine nature,
- and He asks now to be glorified with that same glory as the “Christ”, the God-man.

The Hypostatic Union

- God must be immutable, since He cannot degrade into a worse state and He cannot improve into a better state. He is ever-perfect and, as God, cannot be otherwise. Perfection is an absolute, and it is impossible for Him to be “more perfect.”

The Hypostatic Union

- By contrast, human nature lacks infinite capacities. A human is finite and mutable and always has room for improvement.
- So it was with Jesus' human nature.
- Which explains the fact that Jesus “grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52).

The Hypostatic Union

God is one in being,
essence, and nature.



Yet the 2nd person now and
forevermore has two natures,
divine and human.

One will or two wills?

- Heb. 2:17 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest . . . , to make propitiation for the sins of the people.
- Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 375), “That which Christ has not assumed he has not healed.”
- Maximus the Confessor (c. 600) recognized that sin entered the world through human will at the fall, and that, in accordance with Gregory, the Son must have assumed a human will in order to redeem it.

“Two-Will” Christology

- Dyothelitism: From the Greek: dyo (two) + thelemata (wills)
- Formally adopted after at the 3rd Council of Constantinople in response to the Monothelite (one will) controversy.
- In his one person, Jesus Christ has two wills (divine and human) which correspond to his two natures (divine and human).
- Therefore the “will” is properly viewed as a property of one’s nature, not one’s person.

“Two-Will” Christology

- This is consistent with Scripture where there is a distinction made between the wills of the Father and Christ *during his earthly ministry*.
- Will is to be regarded as a property of nature (not person); just as with our triune God, having one nature and being, there is properly only one divine will in the Godhead.
- The Two-will Christology is a legitimate extrapolation of the Chalcedonian Creed, and has been held by the vast majority of Christians down thru the ages.

Two natures in Christ

- Jesus Christ, the God-man acts according to both natures. The person acts, not the natures.
- Christ's authoritative works (e.g. forgiving sins, substitutionary death) are possible because of his divine nature.
- Yet, his works of ministry were from his manhood in the power of the Holy Spirit.
- Since both natures are united in **one person**, his works are that of the God-man, not simply the works of a man.

The Humanity of Jesus

- Acknowledging the two natures solves many exegetical problems.
- Matt. 26:39, “if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will.”
- Jesus, **willed humanly** in obedience to his Father **all that he had willed divinely** with the Father and the Holy Spirit for our salvation.
- Thus he has spoken here according to his humanity.

The Humanity of Jesus

- Mark 13:32, “But concerning that day or that hour, no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father.”
- In his divinity he certainly would know the hour. In his humanity, as the Son of man, he would not necessarily know.
- Thus he has spoken here according to his humanity.

The Humanity of Jesus

- The human nature assumed in the incarnation consisted of both a human body and rational soul (mind and spirit).
- He assumed the frailties and infirmities of mankind, yet without sin.
- Disease can be attributed to the Fall (sin). Therefore, as far as we know, Jesus never suffered disease.
- Yet, 'he was a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief' (Isa. 53:3), consistent with a true human nature.

The God-man

- Jesus must be understood as he is God, as he is man, and as he is the God-man (mediator).
- As God, he is equal with the Father and the Spirit.
- As man, he is – and always will be – subordinate to the Father.
- As mediator, the God-man intercedes on behalf of God's people.
- The value of Christ's life and death is infinite because of the infinite value of his person.

In Summary

- “In the Godhead there is but one substance, one intelligence, one will, etc., and yet three persons eternally co-exist of that one essence, and exercise that one intelligence and one will, etc. In Christ on the contrary, there are two spirits, two intelligences, two wills, and yet all the while one indivisible person ” *Hodge, Outlines of Theology, p.167*

In Summary

- The early Creeds and Ecumenical Councils up to and including “the decision of the Council of Constantinople (681 AD) . . . closed the gradually perfected definition of the church doctrine as to the Person of Christ, and have been accepted by all Protestants.”

Hodge, Outlines of Theology, p. 386.