Chapter Four

The Holy Trinity

In the doctrine of the Trinity," wrote Herman Bavinck, "beats the heart of the whole revelation of God for the redemption of humanity." As the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, "our God is above us, before us, and within us." The doctrine of the **Trinity**—God as one in essence and three in person—shapes and structures Christian faith and practice in every way, distinguishing it from all world religions.

From the Enlightenment to the present day, it has been widely assumed that we all worship the same God with different names; every religion brings its piece of the puzzle to the game. Despite its cheery optimism, this is actually a disrespectful position to take, not only toward Christianity but toward other religions.

As a deliverance of special revelation, the doctrine of the Trinity most obviously distinguishes the Christian faith from all the world's religions. It is one thing to call the same animal a *horse* in English, *caballo* in Spanish, *cheval* in French, and *mã̌c* in Mandarin, and quite another thing to imagine that a horse is also a dog, a fish, a vacation, and a dinner plate. We do not disagree merely over words or the finer points of theology, but over the identity of the object of our worship and the only name on whom we are to call for salvation. As I said in the introduction, the gospel defines who God is in Christian theology.

Central to the unfolding drama of Scripture, the Trinity is also a dogma that gives decisive shape to our worship and discipleship. As this chapter argues, these coordinates (drama, doctrine, doxology, and discipleship) are integrally related in the development of this central teaching.

I. Revelation of the Trinity in Scripture

Over against the polytheistic religions of Israel's neighbors, the first presupposition of the Bible is that there is one God. This is revealed in the *Shema* ("Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" [Dt 6:4–5]), to which Jesus alluded when Satan tempted him to idolatry (Mt 4:10). Jesus honors his Father in all that he says and does (Jn

5:36), and his miracles testify to this God: "And they glorified the God of Israel" (Mt 15:31).

The apostles follow this emphasis. For example, Paul says that while the Gentiles worship many so-called gods, "yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (1 Co 8:6). There is "one God" (Eph 4:6). Paul's mission was to turn Gentiles "from idols to serve the living and true God" (1 Th 1:9), as was Peter's mission as well (1 Pe 4:3). Before the Roman governor Felix, Paul entreated, "This I confess to you, that according to the Way, which they call a sect, I worship the God of our fathers, believing everything laid down by the Law and written in the Prophets, having a hope in God" (Ac 24:14–15).

So how did it come to be that these apostles—and the first Christian communities—began to worship not only the Father but Jesus of Nazareth, as well as the Holy Spirit, as God? That they did so is an established fact, which we know not only from the biblical sources but also according to the description of early Christian worship by Jewish and Roman sources. Doesn't this practice contradict their repeated insistence that they worship only one God? To answer this question, we should remind ourselves of that inextricable link between drama, doctrine, doxology, and discipleship.

First, then, the drama. Like the person and work of Christ, or the union of Jews and Gentiles in one body—which Paul calls a "mystery" that has now been revealed—the Trinity is more clearly revealed as the history of redemption proceeds. However, when we reread the Old Testament in the light of the New, we pick up on many references that we (and old covenant believers) might easily have overlooked. Not only does Yahweh act through his angelic servants; in some passages, a particular servant is singled out for special mention. Distinguished from the other angels, this servant is even on occasion identified as Yahweh himself. This is especially true of the "Angel of the Lord" theophanies, in which the heavenly messenger is distinguished from other angels as well as from Yahweh but then identified with Yahweh as well (Ge 18; 22:11–18; 32:24–30; Ex 3:2–6). He is the Angel of God's Presence (Isa 63:9), and in Zechariah 3 there is an intriguing courtroom scene in which Yahweh himself (the personal name, not just the title) is identified with the Angel of the Lord (vv. 1–4). In the Psalms and prophets, there are references to the coming Messiah, who is laureled with attributes that can be predicated only of Yahweh. In Isaiah 42, the Servant is identified with Yahweh himself, and yet Yahweh says, "I have

put my Spirit upon him" (v. 1). Reading such passages in the light of the fuller teaching of the New Testament, it made sense to say that the Father put his Spirit upon the incarnate Son.

The early Christians did not arrive at the doctrine of the Trinity by theological speculation. Rather, they simply found themselves at a significant moment in redemptive history, when God had acted climactically in Jesus Christ. It was held that this Jesus was the Son who existed with the Father before the ages and was made human "when the fullness of time had come" (Gal 4:4; cf. Ro 1:1–6). With intentional echoes of Genesis 1, John 1 begins, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made" (vv. 1–3). Here, the Son is distinct from the Father, but is identified as God. He is "the only Son from the Father" (*monogenous para patros*, v. 14) and "the only God [*monogenēs theos*], who is at the Father's side" (v. 18).

Paul follows the same formula. Jesus Christ is "the image of the invisible God." "For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15–17). The author of creation is also the author of redemption. All things come from the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. The doctrine arises out of the drama also in the event of Jesus' baptism. There are not only three names, but three actors on the scene (Mt 3:13–17; Mk 1:9–11; Lk 3:21–22; Jn 1:32–34). There is the Father who speaks ("This is my beloved Son"), the beloved Son who is baptized, and the dove who hovers above Jesus, as he did over the waters in creation. Jesus also identified himself as the Lord of the Sabbath (Lk 6:5) and as the Son of David who is nevertheless David's Lord (Lk 20:41–44, in fulfillment of Ps 110:1).

Jesus appropriates the attributes and actions reserved for Yahweh alone, including the personal name, Yahweh (I AM) (Jn 6:35, 48, 51; 8:12, 58; 9:5; 10:11, 14; 11:25; 14:6; 15:1, 5). In the upper room discourse (Jn 14–16), Jesus reveals the intimate relationship between himself and the Father and the Spirit—a relationship with precreation origins—and in his prayer in John 17 Jesus speaks of "the glory that I had with you before the world existed" (v. 5). He provokes the outrage of the religious leaders by forgiving sins directly in his person, bypassing the temple: "Why does this

man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" (Mk 2:7). Jesus was condemned on the charge of blasphemy, "making himself equal with God" (Jn 5:18). Jesus welcomes Thomas's confession, "My Lord and my God!" (Jn 20:28–29). It is prophesied in Isaiah 45:23 that "every knee shall bow … and every tongue shall swear allegiance" to Yahweh's sovereign lordship. Yet Paul says that Jesus is given "the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (Php 2:9–11). Surely Paul knew that Yahweh was "put to the test" in the wilderness, but now he identifies the offended party with Christ (1 Co 10:9). "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19). The "day of the Lord" is identified with Christ's return (1 Th 5:2).

In the Apocalypse, Jesus is "the Alpha and the Omega … who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev 1:8); he is "the first and the last" and "the living one," who holds "the keys of death and Hades" (vv. 17–18). In fact, as Gerald Bray notes, this opening passage of John's revelation refers to the voice of the Father (v. 8) and the voice of the Son (vv. 17–18) and John received his vision "in the Spirit" (v. 10). "In the famous letters to the seven churches (chs. 2–3), it is Christ who speaks, yet each letter concludes with the solemn command: 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." In the heavenly worship, the saints and angels worship the Lamb (Rev 5:13), although when John falls down before the angel who tells him what to write, the apostle is warned, "You must not do that! I am a fellow servant with you and your brothers who hold to the testimony of Jesus. Worship God." John adds, "For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Rev 19:9–10).

The Spirit, distinct from the Father and the Son, is nevertheless worshiped with them as God and as the one who, with the Father, "raised Christ Jesus from the dead" and "will also give life to your mortal bodies …" (Ro 7:11). In both testaments, the Spirit possesses the name of Yahweh (Ex 31:3; Ac 5:3–4; 1 Co 3:16; 2 Pe 1:21) and his essential attributes (Ps 139:7–10; Isa 40:13–14; 1 Co 2:10–11). To the Spirit are attributed works that are ascribed only to God (creation, Ge 1:2; cf. Job 26:13; Ps 33:6; providence, Ps 104:30; regeneration, Jn 3:4–6; Tit 3:5; resurrection of the dead, Ro 8:11). The Spirit also receives divine worship (Mt 28:19; Ro 9:1; 2 Co 13:14). In fact, when Peter confronts Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5, he warns that they have lied "to the Holy Spirit" (v. 3); therefore, they have

"not lied to man but to God" (v. 4). Paul explains that "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Co 3:17). In short, with the progress of the drama there is a progressive revelation of the triune God.

Second, *doxology*. Besides arising from the unfolding drama, many New Testament trinitarian references occur in worship. The formal confession "one God in three persons" arises naturally from the triadic formulas in the New Testament, especially in the context of baptism (Mt 28:19) and liturgical blessings and benedictions (Mt 28:19; Jn 1:18; 5:23; Ro 5:5–8; 1 Co 6:11; 8:6; 12:4–6; 2 Co 13:13–14; Eph 4:4–6; 2 Th 2:13; 1 Ti 2:5; 1 Pe 1:2).

Third, the Trinitarian confession also arises from the *discipleship* prescribed and practiced in the apostolic community. The father of liberal Protestantism, Friedrich Schleiermacher, dismissed the Trinity as nonessential because, he said, it makes no difference to religious experience. Since we experience only "God" and not "three persons," why should it matter? However, not only is Schleiermacher's method deeply flawed (based on our pious experience rather than an external revelation); he missed one of the most intriguing features that gave rise to belief in the Trinity in the first place: namely, that people did in fact experience the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as distinct yet divine persons. They encountered the incarnate Son at first hand (1 Jn 1:1–4), and they experienced the Spirit as he descended at Pentecost and indwelled believers. Not even in terms of personal experience and response, then, can one regard the Trinity as nonessential to the apostolic community. This practical experience of the apostolic community not only was a useful application or implication of the doctrine, but, along with the drama, demanded it.

Far from renouncing the God of Israel, the earliest Christians believed that they were worshiping the God of their fathers and mothers. Yet there they were, faced with Jesus as God the Son in human flesh and God the Spirit descending and indwelling. There they were, being baptized—at Christ's behest—in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and being blessed with benedictions from the Trinity. "One God, three persons": the formula was implicit already, but became explicit through hard-fought battles.

II. Postapostolic Development of the Doctrine

In its earliest years, the Christian church was a Jewish sect, preoccupied with the challenge of bringing the gospel to Jerusalem and Judea. Soon, however, it entered the Gentile world—first through the Diaspora (that is, Jews scattered throughout the Roman Empire). In the process, the gospel encountered different objections and challenges. On the popular level, Greeks and Romans were not offended by the addition of another foreign deity to the pantheon. Early Christians repeated traditional Jewish objections to polytheism. Yet as Christianity gained converts and critics among cultural elites, it had more philosophical challenges to face.

How do you explain and defend the Christian faith to those with a fundamentally different worldview—without accommodating that faith to the presuppositions of unbelief? That perennial question of Christian mission pressed itself on the consciousness of the ancient church. The dogma of the Trinity would never have emerged out of a synthesis of Christian and pagan thought. On the contrary, the early pioneers of Trinitarian theology were remarkably adept at exploiting their inherited vocabulary and philosophical concepts in service to revelation.

A. Early Trinitarian Debates

For centuries, the Greek mind had been preoccupied with the "one-and-many problem." **Essence** refers simply to reality: what is there to know. Something with certain definable characteristics is called an "essence" or "substance." Is reality ultimately one or many? Is plurality a falling away from the pure unity of being, into a mere appearance or shadow of its former self? That was the assumption of most Greek philosophers, including Parmenides, the Stoics, and Plato. Even Aristotle maintained the priority of the one over the many.

The great Jewish philosopher of Jesus' day, Philo, established a school in Alexandria, where he not only translated but transformed biblical teaching into the categories of Platonism. A little over a century later, Origen (185–254) founded a Christian school in Alexandria modeled on Philo's academy. Like Philo, Origen tried to merge the Bible with Plato. "The One"—Platonism's favored term for the divine principle—cannot be divided, Origen argued; plurality itself is a falling away from being. However, the Son is indeed held by the apostles to be divine. Furthermore, the radical New Testament identification of the Creator as God—and the Logos by whom he made the world as God (Jn 1:1–5)—had a weaker grip on Origen's thinking than the Platonist view of the logos as a semidivine

being or principle responsible for creating the "lower" (material) world. Origen concluded that the Son is subordinate to the Father not only **economically** (i.e., with respect to God's works in the world), but *ontologically* (that is, in his essential nature). To many Christians, this suggested that the Son is less divine than the Father.

Key Distinction: *economic/immanent (Trinity)*
Scripture reveals the three persons (Father, Son, and Spirit) as distinct actors in the economy (historical outworking) of creation, redemption, the application of salvation, and the consummation. Christianity teaches that this is a truth not only in revelation, but in reality. In other words, God reveals himself economically as one God in three persons because he *is* in fact such (ontologically).

A third-century presbyter named Arius, who also served in Alexandria, went a step further, arguing that the Son is the first created being. "There exists a trinity [*trias*]," he said, "in unequal glories." The Father alone is God, properly speaking, while there was a time when the Son did not exist. Seeking a middle way, Semi-Arians argued that the Son is of an essence *similar* to, though not exactly the same as, that of the Father. Orthodoxy hung on a vowel: **homoousios** ("of the same essence") versus *homoiousios* ("of a similar essence").

A somewhat different way of preserving the unity of God was struck by Sabellius. He argued that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are "masks" or personae worn by the one divine person. Like an actor on the stage, God could appear sometimes as the Father, other times as the Son, and other times as the Spirit. However, these are not actually three different actors. Though the third-century Roman presbyter was excommunicated by the bishop of Rome in AD 220, Sabellianism—more commonly known as modalism—has remained a recurring challenge throughout church history.

All of these early challenges were the result of the inability of the Greek mind to comprehend a plurality that is not in some sense a division or falling away from the pure unity of being. To put it clumsily, there could only be *one* One at the top of the ladder, not three. An essence cannot be divided—certainly, not the essence of the divine One. To the Greek mind, the orthodox Christians were saying that God is one in essence and three in essence: an obvious contradiction. Part of the problem was that there just weren't enough conceptual tools in the toolbox to make the point that the threeness (plurality) did not pertain to the essence. Aristotle had coined

the same term, **ousia,** to refer both to the essence and to individual bearers of it. For example, Susan is a bearer of the essence we call "humanity," but Susan and humanity were both called *essence*.

The real breakthrough at this point came with the Cappadocian theologians in the fourth century: Gregory of Nyssa, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Basil of Caesarea. Instead of calling the essence and the individual both "essence" (*ousia*), they coined the term **hypostasis** for individual persons who bear it. No longer did persons get swallowed up in generic essences. At the same time, the Greek word for *person* (*prosōpon*) had its own set of problems, because it was ordinarily used to refer to an actor's role (exactly what we mean by an actor's "persona"). Applied to the Trinity, that would mean modalism, the heresy of Sabellius.

Up to this point, Christians objected to the charge of logical contradiction but did not yet have the precise vocabulary for articulating it. Even though the philosophy here is complex, *hypostasis* (an individual subsistence with its own characteristics) was the right word for distinguishing the three persons from the one essence. Although a bearer of a shared essence, a hypostasis is a distinct entity with its own attributes as well. For the first time, "persons" attained their own ontological status. No longer was the Greek objection to a division in the divine essence even relevant: it is not God's essence that is plural, but the persons. There are not grades of being in God's essence, from the Father (pure being) to the Son and the Spirit (less being); rather, there is one essence that each person shares equally. In the process of defining the Trinitarian formula, the Cappadocians also introduced new conceptual space for a richer affirmation of human personhood that transformed Western culture.

These theologians of the East argued that while each person of the Trinity shares equally in the one divine essence (avoiding Origen's ontological subordinationism), the Son and the Spirit receive their personal existence from the Father. Thus, unity and plurality receive equal appreciation: "No sooner do I conceive of the One," said Gregory of Nazianzus, "than I am illumined by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One."

Key Distinction:
essence/persons (Trinity)

God is one in essence and three in persons (or hypostases). An essence is simply something with characteristics—that is, an entity about which something can be said. A person (or hypostasis) is a distinct bearer of an essence. Applied to the Trinity, it means that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct persons, each with his own personal attributes, while each also shares equally the attributes of deity (i.e., the divine essence).

This interrelationship between persons is further underscored by the term **perichoresis,** which refers to the mutual indwelling of the persons in each other. This relationship is underscored in John's Gospel, where Jesus speaks of himself as being in the bosom or at the side of his Father from all eternity (Jn 1:18; 14:10; 17:5) and engaging, with the Father and the Spirit, in a mutual exchange of gifts and activities (Jn 16:14–15; 17:6, 21–23). No one comes to the Father except through the Son; in fact, to know the Son is to know the Father also (Jn 14:6–7). This notion of perichoresis—a unity of will and action—is not an alternative to a unity of essence, as is taught by Latter-Day Saints (Mormonism) as well as social Trinitarianism (especially Jürgen Moltmann). Rather, the essential unity of the persons is the presupposition for their shared life. There is therefore an intimate unity of these three persons that cannot be duplicated in any creaturely community. No human society, even the church, is more than an analogy of the Trinitarian life. That said, the analogy is one that is pregnant with implications for our life together in Christ.

B. The Ecumenical Consensus and East-West Tensions

It has become fashionable in recent theology to overemphasize the differences between the Eastern and Western formulations of the Trinity. To summarize briefly, it is frequently said that Western (Latin) reflection, especially from Augustine onward, is implicitly *modalistic*. Whereas the East locates the unity of the Godhead in a person—namely, the Father, who eternally begets and spirates the other persons—the West lodges it in the one essence. The result is that the "real God" is the essence, as if it were a person in its own right, and the persons are nothing more than relations (fatherhood, sonship, and bond of love). Like most rumors, this thesis has an element of truth that has been exaggerated into a caricature.

It is true that the unity of essence is more fully developed in Jerome, Augustine, and other Western theologians than the distinctness of persons. This is due in part to the fact that they were wrestling especially with Arian and Semi-Arian opponents, and were therefore eager to underscore the fact that the Son (and the Spirit, too) shares exactly and equally the same

essence as the Father. It is also due in part to the fact that Latin fathers like Jerome and Augustine did not understand the point that the Cappadocian (Eastern) fathers were making when they seized upon the word *hypostasis*. Unable to read Greek fluently, Augustine himself expressed his confusion over the term and, like Jerome, preferred the Latin term *persona*. He compounded the suspicion of modalistic tendencies when he offered his infamous psychological analogy of the Trinity, as memory (the Father), understanding (the Son), and will (the Spirit). Augustine even says that "these three constitute" not only one divine essence but "one mind." Although it is only an analogy, it is not a good one; it suggests one person, not three. (In fact, most Western analogies for the Trinity veer toward modalism, not doing justice to the distinct identity of the persons.) While the East seemed more worried about modalism, the West exhibited a greater suspicion of ontological subordination. Some on both sides increasingly traded charges that the other had in fact embraced these heresies.

Nevertheless, it is crucial to recognize and celebrate the fact that the whole church agreed upon the formula "one in essence and three in persons." In fact, this phrase was already coined by the Latin father Tertullian in the third century. The remarkable ecumenical consensus reached at the Council of Nicaea in 325 (subsequently codified as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed) remains the church's confession to this day. This illustrates an important distinction between dogmas (the church's statement of biblical doctrine) and formulations of theologians concerning the shared ecumenical consensus. Difference over nuances in formulations may affect the ecumenical dogma, but this need not be—and often has not been—the case.

In spite of this consensus, mutual suspicions (political as well as theological) deepened over the centuries after Nicaea. Confronting a revival of Arianism in Spain, the church received the repentant back only by amending the Nicene Creed to say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son* (**filioque**). Again, the threat of Arianism made the Western church especially sensitive to any challenge to the Son's equality with the Father. Soon, the additional clause was used in formal services, even in Rome. Named for the addition (*filioque*), the *filioque* controversy contributed significantly to a formal schism in 1054. Among the charges made by the East were the following: (1) Out of an exaggerated fear of ontological subordination, the West had abandoned the consensus that the Father is the principium (origin) of the Godhead. (2) What does this mean

for the status of the Spirit? Had the West staved off the ontological subordination of the Son only to embrace the ontological subordination of the Spirit to the Father and the Son? The suspicions of modalism and a reduction of the Spirit to the "bond of love" between the Father and the Son seemed now to have been justified. (3) By definition, a unilateral amendment of an ecumenical creed by one branch of the church is an act of schism. In spite of a promising beginning, the Fourth Lateran Council (1215) failed to heal the East-West schism.

The Protestant Reformers championed the ecumenical consensus. Although they accepted the Latin version of the Nicene Creed, they did not spend much energy in defending the filioque clause and were obviously sympathetic to the East's grievance against Rome's pretensions even to the point of amending an ecumenical creed. Faced by challenges from radical Protestants—especially neo-Arians who became known as Socinians (forerunners of Unitarianism), Calvin was especially eager to draw from the best of Eastern and Western Trinitarian reflection.

I discuss Calvin's contributions more fully in *The Christian Faith*. Here I offer only a brief summary. First, Calvin believed that the Trinity lies at the heart of the faith. Without it, "only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God."[9] Second, Calvin also tried to understand the tensions between the Christian East and West that we have considered, even scolding Augustine and Jerome for being "confused…. by the word 'hypostasis' " instead of listening carefully to the Cappadocian insight. While affirming the unity of the persons in one essence against his neo-Arian opponents, Calvin saw the wisdom in the East's emphasis on the persons as real "subsistences"—that is, as distinct entities, each with his own personal characteristics. "For in each hypostasis the whole divine nature is understood," he says, "with this qualification— that to each belongs his own peculiar quality." He adds, "It is not fitting to suppress the distinction that we observe to be expressed in Scripture. It is this: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of all that activity."[12] Calvin is simply following the formulation of the Cappadocian fathers; for example, in Gregory of Nyssa's statement that all of God's external activity "has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit." Third, Calvin argues that the Son and the Spirit do not receive their *divine nature* from the

Father, but they do receive their *personal existence* from the Father. "In this sense the opinions of the ancients are to be harmonized, which otherwise would seem somewhat to clash."

While affirming the Western position on the filioque (i.e., the procession of the Spirit from the Father *and the Son*), Calvin shared the East's concerns about the West's modalistic tendencies—even singling out Augustine's psychological analogy for criticism. He was persuaded by the East's emphasis on the distinctness of the persons and on their distinct agency in every external operation. "And that passage in Gregory of Nazianzus vastly delights me: 'I cannot think on the one without quickly being encircled by the splendor of the three; nor can I discern the three without being straightway carried back to the one.' "[16] Ontological subordinationism (and Arianism) is contradicted by the fact that the persons share exactly and equally the same *essential* attributes. Modalism is rebuffed by affirming the reality of personal attributes that distinguish each person.

This path was taken by other Reformed theologians as well. They even went so far as to call the attributes of each person "incommunicable." The Father is the source, the Son is the mediator, and the Spirit is the one who brings about the intended effect of God's speech within the world. As will become clearer as we move along, this point shapes the way we think about God's relation to the world and his creative and redemptive work in it.

Key Defenders of the Trinity in the Ancient Church	
Irenaeus (second century)	Bishop of Lyons and student of Polycarp (who was a disciple of John the apostle). Known especially for his defense of Christianity against gnosticism (*Against Heresies*).
Tertullian (160–220)	Carthage theologian who pioneered Trinitarian theology in the West; developed the formula "three persons, one essence."
Athanasius (293–373)	Bishop of Alexandria who helped to shape and defend Nicene orthodoxy.
The Cappadocian Fathers (fourth century)	Brothers Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa, together with their friend Gregory of Nazianzus, were leaders in Cappadocia (modern Turkey) who played a formative role in developing the Trinitarian theology of the East.

Augustine (354–430)	Bishop of Hippo (in Northern Africa) who contributed important advances to Latin (Western) Trinitarian theology.

C. Modern Developments

The Enlightenment represents the triumph of a basically Socinian (neo-Arian) theology. Even many who did not identify formally with the Unitarian religion and remained within established churches either rejected the Trinity (along with other core Christian beliefs) or treated it as an irrelevant concept. After all, it was not a deliverance of unaided, autonomous, universal reason. Nor was it required by the necessities of universal, practical morality (as Kant argued), or religious experience (as Schleiermacher argued). So, with few exceptions, it was simply avoided until G. W. F. Hegel appropriated a Trinitarian scheme for his speculative philosophy.

Protestant liberalism added new chapters to the Socinian legacy, and while orthodox Christians continued to affirm the Trinity as an essential doctrine, its import was not always evident in faith and practice. It was Karl Barth who, in the twentieth century, revived widespread interest in the Trinity, in part through his reading of the older Reformed systems. Not only affirmed as one doctrine among many, Trinitarian thinking is evident across Barth's entire *Church Dogmatics*.

Nevertheless, some recent theologians have wondered if Barth's formulations emphasize the one God over the three persons. There is some basis for this concern, in my view. However, Barth is often treated as the foil for sweeping indictments of Western Trinitarian reflection. More radical critiques, especially by Jürgen Moltmann and other advocates of *social Trinitarianism*, challenge the whole ecumenical consensus as a failure to give the plurality of persons its due. The Trinity is "one community of persons," not "one essence in three persons." Although advocates of this view reject the label, in substance it represents *tritheism*: that is, belief in three Gods.

It has become increasingly popular in evangelical circles to reject the orthodox belief in the eternal generation of the Son. The concern is that it renders the Son ontologically subordinate (inferior) to the Father. However, this rests on a misunderstanding of the classic formulation and is easily resolved by a proper distinction between essence and persons.

As the pendulum continues to swing between the "one" and the "many" in our own day as it did in the past, we should be impressed with that vast

consensus that has bound Christians in all times and places to the formula "one God in three persons." This formula is sufficient for our faith and practice, Calvin reminds us. "Here, indeed, if anywhere in the secret mysteries of Scripture, we ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation."

Views of the Trinity	
Modalism and Subordinationism	• God is one person (the Father), manifested to us sometimes also as "Son" and "Spirit." Subordinationists (and Arians) taught that the Son and the Spirit are inferior ontologically to the Father.
	• Founder of Modalism: Sabellius (third-century Roman presbyter). Later proponents: Socinians, Unitarians. Origen and Eusebius were subordinationists, as were the Arians in a more radical way.
Orthodox	• God is one in essence, three in persons.
Trinitarianism	• Hippolytus, Tertullian, Athanasius, Augustine, the Cappadocian Fathers, Council of Nicaea (AD 325).
Tritheism	• God is three persons, with no unity of essence.
	• Founders: John Philoponus, Eugenius of Seleucia. Later proponents: Latter-Day Saints (Mormons).

III. Practical Benefits of the Doctrine of the Trinity

The Trinity is not one doctrine among others, but gives distinctive shape to Christian faith and practice—across all of the topics that we will cover in this volume. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit stride across the chapters of redemptive history toward the goal whose origin lies in an eternal pact between them. We worship, pray, confess, and sing our laments and praises to the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit. We are baptized and blessed in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. From the word of the Father concerning his Son in the power of the Spirit, a desert wasteland blooms into a lush garden in ever-widening patches throughout the world.

We are adopted as children, not of a unipersonal God, but of the Father, as coheirs with his Son as Mediator, united to the Son and his ecclesial body by the Spirit. Paul's doxology in Romans 11:36—"From him and

through him and to him are all things"—now means more than a unipersonal God being the source, effectual agent, and end of all things; it means that all good gifts come from the Father, through the Spirit, and to the Son. As we noted earlier, "to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity." No less than the Father are the Son and the Spirit our Creator and preserver. No less than the Son are the Father and the Spirit our Savior and Lord. No less than the Father and the Son is the Spirit "worshiped and glorified."

One of the reasons that many Christians have found little practical relevance of this doctrine for their lives is that our public worship—and therefore private piety—has become increasingly emptied of Trinitarian references. As we've seen, one of the reasons for the controversies and greater refinements in formulating this doctrine is that monotheistic Jews were now offering worship to Christ and the Holy Spirit as well as to the Father. In addition to the New Testament formulas for baptism and benedictions, ancient prayers and hymns planted the Trinitarian faith deep in the hearts of Christian people across many times and places. Christians throughout the ages didn't just talk *about* the Trinity (which still, more often than not, happens today), but *to* the Father, in the Son, by the Spirit.

Many forms of worship today, however, have dispensed with these rich resources without replacing them with equally Trinitarian elements. So now when we raise the subject in catechism or youth group (which itself is increasingly rare), many find it unfamiliar to their Christian experience thus far. To the extent that our *experience* is not Trinitarian, it is not properly Christian. One of my goals in this book is to explore the relevance of the Trinity not only across the whole system of Christian doctrine, but in our lives as worshipers and disciples of Jesus Christ.

Many of the differences in faith and practice between Christian denominations and traditions can be attributed at least in part to a tendency to overlook this mutuality of the three persons in every work. It is not surprising that liberalism reduced the Trinity to the Father (as in Adolf von Harnack's oft-repeated formula, "the universal fatherhood of God and universal brotherhood of man") and therefore has had little interest in redemption by a divine Savior or its supernatural application by the Spirit. Deism needed only an Architect, not a Contractor and Builder. The tendency to focus on Christ apart from the Father and the Spirit has also

led to a reductionistic view of redemption that is disconnected from creation and consummation. Placing the Spirit at the center—often in reaction against these other tendencies—one can easily treat the Spirit as a freelance operator rather than the one whose mission is to shine the spotlight on the Father's word concerning his Son's work. Throughout this volume we will be fleshing out what it means to say that in every external work of the Trinity all things are done by the Father, in the Son, through the Spirit.

Key Terms

- Trinity
- *homoousios*
- *hypostasis*
- *perichoresis*
- *filioque*

Key Distinctions

- economic/immanent (Trinity)
- essence/persons (Trinity)