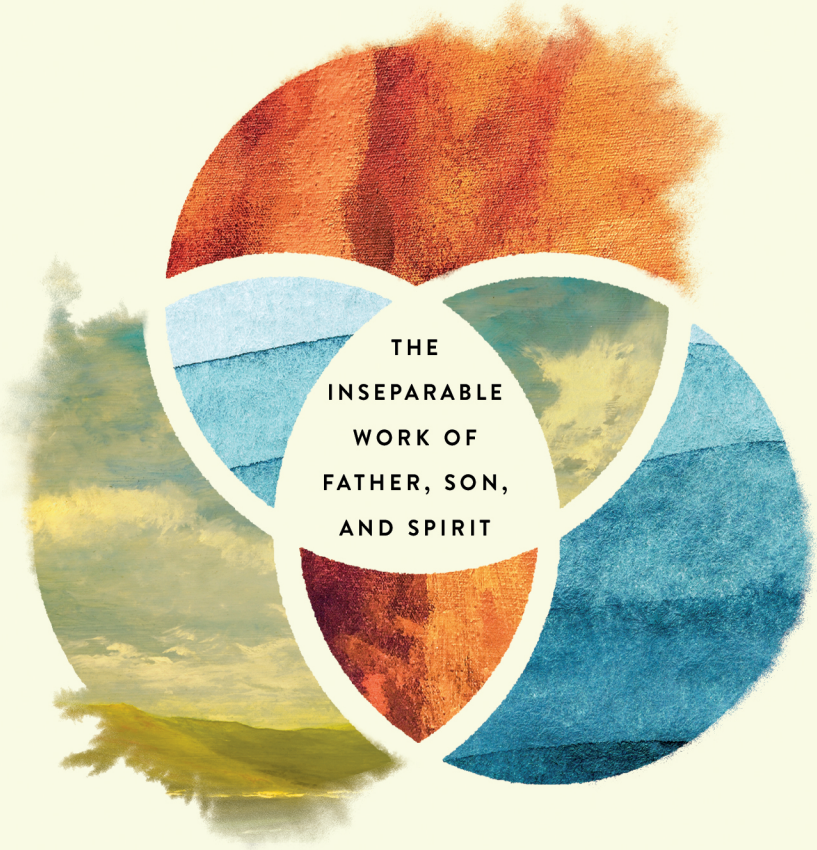
BEHOLDING *the* TRIUNE GOD



MATTHEW Y. EMERSON
and BRANDON D. SMITH

"If the twentieth century witnessed a 'revival' of interest in the doctrine of the Trinity among dogmatic theologians, the past decade or so has seen a similar renewal among evangelical Christians, but one more explicitly committed to retrieving the doctrine in its creedal and orthodox perspective. This is the book we have been waiting for—an accessible, historically informed, and biblically rooted account of the triune God's indivisible activity in creation, providence, and salvation history. The book provides simple (but not simplistic) definitions of many complex terms and traces their application through the various activities of the Holy Trinity. I am often asked by students and others for a good introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity. This book will now give me a ready answer to that pressing question."

R. Lucas Stamps, Professor of Christian Theology, Anderson University; coeditor, *Baptists and the Christian Tradition* and *The Theology of T. F. Torrance: An Evangelical Evaluation*

"The Trinity is not just one Christian doctrine among many. Rather, God the Trinity is the source of all Christian doctrine and delight. Emerson and Smith capture how understanding God's essence and action should lead all Christians into deeper fellowship with the one triune God—Father, Son, and Spirit."

J. T. English, Lead Pastor, Storyline Church, Arvada, Colorado; Associate Professor of Christian Theology, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Deep Discipleship*; coauthor, *You Are a Theologian*

"Unpacking texts and demystifying terms, the authors enrich our understanding through the church's historic witnesses to the doctrine of the Trinity, teaching us through the voices of the church fathers, Reformers, Puritans, and Baptists. Drawing equally from the Old and New Testaments, Emerson and Smith offer a resource as much for the college or seminary student diving deeply into complex questions about the life of God as for the pastor instructing and inspiring congregants with a beautiful vision of the triune life and a desire to be enfolded into that life. Lay audiences will also find this book accessible and eminently rewarding."

Stefana Dan Laing, Associate Professor of Divinity, Beeson Divinity School; author, *Retrieving History: Memory and Identity Formation in the Early Church*

"Two trustworthy theologians team up on a project to explain why it's never enough to say that the persons of the Trinity team up on projects. There is a much deeper unity to the work of the triune God, and this short, readable book directs our attention to it."

Fred Sanders, Professor of Theology, Torrey Honors College, Biola University; author, *The Deep Things of God*

"The doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity is part of the deposit of the church's ancient faith. Sadly, much of contemporary evangelical thought and preaching is drifting away from this historic doctrine, unflinchingly affirmed by the theologians of the Reformation, and substituting the church's Trinitarian monotheism with a functional tritheism. The recent evangelical retrieval of this doctrine, while salutary, has not yet trickled down to the ordinary understanding of the faith. Emerson and Smith are proposing to meet that need and present inseparable operations in a way that is accessible and clearly biblical. One could not wish for a better team of Trinitarian theologians to undertake such an essential task."

Adonis Vidu, Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Theology, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary; author, *The Same God Who Works All Things*

"Emerson and Smith describe the unity and distinction inherent in the Trinity as it unfolds across the canon of Scripture and as it develops historically by drawing from the work of the church fathers and resulting creeds. Emerson and Smith's framework reinforces the importance of a Trinitarian hermeneutic for understanding the missional authority of the triune God. This is an important book, and I am grateful for their contribution."

Cas Monaco, Vice President of Missiology and Gospel Engagement, FamilyLife

"Emerson and Smith have written a timely and helpful book for teachers, students, and church members. Though they address technical issues—Trinity, inseparable operations, appropriations, processions and missions, prosopological exegesis—they do so in an accessible manner. This book makes clear the importance of maintaining the doctrine of inseparable operations in order to maintain the biblical and historically orthodox confession of the Trinity."

Richard C. Barcellos, Pastor, Grace Reformed Baptist Church, Palmdale, California; Associate Professor of Exegetical Theology, International Reformed Baptist Seminary; author, *Trinity and Creation: A Scriptural and Confessional Account*

"Emerson and Smith provide a powerful reminder of why it is vital that we think in terms of the triune God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—acting in history. This book offers fresh eyes to see how all three persons of the Trinity act as one and offers hope for everything that our triune God wants to do in us and in the world."

Beth Stovell, Professor of Old Testament and Chair of General Theological Studies, Ambrose Seminary

Beholding the Triune God

The Inseparable Work of Father, Son, and Spirit

Matthew Y. Emerson and
Brandon D. Smith

CROSSWAY®
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Beholding the Triune God: The Inseparable Work of Father, Son, and Spirit

Published by Crossway
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

Cover design: Faceout Studio, Spencer Fuller

First printing 2024

Printed in the United States of America

Trade paperback ISBN: 978-1-4335-7794-9
ePub ISBN: 978-1-4335-7797-0
PDF ISBN: 978-1-4335-7795-6

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Emerson, Matthew Y., 1984– author. | Smith, Brandon D., author.
Title: Beholding the triune God : the inseparable work of Father, Son, and Spirit / Matthew Y. Emerson and Brandon D. Smith.
Description: Wheaton, Illinois : Crossway, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index.
Identifiers: LCCN 2023040568 (print) | LCCN 2023040569 (ebook) | ISBN 9781433577949 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9781433577956 (pdf) | ISBN 9781433577970 (epub)
Subjects: LCSH: Trinity. | God—Fatherhood. | Son of God. | Holy Spirit.
Classification: LCC BT111.3 .E438 2024 (print) | LCC BT111.3 (ebook) | DDC 231/.044—dc23/eng/20240220
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040568
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2023040569

Crossway is a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

VP 33 32 31 30 29 28 27 26 25 24
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To our wives, Alicia and Christa, who daily help us behold the triune God

Contents

Introduction

Indivisible and Undivided

IMAGINE THAT YOU'RE TRYING to describe what God did on the cross. What do you say? Here's how we've heard it described (including, at times, by ourselves!):

- The Father poured out his wrath on the Son.
- The Father turned his face away.
- The Father abandoned his Son.
- The Son felt the pangs of hell because he was separated from the Father on the cross.

Notice that in describing the cross this way, we are saying that there are two primary actors, two distinct individuals, the Father and the Son, the first two persons of the Godhead, and that each is doing something different at the crucifixion. For now, notice also that the third person of God, the Spirit, is never mentioned in these statements.

Let's use a different example. You're asked to describe God's providence. What do you say? Here's how we've heard it described (again, at times, by ourselves!):

- The Father chose this path for me because he cares for me.
- When we talk about election, we're talking about the plan of God the Father.
- We have a good Father who has planned all things to work together for our good.

Notice that in describing providence this way, we're attributing God's "plan" specifically to God the Father, and sometimes it sounds as if it's *only* God the Father who plans out providence.

One last example will suffice. Imagine that you're told to describe how a Christian receives and uses spiritual gifts. What do you say?

- The Spirit gave me the gift of [X, Y, or Z].
- I can [use gift X, Y, or Z] because the Spirit empowers me.
- I'm gifted at [X, Y, or Z] because the Spirit chose to make me that way.

Are the Father and the Son involved in the spiritual gifts? Or just the Spirit?

In each of these examples, and even in the way we've asked the follow-up questions, what we're trying to help you see is that we often think about God's acts as *divisible between the persons* and *distributed according to their roles*. So in these scenarios, sometimes the actor is primarily the Father, as in the examples about

providence; sometimes the actor is the Son, as in the examples about the crucifixion; and sometimes the actor is the Spirit, as in the examples about the spiritual gifts.

Let's return to the examples related to the crucifixion. A question we often ask our students when talking about this subject, and after we've described the crucifixion in the ways we gave above, is, "What was the Spirit doing while the Father was forsaking the Son?" Was the Spirit just watching from the sidelines? Was he taking a break from his divine duties? Are the Son and the Spirit also wrathful toward sin? Returning next to providence, do the Son and the Spirit sit on the bench while the Father governs his creation? And with respect to the spiritual gifts, do the Father and the Son renounce their authority and hand it over to the Spirit to let him distribute gifts to whom he wills?

These questions, we hope, help us see that the way we talk about God's acts often divides the persons of God in a way that is contrary to our confession that God is one God in three persons. If only one divine person, or in some cases two of the three, is acting on any given occasion, how is that consistent with the Christian confession of one God, or with its roots in Jewish monotheism? Aren't there now three Gods, each of whom acts in different ways in different times? Or is there one God who is sometimes Father, sometimes Son, and sometimes Spirit? The former example is the heresy called "tritheism," while the latter is called "modalism." These are ancient false teachings that the church combatted through articulating what we know as the doctrine of the Trinity. And in order to combat them, we need to recover what the early church referred to as

the doctrine of *inseparable operations*.[1] As we will see, the triune God's work in the world enables us to behold his power and goodness.

Beholding the Triune God through His Inseparable Operations

The triune God has graciously revealed himself to us. Historically and on biblical grounds, Christians have held two affirmations about who and what God is—God is one God, and he exists as three persons. This identification of God as triune stands at the heart of the Christian faith, along with the confession that the second person of the Trinity, the Son, took on a human nature without ceasing to be God. As fully human and fully God, Jesus Christ lived a perfectly righteous human life, died a penal, sacrificial, atoning death for sinners on the cross, proclaimed victory over death during his descent to the dead, and rose from the dead bodily on the third day. All of this was according to the Scriptures (1 Cor. 15:1–4) and in order to fulfill the promise that God made to Adam and Eve, that through the seed of woman he would crush the enemy's head and thereby reconcile himself to his image bearers and restore creation (Gen. 3:15).

But we would be mistaken if we took the Son's incarnation and subsequent saving actions as evidence that only *he* is acting in the

1 Athanasius of Alexandria offers one of the earliest accounts of a full-blown doctrine of inseparable operations. See *Epistles to Serapion* 1.1.2–3 and Lewis Ayres's discussion in *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004), 214. In terms of modern works expounding a helpful biblical, theological, and historical doctrine of inseparable operations, nothing currently on offer compares to Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

act of redemption. On the contrary, it is the *one God*—Father, Son, and Spirit—who acts in the whole history of salvation, including in the incarnation. Likewise, we should remember that it is this same *one God*—Father, Son, and Spirit—who "in the beginning created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1), who called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldeans, who spoke to Moses in the burning bush, who brought Israel out of Egypt, who revealed himself to Moses and gave the Torah on Mount Sinai, who led Israel through the wilderness, who scattered Israel's enemies before her as she entered the promised land, who raised up judges and kings for Israel, who judged Israel and sent her into exile through the same nations that deserve and will receive his judgment, and who, to return to where we started, brought salvation to Israel and the nations in the person of the incarnate Son, Jesus Christ. It is this same *one God*—Father, Son, and Spirit—who calls his church together and feeds them with word and sacrament, who governs the world and brings rain on the just and the unjust, and who will, on the last day, remake what he has made and dwell with his people forever in the new heavens and new earth. In sum, the fundamental confession of God's people—"Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*" (Deut. 6:4)— is still true even after the sending of the Son and the Spirit.

In articulating the acts of God this way, we are again emphasizing the *unity* of their action. We want to hammer this concept home at the beginning because it is one of the two major emphases of this book, and also because so much of our talk about God in contemporary evangelicalism actually cuts against God's unity, especially as it pertains to what he does. Our songs and hymns and spiritual songs, our devotional readings, our prayers, and our sermons often isolate one of the persons of God from among the other two and

speak of that one person as if he is the only one carrying out a particular act (or possessing a particular attribute). The problem with this approach, where God's acts can be divvied up among the persons, is that it defies the logic of the Bible, Christian history, and systematic theology. The Bible speaks again and again of *God* acting. Systematic theology insists that for God to truly be *one*, his acts must be one, carried out by the one God who is Father, Son, and Spirit. And Christian history has taught throughout the last two millennia that the external works of God are indivisible.

Put simply: the doctrine of *inseparable operations* teaches that you cannot separate the acts of God between the persons of God. Every act of God is a singular act of Father, Son, and Spirit. So we can't say that the Father alone creates or governs or pours out his sole wrath on Jesus at the cross. We can't say that the Son alone saves us from our sins. We can't say that the Spirit alone guides or comforts or gifts believers. Why? Because they are all acts of God. Thus, every act of God is the act of the one God—Father, Son, and Spirit, singular not only in purpose or agreement, but also in essence and every divine attribute. As Gregory of Nyssa explained:

> Whatever your thought suggests to you as the Father's mode of being . . . you will think also of the Son, and likewise of the Spirit. For the principle of the uncreated and of the incomprehensible is one and the same, whether in regard to the Father or the Son or the Spirit. For one is not more incomprehensible and uncreated and another less so.[2]

2 *Letter 38* 3e–3f. English translation from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd Series, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Blomfield Jackson (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature, 1895).

Put simply, Father, Son, and Spirit are each God but are not each other. To speak of any person is to speak of God, and to speak of God is to speak of three persons. It is one of the two main burdens of this book to demonstrate this claim from Scripture, theological reason, and Christian tradition.

Preserving the Properties of Each Person

The other burden of this book is to show that every act of God is the work of the *triune God*—Father, Son, and Spirit. That is, even while we emphasize the unity of God's being and therefore of God's acts, we also must insist that God is one precisely in the fact that he is three persons, and therefore that he acts as the one God who exists in three persons. In other words, it is Father, Son, and Spirit who act in every act of God, even if none of them act in isolation from each other. How can this be the case? How can we affirm that God's acts are *one*, via the doctrine of inseparable operations, but also affirm that his acts are carried out by the *three* persons? Further, how does the doctrine of inseparable operations square with the kind of language that we see in Scripture, such as the Spirit distributing spiritual gifts, or the incarnate Son saying, "Not as I will, but as you will" (Matt. 26:39)?

Regarding the former example, the church historically has relied on the doctrine of *appropriations*. That is, it is biblically sound and theologically faithful to appropriate, or attribute, particular acts of God to one of the persons of God. When we do so, we are not saying that it is only that one person who carries out that act, but we are saying that the act is uniquely associated with the mission of that one person. So, for instance, yes, it is only the Son who becomes incarnate. In this sense, the

act of redemption, specifically through the incarnate Son's penal substitutionary death, is appropriated to the Son. Jesus saves! But it would be a mistake to say that because only the Son becomes incarnate, *only* the Son saves. Instead, we should say that the one act of salvation is carried out by the one God—Father, Son, and Spirit—in a way that reveals the unique personal properties of each. The Father sends the Son, the Son is sent by the Father, and the Spirit is the agent through whom the Father sends the Son. It is the Father who sends the Son to the virgin's womb, the Son who takes on human flesh in the virgin's womb, and the Spirit who causes the virgin to miraculously conceive the incarnate Son.

Order in the Trinity

Another more technical way to say this is that the divine missions are appropriated to each person according to their divine procession. To understand what this sentence means, we need to break down the vocabulary a bit.

- *Divine Simplicity*. This phrase asserts the absolute unity of the Trinity. Father, Son, and Spirit are not "parts" of God as though they each make up one-third of God's nature or essence, for the triune God is not a created being that was put together by a greater creator, but rather is eternally the one God in three persons. All of God's attributes are shared equally and fully by each person of the Trinity, which means that Father, Son, and Spirit equally *are* loving, just, powerful, authoritative, and so on. They do not sit around a divine boardroom table and discuss their

"plans" or divvy up their divinity, but are rather always united in will, purpose, action, and essence.

- *Divine Processions*. This phrase refers to how God is one God in three persons from eternity. God is not divided into three persons through differences in actions or attributes or deserved adoration, but only through what are called the "eternal relations of origin." These relations refer to how each person of God subsists in the divine essence, which they equally share and together are. The Father is eternally unbegotten; that is, he does not receive the divine essence from one of the other persons. The Son is eternally begotten of the Father; that is, the Son eternally (without beginning or end) receives the divine essence from the Father; and the Spirit is eternally spirated ("breathed"); that is, the Spirit eternally receives the divine essence from the Father and the Son. Again, this generation and spiration is *eternal*, so whatever it means for the Son to be "begotten" and the Spirit to be "breathed," it's not an event that happened in time, and the persons are therefore not created.

- *Eternal Relations of Origin and* Taxis. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinguished from one another eternally via relations to one another. Further, there is a *taxis* ("order") to the eternal relations of origin. The eternal relations of origin, wherein the Father is, we could say, the fount of divinity who begets the Son and who with the Son spirates the Spirit, pattern the order of God's acts. Every act of God, because of who God is as Father, Son,

and Spirit, is from the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit. And this from-through-by language does not indicate a hierarchy, but rather a unified order.

- *Divine Missions*. This phrase refers to the external works of God and their attribution to particular divine persons in the economy of salvation. The divine missions are revelations and extensions of the divine processions, the manifestation of divine persons in creation. This term, then, relates particularly to the Son, who is begotten by the Father in all eternity, being sent by the Father in the incarnation, and to the Holy Spirit, who eternally proceeds from the Father and the Son, being sent by the Father and the Son at Pentecost.

- *Appropriation*. This term refers to our ability to assign one act or attribute of God to a particular divine person while recognizing that the act or attribute to which we're referring actually belongs equally to all three at once because they are the one God.

We hope that these terms will become clearer as they are put to use in the following chapters. However, the doctrine of creation can serve as an example to start.

The Bible begins with these words: "In the beginning, *God* created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). We often assume that "God" here refers to the Father. But according to the doctrine of inseparable operations (and Scripture), this action is carried out by the one God, not just one of the persons of God. At the same

time, we want to recognize that God always acts *as triune*, because that is who he is. So we also want to say that each person of God creates. We can affirm both of these via the doctrine of appropriations and via reference to *taxis*, or "order." A common way to put it throughout church history is that the acts of God are *from* the Father, *through* the Son, and *by* the Spirit. So for the doctrine of creation, we can say that creation is from the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit. Indeed, the Bible describes creation in this way. For example, Genesis 1:1–3 teaches that God spoke the world into existence with the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters. In a clear recapitulation of this creation narrative, John's Gospel asserts: "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. In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (John 1:1–4). Later, Jesus says that it is the Spirit who gives life (John 6:63). Who gives life? The Father? Yes. The Son? Yes. The Spirit? Yes. Paul says similarly, "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 Cor. 8:6).

To be specific, then, creation is from the Father in the sense that the Father speaks creation into existence. Creation is through the Son in the sense that the Son is the Father's Word, the word that he speaks in order to bring creation into existence. And creation is by the Spirit in the sense that it is the Spirit who actively carries out and brings to pass the Father's Word that he speaks on each day. Creation is from the Father, through the Son, and by the Spirit. So we see here that even when we say "God created

all things," the Bible pressures us to recognize that we cannot say "God" without the Trinity.

We could multiply examples of this kind of talk, but we'll save it for the subsequent chapters, each of which discusses how God acts in a particular event in creation and redemption. For now, what's important is for us to recognize that any time we speak of an act of God, we have to maintain both his *oneness* and his *threeness* when we do so.

Where We're Going

In the following chapters, we aim to bring the idea of inseparable operations to bear on the most important doctrines of Scripture. While these concepts can be difficult to understand, they are crucial to understanding how our triune God has revealed himself to us. And after you read this book, our hope and prayer is that you will see the beauty of the Apostles' Creed like millennia of Christians before us:

I believe in God, the Father almighty,
creator of heaven and earth.
I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,
who was conceived by the Spirit
and born of the virgin Mary.
He suffered under Pontius Pilate,
was crucified, died, and was buried;
he descended to hell.
The third day he rose again from the dead.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty.
From there he will come to judge the living and the dead.

I believe in the Holy Spirit,
the holy catholic [or, universal] church,
the communion of saints,
the forgiveness of sins,
the resurrection of the body,
and the life everlasting. Amen.

1

Revelation

HUMANITY HAS LOVED the pursuit of knowledge since the very beginning, when Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden fruit under the false impression that they should (or even could) know the things God knows (Gen. 3:5). What Adam and Eve should have accepted—and what humanity continues to need to accept—is, "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). Adam and Eve thought that God was holding out on them. They were duped by Satan into thinking that what God had already revealed wasn't enough and that they needed to get behind the curtain to find the good stuff. In this chapter, we hope to show that the triune God's self-revelation is not exhaustive but is completely sufficient for us and our salvation (now, that's the good stuff).

The doctrine of revelation seems simple enough: it describes the way in which God reveals knowledge of himself and his salvific will to humankind. This definition is true enough but, as we will

see, the biblical description of God's revelation of himself is much richer and more beautiful than this. Scott Swain has helpfully argued that one way to think about God's revelation or self-communication is to situate it within a "trinitarian, covenantal context."[1] Put another way, the triune God's communication of himself reveals both something about his perfect being and life (*ad intra*) and something about his redemptive work in creation for us and our salvation (*ad extra*).

Trinitarian Unity in Revelation

The triune God's self-communication is entirely gratuitous—he didn't have to do it—and yet entirely consistent with his character—he created us to know and be in communion with him. Athanasius of Alexandria makes this argument beautifully in *On the Incarnation*. As Athanasius sees it, Adam and Eve's sin creates a "divine dilemma." On the one hand, God created mankind to know him. On the other hand, God promised to punish them if they sinned. And when they sinned, they turned their eyes away from God and toward idolatry of creation, making it impossible for them to save themselves. Athanasius then asks the important question: in light of their sin and its consequences, what was God to do?

> So the Word of God came himself, in order that he being the image of the Father (cf. Col. 1.15), the human being "in the image" might be recreated. It could not, again, have been done in any other way, without death and corruption being utterly

1 Scott R. Swain, *Trinity, Reading, and Revelation: A Theological Introduction to the Bible and Its Interpretation* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), 7.

> destroyed. So he rightly took a mortal body, that in it death might henceforth be destroyed utterly and human beings be renewed again according to the image. For this purpose, then, there was need of none other than the Image of the Father.[2]

God is not a liar and so there would be consequences for their sin. That much seems obvious. But did God *have to* redeem Adam and Eve? Certainly not, insofar as God is lacking nothing (Acts 17:25). However, again, God is not a liar—he created humanity so that they would know him. So, then, it is entirely consistent with his character to redeem their knowledge and turn their eyes back toward him. Satan and sin would not have the last word. No, God himself would enter into his creation through the incarnation of the Son, the climax of revelation in biblical (and human) history. In the mission of the Son, God himself would stand in front of humanity to lift their eyes off of created things and back to beholding their Creator, restoring his image bearers to relationship with him through the incarnation of the Son, the true image (Heb. 1:3). The biblical storyline gestures toward this end both before and after Adam and Eve sinned.

God communicated and was present with his creation from the start. After all, the singular act of creation is a triune act: God spoke all things into existence by his Word and by the presence of his Spirit (Gen. 1:1–3ff.; Job 33:4; John 1:1–5). God spoke when he commanded Adam and Eve to multiply and to steward creation (Gen. 1:26–28). He spoke again when he called out to them after they sinned, once again commanding them to multiply and to

2 *On the Incarnation*, 13. English translation from Saint Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, trans. John Behr (Yonkers, NY: SVS Press, 2011), 63.

steward creation even through the frustration of sin's consequences (Gen. 3:9–20). God showed immediately that he was still with his people, revealing who he is and keeping his covenantal promise to know and be known by his people.[3]

As the biblical storyline unfolds, this covenantal self-communication continues. The book of Exodus, for example, is one long story of God's presence among his people, revealing who he is and who he commands them to be. Starting with Moses's encounter with the burning bush (Ex. 3) and continuing through the Israelites' wandering in the wilderness, God's presence is evident, but he is veiled by smoke, clouds, or fire. The famous story of the golden calf—in which the Israelites create an idol to worship as a response to impatience for God's revelation (Ex. 32:1–6)—reminds us that, much like Adam and Eve, God's people wanted more. And if we're thinking along the lines of Athanasius above, we may also wonder why God desires to be known and yet veils himself. There are at least two reasons worth considering.

First, we are sinners. Sin hampers our ability to know God and to behold his glory because we, like Adam and Eve and the Israelites, "suppress the truth" (Rom. 1:18). We often don't even *want to* know and behold the Lord. Second, and more foundationally, we are creatures. Even before they sinned, we should remember that Adam and Eve were still finite creatures. They still relied on their Creator for sustenance and wisdom. The Creator/creature

3 Though scholars have spilt much ink debating what constitutes a covenant and whether there is such a thing as either an eternal "covenant of redemption" between the divine persons or an Adamic or Edenic covenant between God and humanity, we are using the term more broadly to describe the self-giving binding of God to his people and his people to him. We rely again on Swain, *Trinity, Reading, and Revelation*, 18–19, for this general definition.

distinction exists because the triune God is eternal and infinite; even sinless humans were (and will be in the new creation) temporal and finite. The church has classically called this God's "incomprehensibility" or "divine otherness": that God can be known as he has revealed himself, but nonetheless he is utterly distinct from us as the eternal sovereign God of the universe. As such, he cannot be fully comprehended as though he is a subject in a textbook or petri dish that can be fully examined and explained. But, again, this doesn't mean that he is *unknowable*.

Consider a well-known scene from Exodus 33. After several trips to speak with the Lord, Moses finally pleads for an unveiled glimpse at his glory:

> Moses said, "Please show me your glory." And [the Lord] said, "I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But," he said, "you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live." And the LORD said, "Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand on the rock, and while my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen." (33:18–23)

Notice here that God doesn't reject Moses's request. He wants to be known—he has proven this consistently already. He has told his people his name, articulates his will and his response to his people's obedience/disobedience, and even allows Moses a tangible

glimpse of him passing by the cleft. At the same time, Moses cannot look directly at God's "face" and live. Because God is spirit and noncorporeal (John 4:24; 1 Tim. 1:17), "face" here likely means something like an ability to fully comprehend one's identity or even essence, not a literal physical face with eyes, nose, and mouth.

As the biblical storyline continues, God's veiled presence continues in the form of the tabernacle and the temple, and through various other mediatory modes like speaking through angels and prophets. This veiled presence is the paradox we must accept in the triune God's self-communication to his people. He wants to be known and makes himself known, albeit in a way that accommodates finite humanity. In the transition from the Old Testament to the New, the divine missions further bring God's promises to bear.

Trinitarian Distinction in Revelation

The one God of Israel is the triune God who communicates and covenants with his people. There was always a foreshadowing in the Hebrew Scriptures that this one God included the identities of a Father (Ex. 4:22; Isa. 63:16), a Son (Pss. 2:7–12; 110:1–3; Isa. 7:14), and a Holy Spirit (Neh. 9:20; Isa. 32:15; Joel 2:28–32).[4] The earliest Christians were good readers of Scripture, and when they encountered the person and work of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, they were pressured to see the one God of Israel as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:21–23; 22:43; John 1:1–3; 14:26–15:26; Acts 2:16–21).[5]

4 These references are obviously nowhere near comprehensive but are rather representative.

5 There are various ways to describe how the Old Testament's revelation of God relates to the doctrine of the Trinity. For a few helpful proposals, see C. Kavin Rowe, "Biblical

More specifically, *inseparable operations* is a category that helps us affirm that the one God of Israel who self-communicated and covenanted with his people in the Old Testament *just is* the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We mentioned at the outset of this chapter that the triune God's communication of himself reveals both something about his perfect being and life (*ad intra*) and something about his redemptive work in creation for us and our salvation (*ad extra*). Put another way, we know *who* God is in large part by what he *says* and *does*. We can now reflect on this statement in more detail as it relates to revelation.

As we explained at the beginning of this book, it's best to speak about the eternal triune life *ad intra* (or, "toward the inside") in terms of *eternal relations* and *processions*. While not using the terms explicitly, the Bible teaches these eternal relations by explaining how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit have lived in perfect relation to one another before the foundation of the world. Consider once again Genesis 1, where the Father speaks his Word by the presence of his Spirit—all three persons act inseparably in the act of creation, showing their eternal unity and distinction as the Creator. Or consider John 17, in which Jesus prays that his disciples will love one another just as he and the Father loved one another "before the foundation of the world" (v. 24). This is once again language about their eternal relations: they are the Father and the Son who have shared this bond of love since before time

---

Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11/3 (2002): 295–312; Fred Sanders, *The Triune God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2016), 209–37; Christopher R. Seitz, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2018); Heath A. Thomas, "Old Testament," in *The Trinity in the Canon: A Biblical, Theological, Historical, and Practical Proposal*, ed. Brandon D. Smith (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2023), 61–82.

began.[6] As Baptist theologian John Gill said, "Whatever distinguishes them cannot arise from, nor depend upon any works done by them in time, since their distinction is from eternity."[7] The Son eternally proceeds from the Father by generation; the Spirit eternally proceeds from the Father and Son by spiration ("breathing").

These eternal relations or processions are most clearly revealed *ad extra* ("toward the outside") in the divine *missions*: the sending of the Son (incarnation) and the Spirit (Pentecost). So when we talk about God's revelation—specifically his communication and covenant with his people—the divine missions are ultimately at the center. Why? Because these missions are the further unveiling of God's purposes to know and redeem his people that have already been mentioned in the Old Testament. They are not merely gesturing toward or beginning to unveil the mystery of the Trinity as though we're waiting for something else in the future; they are specific manifestations of the divine persons in creation for the sake of revelation. When Jesus said, "Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them" (Matt. 5:17) or, "Everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled" (Luke 24:44), we should recognize that

6 Pushing further, many have argued throughout church history that this bond of love or communion is the Holy Spirit, citing especially the Spirit's work as a comforter and unifier of God's people in Jesus's discourse in John 14–17 or Paul's reasoning in 1 Cor. 12–13 and Eph. 4:3–4, though our argument doesn't depend on affirming this. Augustine of Hippo's *On the Trinity* is most notable for introducing this idea to the church more broadly in, e.g., 5.3.12.

7 John Gill, *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity* (Paris, AR: Baptist Standard Bearer, 2007), 1.28.2.

the incarnation is an act of revelation. It would be fair to say that the incarnation is the climax of history, but we should be careful not to say that this is something *entirely* new—as we have seen, the whole biblical storyline leading up to this moment has portrayed God as present with his people, revealing who he is and what he commands of his people. The eternal Son who put on flesh was sent by the Father to reveal and further bring to bear his salvific love, and they sent the Holy Spirit to further reveal and bring to bear those salvific purposes (John 3:16; Eph. 3:3–14). Indeed, the Holy Spirit makes us "God's temple" (1 Cor. 3:16) and was sent so that the Father and the Son could dwell with us (John 14:23–26).

Scripture as God's Revelation

The content of revelation is God himself, and the one who enacts the revelation is that same God as an act of grace and mercy.[8] We see this throughout Scripture. Though we have already discussed the various ways God has revealed himself to his people and made himself present among them, a notable omission thus far has been God's revelation in Scripture. After all, Scripture has been the locus of authority for all of our claims thus far. But this point has been delayed because it depends on what we've said above.

Paul tells us, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16–17). How do we know that

8 John Webster, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 14.

God has revealed himself to us and intends to know us? By reading Scripture as people united with Christ and indwelled by the Holy Spirit. Scripture—God's final revelation to his people—sums up, describes, and brings forth all other revelatory acts beforehand. God's very words have always been a significant part of the life of God's people—from creation to communication to covenant—and the Scriptures were being written, taught, and shared to preserve his words. This is why prophets, priests, and kings were all bound by Scripture (Deut. 17:18–20; Neh. 8:1–3; Isa. 36:14), and why Peter defended the authority of both the Old Testament and Paul's letters even as the New Testament was being formed (2 Pet. 1:21; 3:16). Both Paul and Peter also affirm that the Scriptures were inspired by the Holy Spirit, who, as we mentioned above, was sent by the Father and the Son to bring God's promises to bear.

For most of Christian history, Scripture as God's revelation was always tied to the revelatory acts of God throughout human history, particularly the revelatory work of the Son (incarnation) and the Spirit (inspiration and illumination). We already saw above the way Athanasius articulates the relationship between revelation and the incarnation of the Son. Now, let's consider this quote by John Calvin regarding the relationship between revelation, Scripture, and the Holy Spirit:

> The testimony of the Spirit is more excellent than all reason. For as God alone is a fit witness of himself in his Word, so also the Word will not find acceptance in men's hearts before it is sealed by the inward testimony of the Spirit. The same Spirit, therefore, who has spoken through the mouths of the prophets

> must penetrate into our hearts to persuade us that they faithfully proclaimed what had been divinely commanded.[9]

Calvin reinforces what we said above: revelation ultimately has God as its content and originator. Therefore, whether we are speaking of Moses on the mountain or any one of us reading Scripture today, God's work is required for us to truly know him and be redeemed by him. The missions of the Son and the Spirit give us post–New Testament readers the ability to know God, gain wisdom from him, and live according to his ways (1 Cor. 2). *That same Word*, the Son, speaks to us through the Scriptures by *that same Spirit* who inspired those who wrote them. Our triune God wants to know us and be known by us—he's proven it since the moment he said, "Let there be . . ."

Ultimately, then, revelation has a Trinitarian shape. The incarnate Son is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature (Heb. 1:2), and the one in whom we see the Father (John 14:9–10). And it is the Spirit who testifies to the Son (John 15:26–27; 16:13–15; 2 Cor. 3:17–18). Through the Spirit's testimony, climactically through the incarnate Son and through the Scriptures which testify to him (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:46; 1 Pet. 1:10–12), we see the Son in whom we know the Father. The Trinitarian shape of revelation explains Trinitarian distinction in revelation. It is the Son who becomes incarnate by the agency of the Holy Spirit so that, in the Son, we can see the Father. It is the Spirit who testifies to the Son in the

9 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1.7.4.

incarnation and in inspiration because it is in seeing the Son that we see the Father.

Beholding the Triune God in Revelation

To behold is to see or observe. There is perhaps no clearer way to describe the way we behold our triune God than through his self-revelation. The other doctrines in this book flow from this one, for we would not be able to speak any further about God's being and actions without him first making himself known to us in creation and salvation.

There are times in any Christian's life when we feel like God is silent, that our prayers hit the ceiling and go no further. But God has told and shown us clearly that this is not the case. No, our triune God wants us to know him. He's gratuitously and lavishly given us everything we need for salvation, for a redemption of our knowledge of him, so that we might know, love, and follow him.