

The Whole Counsel of God
Study 2

**GOD AS ETERNALLY RELATED WITHIN HIMSELF:
THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY REVEALED IN CHRIST.**

(G. T. Tabert)

The study of the whole counsel of God must begin with the God who has purposed and planned his whole course of action. We can only understand God's counsel and ways in so far as we know him. To begin with God, where do we start? God is not an object that is there for the human mind to discover. We can only know him as he reveals himself, and his revelation is his act by his will. This means that we must start with God's revelation of himself.

Beginning with the full revelation of God in Christ

The revelation of God begins where the Bible begins. God first makes himself known as the creator, and all of our knowledge of him must begin here. Through creation God gives the elementary knowledge of himself that provides the foundation for all further revelation. Paul defines this foundational knowledge in Rom 1.20 as the knowledge of God's invisible attributes, i.e., his eternal power and divine nature. We should pause here and take in what is involved in this. God's attributes are invisible and define God in contrast to and in relation to creation. These attributes are his eternal power and divine nature. God is eternal, and this sets him in contrast to all creatures that have their existence in time. His is the power by which all things are created, and this defines his relationship with all. He is God by virtue of being the source of all creatures. The eternal power defines the divine nature. This definition of the divine nature must be kept in mind as we look at Jesus, the Son of God, and the Spirit. In the divide between the creator and the creature, they stand on the side of the creator. They share with the Father the divine attributes that define deity.

After mankind fell in sin, God entered the world to make himself known through his work of judging sin and working toward the redemption of the human race. In the OT we see God moving through history shaping its course and progressively revealing more of himself, but this revelation does not rise above the principle of revelation set in creation. In the OT God only reveals himself in his attributes by which he relates to the world in general and his people in particular. The attributes revealed in history are more personal than those seen through creation, for they characterize God in his personal relationship with people. Here we see that God is holy (apart from all), that he is sovereign in his dealings with mankind, that he loves and is jealous with the jealousy of love, that he judges and has wrath, that he is merciful and gracious, etc. The revelation of God through these attributes still leaves God as he exists in himself hidden. This changes in Jesus Christ. In Christ, God makes himself known within a divine relationship that he has apart from and prior to his relationship with creation. God is fully revealed.

When Jesus disclosed himself as the Son of God, he revealed God as his own Father. This is not, first of all, a revelation of God in relation to his creation. Jesus did not reveal God as the Father of mankind through creation or of the children of Israel as his people. God is the Father in relation to his only Son who was fully divine, and only in this divine relationship does God give eternal life by which we know the only true God and Jesus Christ whom he has sent (Jn 17.3). Now we have a revelation of a wholly new order. God is revealed as the Father in the person of his Son. This full revelation of God is not confined to something Jesus said or did; it is given in his very person.

An overview of the doctrine of the trinity

Before we embark on the detailed study of what the Bible teaches about the full revelation of God in Christ, we will give a general account of the doctrine this revelation yields. This way we can keep the doctrine before us as we explore the details of revelation.

In Christ, God is revealed in three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. The truth of God in three persons takes in several facts given in scripture.

First, the three are *equally divine*. The Father, Son and Spirit share the attributes that define deity—the eternal power and divine nature. Each of the three carries out the divine work of creation and redemption. Each one is creator and giver of life, and so the three are equally divine.

Second, the Father, Son and Spirit are *distinct and interrelated persons*. They each are revealed as being personal, having personal identity, intelligence and will. The personal pronouns, *I*, *you* and *he* are used of them in their relationship with each other. The uniqueness in the divine persons lies in the fact that they do not exist or have an identity independently of each other. They are interrelated in such a way that each person only has his deity and identity in his relationship with the others. The Father has his identity only as the Father of the Son and by the Spirit. The Son has his identity only as the Son of God and the Son who works by the Spirit. The Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son.

Third, the three are *one*. The Father, Son and Spirit are equal but not the same. They each have their distinct place in the divine relationship and carry out their own role in the divine work so that together they are one God and do the one work of God. To put it simply, all is from the Father through the Son by the Spirit.

The Father, Son and Spirit cover the entire relationship of God and his creation. In the Father we see God's character as wholly invisible, eternally unchanging, above all creation and as the absolute source of all. We can refer to this as the absolute transcendence of God. In the Son, God is from within himself related so that all that is absolute in the Father is communicated and revealed. We can call this the relatedness of God. In the Spirit, God receives all that is communicated to put it into effect within the creature. We can refer to this as the imminence of God.

Think of a relationship as consisting of three dynamic points. First, there is the source or absolute origin from which the relationship moves out. Second, there is the communication and mediation of all. The relationship is established here. Third, all that is given through the relationship must be received and put into effect. With us it works as follows: I begin with originating my action within my mind; then I move out of myself to communicate and impart; finally what I communicate or impart has to be received and put into effect. I am one person and can only establish a relationship with another party that exists outside of me and that is given to me. In building a relationship I have to move out from myself (the first point) through the other two points of the relationship. With God it is different. The relationship in which he exists as God is not external to him and given to him. It is fully in him. He is not one person (a single "I") who moves through the three points of a relationship. Rather, the full divine reality (not simply all of God's power but his full personal identity and presence) is at each point as a centre of the relationship. This means that in God we have three persons who are fully God, are related one to another and together carry out the full work of God.

There is nothing in all of creation that is like God in his triune nature, and that is why the human mind struggles with the concept. This truth is revealed and not thought up. In the very uniqueness of the triune nature of God, we see the wonder and beauty of the revelation of God in Christ. The crowning revelation of the Bible is stated in three words: God is love. This means more than the fact that God loves us. He is in his very being love, and this is only possible because he is a trinity of persons. If God were a solitary being, he would not exist in love eternally because love involves a relationship. He could only begin to love in his relationship with his creatures, but he could not be love. As triune, he lives eternally in a relationship of love and is love. The triune nature of God also establishes the truth of grace in the deepest way, for God holds his entire relationship with us and does everything from originating to carrying out and putting his salvation into effect in us. By faith we find ourselves standing within a web of divine relationships. The relationship is not worked out between God and us but between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and we have our stand within the operations of the divine persons in their relationship with each other. All is of grace and all is of God, and this is the basis of our faith and the inspiration and theme of our worship.

Our study of the full revelation of God

The Bible gives us two starting points for our knowledge of God. The first is creation, and from here we are led to the full revelation of God in Christ. The second is Christ in whom God is revealed at a wholly different level. The revelation of God in Christ came at the end of the history of revelation but it really presents God as he is before creation. Yes, the starting point for creation must be found in God as the trinity. Here we see God loving and setting his purpose before the foundation of the world, and only in light of this revelation can we see the whole counsel of God. This places the doctrine of the trinity at the head of all doctrines, and rightly so, for as we will see throughout the entire study it is the truth that lies under all other truths, just as God stands behind all he does.

The study of the doctrine of the trinity is not a matter of knowing God in his triune nature. The apostle John underscored this point when he wrote to the children, "I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth" (1Jn 2.21). We study this truth because we know it, and in the study the mind grasps and clarifies what faith knows to gain a mature comprehension of the truth in its full scope.

By faith we have the direct access to the full revelation of God, for through conversion we are brought into the workings of the triune God. God the Father is the absolute and unchanging reference point by which we see our sin and alienation from God and to whom we are reconciled. The Son provides the relationship of God to us in his person and work and through him we are related to God. The Spirit indwells us and make real and actual in us all that God is to us and what we are to God in Christ. As believers we relate to all three, the Father, Son and Spirit, as fully God in the perfect unity of the one God.

Standing by faith in the relational operations of the Godhead, we must come to understand God with our minds. This is where the teaching comes in. The teaching only opens up to the mind what faith lays hold of as the divine reality. But, here we face our challenge. The doctrine of the triune nature of God has proven to be very difficult for the human mind to grasp. The first need is to see the reality of the trinity in scripture. We have to see the facts of revelation, but once this is done the real difficulty emerges. The concept of the trinity goes against the way we naturally think with the result that the concept is usually either not understood at all or misunderstood. So we have the twofold need: to give the biblical evidence for the trinity and to clarify to the mind how the trinity is to be understood.

The principal difficulty that the mind has with the trinity is the logical problem. How can there be one God and three persons who are God? The heresies that deny the doctrine of the trinity arise out of an attempt to understand the revelation of God in Christ in a mathematical way (and the human mind is very stubborn when it comes to mathematics). They want to satisfy the superficial demand of logic that one cannot be three. By the way, this demand is rooted in the human mind and persists through all generations. The objection will be raised by all kinds of people, even those who are not intellectuals, contentious or theologically minded. There are three ways to resolve the logical solution in a simplistic but erroneous way. The first is tritheism, i.e., that there are three gods. The three divine persons are seen but not the one God. This is ruled out by the biblical declaration that God is one. Tritheism is not a serious theological position, but it represents the way many people naively conceive of the deity of the Father, Son and Spirit. Those who deny the doctrine of the trinity insist that the idea of the trinity is that of tritheism. The second error, and this is the major strain of heresy, affirms that there is only one God by denying the deity of the Son and of the Spirit. This denial focuses its attack on the deity of Christ. The answer to this heresy must be given by proving the full deity of Christ. A third strain of heresy affirms the full deity of Christ but denies that the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct persons. The oneness of God and the deity of Christ are affirmed but the trinity of persons is denied. The answer to this heresy is found in the fact that in revelation the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct persons who relate to each other. To hold the truth against these errors, we must be committed to the OT revelation that God is one, we must establish the biblical doctrine of the full deity of Christ and of the Spirit and we must see how the Bible presents three distinct persons as one in deity and coexisting in one God.

We have to give the biblical answers to the questions raised and challenges presented against the doctrine of the trinity, but we must not let the controversy press us into a corner. The doctrine of the trinity is not

first of all a doctrine of orthodoxy to be defended against heresy. It is the truth of God, the interest of faith and the spiritual food for the believer. We will first of all study what the Bible teaches to learn how the revelation of God in Christ is opened up to us. But, in following the path of revelation, we bring the human questions with us, and rightly so, for we are to come with our questions and difficulties to God's revelation to get answers and be built up in our faith. While we explore the truth as presented in the Bible rather than letting the controversy govern our study, we must keep our eye open for those biblical facts and teachings that will provide the answers to the questions raised.

Besides the logical difficulties, there is an objection to the doctrine of the trinity that is taken from church history. The doctrinal storm around the deity of Christ grew to engage the whole Roman Empire in the 4th Century and so found a place in world history. This has often made people see the controversy and the whole doctrine as arising at the time of Constantine when Christianity rose to the status of a state religion. Those who object to the doctrine of the trinity appeal to an earlier and better time when the church was persecuted and had a purer and simpler faith. The historical vision here is skewed. Actually, Jesus raised the controversial question, and the affirmation of his deity quickly developed into the greatest spiritual storm to burst on the stage of world history—the crucifixion. Here the Romans and the factions of Judaism were unified against Jesus. From Jesus, the gospel went out to the whole world, and wherever it went the storm was stirred up. Let us begin by following this path from the place where Jesus asked the great controversial question.

What is involved in the subject of the trinity? (Matt 16.13-20)

The doctrine of the trinity is the church's answer to the question that Jesus put to his disciples: "But who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16.15). Jesus did not leave the question about his identity as an issue by itself. He made the correct answer the deciding issue between his disciples and the world and opened up the great issues involved in it. We will study the doctrine of the trinity within the setting Jesus provided for it.

Jesus had completed his ministry in Galilee, and the time had come for him to go to Jerusalem to be crucified. The crucifixion would close his career on earth and open up the work for which the apostles were called and trained. To prepare them for the momentous change, Jesus took them away into a retreat north of Galilee. Away from his field of labour, he opened up to his disciples the great changes that lay ahead of them. He started with the question, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" (Matt 16.13). All turned on the answer to this question.

The controversial question that Jesus pressed on people

Jesus did not ask the people this question, but as the disciples' reply in v 14 shows the people did give their answers. Jesus pressed the question on the people's consciousness by his whole ministry. He was a marvel. He worked wonders and spoke with authority and not as the scribes (7.29). He forgave sins, which was known to be a divine act, and then with a stunning miracle proved that he had the authority to do so on earth (9.1-8). He declared himself to be Lord of the Sabbath (12.9). The way he acted with the divine prerogative brought against him the charge of blasphemy and provoked the leaders to engage in a death plot (9.3; 12.14). Yet, he was not easy to refute. His miracles were obviously the workings of God. What were the religious people to make of him? Does God work through a man who seems to be working as God? He did not simply have power over the physical creation, but he also had authority over demons, and no OT prophet had such authority. The leaders opted for a short and violent solution. His superhuman authority was attributed to Beelzebub, the ruler of demons (12.24). In Satan they thought they found the solution to the riddle: the powerful angel who ruled the demons and was in revolt against God—that would explain the spiritual authority Jesus had over demons and the blasphemy of which they accused him. Jesus did not ask them the question, "Who do you say the Son of Man is?" But, he forced them to answer it, and he pointed out that their answer was eternally fatal (12.25-32).

The crowds were made up of religious people who shared the theological views of the leaders, but they were more open. While the leaders uttered charges of blasphemy under their breath and were blinded to the obvious meaning of the miracle by their theological outrage, the crowds stood in awe at the show of divine power and glorified God. They believed what they saw but did not process what they heard (9.8). They

too were answering the question about who Jesus was. The fact that Jesus could ask the disciples about the popular opinion shows that the crowds answered the question in the kind of gossipy way that excited people share their opinions. They had a high opinion of him. He was not just a normal prophet, but one who had returned from the other side and so brought with him a power and authority that exceeded what could be expected of a mere citizen of earth (16.14). But, while they saw in Jesus something bigger than life, they saw in him no more than a human being. The theology they shared with the religious leaders ruled that out.

Jesus turned to the disciples and asked, “But who do you say that I am?” (16.15). Peter as the spokesman for the twelve gave the answer, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16.16). This confession set the disciples off from the crowds.

The nature of revelation: it supplies the data and presses the question on us

To understand the full force of Jesus’ question, we have to look closely at the title he used for himself: *the Son of Man*. This was an ambivalent term. In the broadest sense, it was the equivalent to our term, human being. Here all agreed; he was a human being (Ps 8.4). The term son of man could also be taken as the title, the Son of Man, which refers to the one who receives the universal reign from God in heaven (Dan 7.13). Is he just another man? What kind of man is he? Jesus’ ambivalence was deliberate. He presented himself to the people by his works. He was a real man, but he said things that did not fit into the limits of what it means to be human. He definitely stepped into God’s sphere. He made people decide.

Jesus put the question as to who he is in such a way that it did not suggest the answer. This points out a feature of his ministry. He presented himself to the people and arrested their attention, but he did not make the decision for them. They had to answer the question about his identity. Yes, Jesus presented enough evidence to show that he was the divine Son of God. The Jewish leaders listened to his words and weighed them rightly but could not accept what they heard because it went against what they saw—he was a man; and so they became blind to the miracle that happened before their very eyes. The crowds believed what they saw, but they were so dazzled that they did not really hear what he was saying. They too assumed that as a man he just would not be divine. Jesus never sorted out for the people the confusion in their minds. He went on until they had to make up their minds and talk about it.

Going public with the question

In Caesarea Philippi Jesus raised the question in private, but he did not leave it as a matter of private discussion. He had to go public with the question and engage the whole world with it. After Peter gave his confession, Jesus disclosed to the disciples his destiny as the Christ, the Son of the living God—he had to “go to Jerusalem, suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day” (Matt 16.21). From the retreat, Jesus made his way down to Jerusalem. The short period in Jerusalem was marked by growing conflict between Jesus and the religious leaders. They tried to trap him, but Jesus came off victorious. On the basis of this triumph over their schemes, Jesus put his final question to them: “What do you think about the Christ, whose son is he?” (Matt 22.42). Then he presented a problem of interpretation to these experts of the law to face them with a conundrum they never thought of—the Messiah is David’s Lord and so he is God’s Son. They retreated in silence, but not in consent. The next time Jesus stood before his foes, he was under arrest. The question he posed was not forgotten. The high priest put him under oath to tell the court if he was the Christ the Son of God. In the boldest terms he confessed to be the Son of God who will be seated at God’s right hand (Matt 26.63-66). In this claim, they found the only charge against him. He suffered at the hands of the religious leaders for one thing only—his witness that he was the Son of God to be manifested in equality with God. When he was hoisted up on the cross, the Jews threw the claim back at him asking him to prove his claim from the cross (Matt 27.39-40). Ironically, he did prove it from the cross, not by coming down from it (as the Jews suggested) but going through with it to rise from the dead (which was their greatest fear, Matt 27.62-66). The risen Christ commissioned his disciples to go public with the witness to his full deity. He triumphed decisively over the Jews, and the good news spread to the Gentiles, but the question continued to be pressed in new ways on people’s minds.

The question persists in the church: the ongoing struggle over the real Jesus

The first churches were formed under the impact of the gospel by the power of the Holy Spirit, and they were united in the confession of faith; but it did not take long for the question as to who Jesus really is to agitate among the early Christians. Paul complained to the Corinthians, “If one comes and preaches another Jesus whom we have not preached...you bear this beautifully” (2Cor 11.4). False apostles who were presenting themselves as apostles of Christ were presenting a different Jesus (2Cor 11.13). There is no indication that the false Jesus was “unorthodox” as such. It seems that it was simply a Jesus of a different character, suited to the flesh—that’s all. But, any change was fatal. By the close of the apostolic age, the problem had grown to full proportions. People were leaving the apostolic fellowship (1Jn 1.3) to form their own groups around the explicit denial of the Son and of the incarnation (1Jn 2.18-24; 4.1-6). John called them antichrists and liars (2.18,22), and he identified the spirit of the false prophets as the spirit of antichrist (4.3). The reference to antichrist is important. The believers had heard that Antichrist is coming, and John points out that the rise of antichrists marked the age as the last hour (2.18). The point made is of crucial significance. The age moves to its end, and the end is the Antichrist replacing the Christ in the world. The whole age is driven by that one question, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” In the agitation, the Christians have the question put to them, “But who do you say that I am?” and they will mark themselves off by their confession.

The three great issues involved

John lets us see that the controversy over the person of Christ marked a total crisis that would grow through history. From his first epistle, we learn that the question about Christ involves three great concerns:

- 1) The confession of the truth: Jesus is the Son of God who has come in the flesh.
- 2) The division between those who are from God and those who are from the world: those who confess Christ have the Anointing from God and by the true confession the Spirit of God is known (1Jn 2.20; 4.2) while those who deny speak by the spirit of antichrist and of error (4.3,6).
- 3) The very identity of the family of God, the church: the true fellowship is formed by the apostolic witness to Christ, and this fellowship is with the Father and the Son (1Jn 1.1-3). Those who denied the Son left the church and showed that they were never of the family of God (2.19) but from the world (4.5).

Jesus in Matt 16.13-20 guided the disciples through the same three areas:

- 1) He began by drawing out the true confession in contrast to the popular opinion (vv 13-16).
- 2) He went on to point out the spiritual source of the confession in contrast to the source of the popular opinion (v 17).
- 3) He closed with announcing the building of his church on the basis of the confession and pointing out the authority that comes through the confession (vv 17-18).

We will study the subject of the trinity in the three areas mapped out by the Lord. First we must present what the bible teaches. Second, we will look at the root of people’s response to the revelation of truth. After all the biblical teaching is openly laid out, we are confronted with a stubborn fact. While some will immediately see the truth, others will not, no matter how long we labour over them. If we do not come to terms with this fact of experience we will find ourselves lost in handling this truth. There is more involved than the objective truth. Third, we will take up the relationship between the doctrine of the trinity and the church. There is no doctrine that is more intimately wrapped up with the church than this one, and this fact is often raised as an objection it. We will see that the Lord ordained it to be this way.

PART 1. THE TRUTH OF THE TRINITY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

Before we turn to the study of what the NT teaches on the subject of the trinity, we should take notice of the way the truth is presented. The Spirit of God never wrote a manual of doctrine that lays out in logical order what we are to believe. Rather, truth is revealed in the mighty works of God in history as he works out his relationship with his people, and this includes the formation of the church. The doctrine is given to us within the story of revelation so that we have to get into the story to get at it. We will be true to this feature of revelation in our study. We will follow the general order in which the truth was unfolded to the church and point out the setting of each aspect of the truth.

The order in which the truth was unfolded to the church is: 1) the confession of faith in response to Jesus Christ as presented in the gospel, 2) the apostolic teaching that is based on this confession and 3) the witness to the triune reality of God given by Jesus in the Gospel of John. While John testifies to what was revealed from the beginning (Jn 20.20; 1Jn 1.1-3), he gave it to the church in writing at the end of the apostolic era. His witness penetrates the most deeply into the reality of the triune God.

Here is a quick overview of the three levels at which the truth is unfolded:

A. The confession of faith: responding to the triune God

By the Gospel, we are made to relate to God in his triune reality.

B. Apostolic teaching: the order of the divine relationship with creation

The apostolic teaching presents a comprehensive view of how God relates to the world and to us as the divine trinity.

C. The Son's witness: relationships within the Godhead

The Gospel of John gives us Jesus' divine witness to the reality of God from within the Godhead. Here we are given to see how the three divine persons relate to each other, and this is the highest view.

Each of the three levels at which the truth of the trinity is unfolded demonstrates the full deity of Christ and the triune nature of God. The three levels taken together present a complete doctrinal understanding.

A. THE CONFESSION OF FAITH: RESPONDING TO THE TRIUNE GOD

The doctrine of the trinity is often regarded as higher truth to be left to higher learning. This is a mistake. The truth of the deity of Christ and the triune nature of God is built into the very confession of faith, and here we must begin in learning the doctrine. This is the right place to begin for several reasons. First of all, this is where the apostles began with their converts. The order of learning reflected in the apostles' teaching was first the confession and then the teaching. The second reason is that here every believer has his point of entry into the truth of Christ. We begin by confessing Christ and then growing in understanding the full truth of God in Christ. We must teach the truth as that which every believer can recognize as being true to his faith. Finally, by anchoring the teaching in the confession of faith, we maintain the importance of the doctrine. It is foundational and marks off the church, and we must handle the truth of that confession with all of its weight and seriousness.

The truth of the trinity is not first of all formally taught. It is confessed.

1. Peter's confession: the necessary view of Christ (Matt 16.16)

The history of Christian confession formally began with Peter's confession. As we have seen, Jesus drew this confession out and gave it the decisive role in the formation and history of the church. We will begin our study of the confession of faith here.

Peter's confession was not an act of apostolic teaching. He did not state the doctrine of the person of Christ in Matt 16.16. Yet, his confession plays a decisive role in the biblical revelation of who Jesus is. It shows the perspective of faith and what the issues are in recognizing Jesus' true identity.

a. The focus is on who Jesus is: a matter of faith

Jesus led the discussion with his disciples so that Peter's confession is heard in contrast to the popular opinion about Jesus reported in v 14. There were many prophets, but there was only to be one Christ. The prophets spoke for God and foretold the coming messianic salvation, but the Messiah carried out the promised salvation of God. A prophet points the people to look beyond him whereas all eyes are to look to the Messiah for God's salvation and final revelation in history. Peter's confession puts the focus on who Jesus is for faith and hope. The gospel proclamation also puts the focus on Christ, and for our doctrinal understanding we must look to and not beyond him.

b. Identifying Jesus within the divine relationships: seeing the triunity of God in the person of Christ

Peter's confession identifies Jesus in his relationship with the Spirit of God and God Father. The title, the Christ (or Messiah in Hebrew), means the Anointed One, and it refers to Christ as anointed by the Spirit. In Ps 2.7 God declares his Anointed to be his Son, and Peter's confession follows this. We see the triune relationships at Jesus' baptism. When the Spirit descended upon him, he was anointed as the Messiah, the Christ (Ac 10.38), and God declared him to be his Son (Matt 3.16-17).

Peter's confession shows that Jesus can only be identified within the relationship that God and the Spirit have with him. It also points out that God and the Spirit are only seen in the final revelation in their relationship with Christ. This witness to Christ is crucial for the doctrine of the trinity. It establishes the fact that the Father, Son and Spirit are distinct from each other and identified in relation to each other. As 1Jn 2.22 stresses, to confess Jesus as the Christ by the Spirit is to confess him as the Son in his relationship with the Father.

c. Seeing Jesus in the context of the OT

Peter's confession stands solidly within the setting of the OT. The hope of the Messiah is rooted in the OT, and the titles, Christ and Son of God are taken from Psalm 2. We should also take note of the expression "the living God," which sets God apart from the dead gods of the Gentiles (see 1Thess 1.9). Why did Peter bring in this point? The answer is found in the setting. Jesus led the disciples out of Jewish territory to Caesarea Philippi which was in Gentile territory (Matt 16.13). The visible display of idolatry (for the sights of idol worship were scattered throughout Gentile territory) would have aroused Peter's Jewish conviction that God is the living God. By drawing out Peter's confession in this setting, Jesus engaged Peter's strong monotheism so that the confession that he is the Son of God became an affirmation of the truth of God as revealed in the OT. This proved to be a matter of critical importance, for the confession of faith had to be secured against Gentile polytheism. Gentiles were quite ready to believe that a god had come to earth (Ac 14.11f.). In Athens Paul struggled against the misunderstanding that the message of Jesus and the resurrection was about two new gods (Ac 17.18) and set the news of Jesus in the context of OT monotheism (Ac 14.15-17; 17.22-31). The relationship between the Son of God and God the Father must be understood within the declaration to Israel that the LORD is one (Deut 6.4). Any notion of tritheism (three separate gods) must be precluded.

2. Jesus fills out the confession: manifested in full deity

Peter identified Christ, but Jesus filled out what it meant for him to be the Christ, the Son of God, through his cross and in his resurrection. We have already seen how Jesus worked and spoke with the divine prerogative, but during his earthly career his own physical state did not reveal his deity. This changed in his resurrection.

Jesus pointed out how he would fill out Peter's confession before the High Priest. In answer to the charge to tell the council whether he was "the Christ the Son of God," Jesus explained, "...I tell you, hereafter you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of Power, and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Matt 26.64). He was clearly understood and charged with blasphemy, for he had declared that his place was at the right hand of God, and this is a position of equality with God (v 65). Notice that Jesus did not make a claim before the High Priest but pointed out how he would be seen after the ordeal of his suffering. The fact of his resurrection and exaltation would demonstrate who he is.

Jesus finally is presented in the Gospel of Matthew in the full divine position. When the disciples met the risen Lord they worshipped him and so responded to him as to God (Matt 28.17). He declared that all authority in heaven and on earth was given to him (v 18), and this is God's total authority. He ordered that his disciples were to be baptized into the one name of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (v 19) and closed with the promise of his omnipresence (v 20).

The risen Lord said that he would send the Spirit as the promise of his Father (Lk 24.49), which is the baptism in the Spirit of which John the Baptist spoke (Ac 1.5). In this baptism we have the direct link established between Jesus and YHWH of the OT. To see the connection we have to go back to the way Jesus was introduced to his public ministry. Matthew, Mark and Luke quote Ish 40.3-6 as being fulfilled in the ministry of John the Baptist (Matt 3.3; Mk 1.2-3; Lk 3.4-6). John fulfilled the prophetic call to prepare the way of the LORD (YHWH), and Jesus stepped into the scene as this LORD. John the Baptist announced the one who would come after him in terms of his surpassing greatness. He would be so much greater than the Baptist as the Spirit in which he would baptize is greater than water. A man can handle water, but only God can give and baptize in the Spirit, and it here that Jesus is identified with the LORD. In the prophetic vision of the OT, the LORD gives and pours out upon his people the Spirit (Ezk 36.27; 37.14; 39.29; Ish 44.3; Joel 2.28-29), and in the fulfilment Jesus fulfilled the role of the LORD.

Jesus stands in a twofold relationship with the Spirit. First, the Spirit came upon him and he worked by the Spirit. This, by the way, is true to the doctrine of the trinity for all of the divine works are accomplished by the Spirit. Second, Jesus is the one who stands in the position of YHWH in pouring out or baptizing with the Spirit. The Spirit poured out by Christ makes believers confess him in his full deity.

3. The apostolic confession focuses on the full deity of Christ

The risen Lord commissioned the gospel to be preached and this gospel brought about the response of confessing Jesus in his divine position.

a. Jesus is Lord: the confession in Paul's letters

The confession of the early Christians was, "Jesus is Lord." Paul opened up the spiritual dynamics in this confession in Rom 10.6-17. The word of faith which was preached was placed in people's mouth and in their heart (v 8). With the mouth they confessed that Jesus is Lord, and with the heart they believed that God raised him from the dead (v 9). In v 13 Paul quotes Joel 2.32, "whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved," as the scriptural basis for the confession with the mouth. In this quotation the Lord is YHWH. The resurrected Jesus is confessed as LORD.

The shortest confession in the NT is that Jesus is Lord. But, the confession is also expanded to include God the Father. In 1Cor 8.5-6 Paul states, "for even if there are so-called gods whether in heaven or on earth, as indeed there are many gods and many lords, yet for us there is but one God, the Father, *from (ek)* whom are all things and we exist for him; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, *by (dia)* through whom are all things and we exist through (*dia*) him" (1Cor 8.5-6). This statement of faith focuses on the divine relationship with the world. The deity is the absolute source *from* whom are all things, but we only know God as the role of God is acted out in the world; and the title for God in this role is Lord. All that is *from* God is carried out in the world *through* the Lord.

In 1Cor 8.6 the apostle is opening up, in light of the gospel, the statement of faith declared to Israel in Deut 6.4: “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one!” This declaration of Moses, just like the confession in 1Cor 8.6, affirms the truth of one God and Lord in opposition to the idolatry of the Gentiles. God is, in both confessions, identified in relation to his people. Israel declares that “the Lord is *our* God, the Lord is one,” and the Christians confess that *to us* there is one God and one Lord. A shift is noticeable in the two declarations of faith that reflects the development in the revelation of God. The two divine titles of Israel’s confession are God and Lord (YHWH), and in the Christian confession the title God is used for the Father and the title Lord is applied to Jesus. This distinction was built into Paul’s proclamation of the gospel by which he solemnly testified “of repentance towards God and faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ac 20.20).

The word *God* is generic and refers to God in his divine nature by which he is set off from creation. God is the eternal and invisible creator of all. This reality of God is ever in the Father. He is ever God as the eternal and absolute source of all, and he ever remains invisible. The title, Lord, is the name through which God is made known in his relationship with his people in the world. This name, in its full meaning, was revealed to Moses at the burning bush (Exodus 3). Here God identifies himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and undertakes to show that what he is by his promises to the fathers he will be in the world through redeeming his people. In the context of Exodus 3, this is the meaning of the declaration, “I AM WHAT I AM.” God is self-determining and is in this world only what he is as this is disclosed by his word given to his people. As God fulfills his word and promise, he makes himself known as the I AM or as YHWH. Throughout the OT, God manifests his Sovereign Lordship by carrying out his word against whatever barriers the world presents, but all that God achieved fell short of God’s complete triumph. Mankind’s separation from God through sin and the universal reign of death defeated all. God is known as the God of the living, and only by defeating death and achieving resurrection life does he show himself to be YHWH or Lord in the fullest and final way. This was only realized in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That is why the divine name, Lord, is given to the risen Christ.

Isaiah gave prophetic and poetic expression to the vision of God’s final triumph.

And on this mountain he will swallow up the covering over all peoples,
Even the veil which is stretched over all nations.
He will swallow up death for all time...
And it will be said in that day,
“Behold, this is our God for whom we have waited that he might save us.
This is the LORD for whom we have waited;
Let us rejoice and be glad in his salvation.

(Ish 25.7-9)

That God is only finally seen to be the LORD in delivering from death is the theme of Psalms. This theme is at the heart of three messianic Psalms, Psalms 16, 22 and 40. God’s relationship with his people went through the LORD’s Anointed, and by delivering his Anointed from death God shows what he is to all of his people. The gospel announces that God has fulfilled this in the resurrection of Jesus. Thus, in the final sense, God is only seen as LORD in the risen Christ. It is not simply the case that God raised Jesus from the dead but that the risen Christ is the one in whom we are raised to life, and this is sealed for us in the fact that through the risen Christ we have received the Spirit. He is the source of resurrection and the giver of the Spirit, and this establishes him fully as LORD. We should add an observation here. The title LORD is applied to the Father as the one who anointed Jesus with the Spirit (Psalm 2); but as the one who gives the Spirit to people, Jesus is the LORD.

The LORD is manifested in Jesus, but at the same time God ever remains the unchanging and invisible God in the Father. In the gospel this distinction established by the fact that God raised Jesus the Lord from the dead (Rom 10.9; 4.24-25). The apostle Paul expressed this distinction by using the title *God* (which focuses on the divine transcendence over creation) for the Father and *Lord* (which focuses on God as sovereign in history) for the Son.

b. Filling out the confession

The confession that Jesus is Lord was not left to the initial act of faith by which a person called on the name of the Lord to be saved (Rom 10.9,13). The Christians met as churches throughout the world as “all who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1Cor 1.2). The assemblies were about confessing that Jesus is Lord. In 1Cor 12.1-3 Paul points to what this involved. In the meetings, the Spirit had one message through all the varieties of ministries, which was that Jesus is Lord. This short confession is the sum of all truth. All teaching, exhortation and spiritual communication opens up and applies the meaning of this confession.

We have this simple confession opened up by the Spirit in Phil 2.5-13. This passage gives a panoramic view of the career of Jesus Christ. It is written as a confession for it declares who Jesus was, what he did, what he became. It is written in lyrical form and so might have been a hymn song in the early church. The climax is the declaration of the great confession: “God highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow...and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil 2.9-11). The mention of every knee bowing and tongue confessing is taken from Ish 45.23 where YHWH swears by himself (and that means that his very identity as God guarantees that this will happen) “that to me every knee will bow, and every tongue will swear allegiance.”

Jesus was given this highest of names (YHWH) in resurrection, but his exalted divine position was not a new attainment for him. His story begins with him existing in the form of God and in this state equality with God was proper to him (Phil 2.6). What is meant by “the form of God” can be seen in the parallel expression, “the form of a servant” in v 7. Jesus took on all the characteristics that make a person a slave. It was not a mere external show. He became a slave in reality. So, the form of God consists of all the characteristics that define God as God. He was fully God. Being in this divine state he humbled himself and was exalted to be called LORD. Jesus did not attain to a position and receive the divine title beyond what he really and essentially is. His real deity stands behind his exalted position before every creature. In the OT it was God who took the name YHWH; so in the NT the name is given to Jesus as the one who existed from eternity in the form of God.

c. Jesus Christ is the Son of the Father: the confession in John’s letters

Paul focused on the confession of Jesus as Lord. The apostle John focused on the Spirit’s work in making believers confess Jesus as the Son of God and as having come in the flesh (1Jn 2.20-23; 4.1-6; 2Jn 7-11). John spells out both positively and negatively the meaning of the confession that Jesus is the Son. As the Son he is confessed in his relation to the Father, and in confessing the Son one has the Father. To deny the Son is not to have the Father. John is dealing with a theological manoeuvre to separate the Father from the Son and seek to have God as Father beyond the sonship of Christ. The Spirit makes us confess the Son as the one in whom we have the Father, and apart from him we do not have the Father. In fact, God is only the Father in his Son.

Both the titles Lord and Son set forth Jesus as fully divine, but they focus on different directions in the divine relationship. The title Lord refers to the divine working in relation to the world whereas the title Son focuses first of all on Jesus’ divine relation to the Father. The confession that Jesus is Lord is used in the context of the mission in which people are saved from the world that does not know God in Christ. The confession of the Son and the incarnation affirms the truth in the context of denial and departure from within the Christian world. The people who denied the truth held onto some form of Jesus but departed from the truth of his deity and humanity. The way the Spirit shifted the focus of the confession is instructive for us. The initial confession of faith that Jesus is Lord must be held against the challenges raised up in the course of the church’s history, and the Spirit uses these challenges to focus faith more sharply and spell out the two sides of Christ’s identity: the exact relationship that the Son has with the Father and his real humanity. From the initial confession of faith, the church must go on to know and confess Christ more specifically, and this process has led to the doctrine of the trinity. We see this development taking full shape in the apostolic teaching.

B. APOSTOLIC TEACHING: THE ORDER OF THE DIVINE RELATIONSHIP WITH CREATION

To understand the apostles' approach to teaching on the subject we are studying, we must begin with their view of the scope of the gospel. We today focus the good news very narrowly on God's relationship with the individual, but the apostles received from Christ the gospel as the good news of the kingdom of God. As individuals we enter the kingdom, but the kingdom is cosmic. It takes in God's reign over all. God will redeem all of creation. This brings us to an important point in the outlook of the apostles. God's relationship with us as believers is within his total relationship as God with all creation. They taught how this will be fully realized in the end, in the redemption of all creation. But, they also taught how this is based on creation, right from the beginning. It is in this cosmic setting that the truth of Christ's full deity and the triune nature of God are taught by the apostles.

1. God's relationship to creation (Colossians 1.12-23)

Paul teaches the full deity of Christ in Colossians. He anchors this teaching in his opening thanksgiving and prayer (Col 1.3-12). He takes up the report of the Colossians' faith, brought about by the gospel. This faith was alive and active in love and it was oriented towards the end in hope. On the basis of this faith, the apostle prays that the believers will be filled with the knowledge of God's will and increase in the knowledge of God. The result he aims at is that they attain steadfastness and patience (v 11). He aimed for this because there were those who were teaching things that would have moved the believers away from their initial faith. In teaching the full deity of Christ, the apostle is only equipping the Christians to be steadfast and to continue in the faith they received through the gospel. Faith is ever the same; but confronted with movements that would turn Christians away, faith must be confirmed by a fuller understanding of the truth in Christ who is the object of faith. Without increasing in the understanding of faith, we have to deal with challenges apart from the truth of Christ, and this will lead to veering from the faith.

a. Establishing the connection between redemption and creation (Col 1.12-16)

We should take note of how Paul makes the move from his opening thanksgiving and prayer (vv 3-11) to his teaching (vv 15ff.). He begins with the Father's role in our salvation (vv 12-13) and then turns to the Son in whom we have the redemption (v 14). For the Christians, this was familiar truth: God the Father redeemed us through his Son. From here, Paul moves into his teaching on the deity of Christ. We must take note of how Paul moves forward. In v 14 he said that we have redemption in (*en*) God's beloved Son. Then in v 16 he says, "For in (*en*) him all things were created." The Son's role as God's agent in redemption is extended to creation. In this move from redemption to creation, the apostle is guiding the Christians in how to think. In conversion they received Christ as Lord (Col 2.6) and that means that he is the one who carries out God's work in relation to them. They were not to stop but to begin here in their understanding of Jesus. What he is in their redemption shows what he is in everything, and the apostle shows what this means by setting forth the Son's role in God's relation to creation. Here we have to grasp the biblical significance of creation. We have already seen that the Godhead is defined by the act of creation. God stands apart from creation as the eternal one who has created all things. Since God created all things through his Son, including all angels, the Son is fully divine and stands with God in the divide between deity and creation.

b. The Son in relation to God and the world: he holds the full relationship

Paul begins in v 15 by setting forth the Son in his two relationships: 1) to God as the image of the invisible God and 2) to the creation as the firstborn of all creation.

The image of the invisible God: To understand the force of what this means, we must see the connection between the statement about the Son in v 15 and v 16 (notice that v 16 begins with the word "for" which introduces the explanation for v 15). He is the image of God not as man is but as the one through whom all things were created. Man is a creature who is made in the image of the creator, but the Son is the agent of

all creation through whom God in his invisible nature and absolute transcendence over creation is seen. All that is in the invisible God, the Father, is in the Son so that God can be shown and known while ever being absolutely transcendent. We can have no knowledge of God apart from the Son and have the full knowledge of God in him.

The firstborn of all creation: The term firstborn is not a term of actual birth but of inheritance. The firstborn is at first the sole heir of the father, and other sons only enter into his relationship with the father and receive a share in what is his. The way the Son of God is the firstborn is spelt out in vv 16f. The Son is the firstborn as the one through whom all things were created. The Father bequeathed on the Son all of creation by creating all through him. The Son did not simply receive as his inheritance what God created. The Father created all through him so that he owns all as the creator. As the firstborn, all creation belongs to the Son, and all others, angels or people, who have a share in creation only receive a share in what belongs to him.

We must also take note of how the Son as the firstborn is distinguished from the Father and related to us. The Father is the absolute source of the divine workings. The Son receives the divine work from the Father for him to carry out in creation. This is significant for our relationship with God. As creatures we can only be recipients of what God does. That means that we can have no share with the Father in his position—he only originates. But, since the Son receives all from the Father, we can share in his relation to God. As fully divine, we have all of God in him, and as related to God and receiving all from the Father we can be joined to him.

Verse 15 shows us how the apostles looked at the deity of Christ. They did not focus on him in isolation, to try and see what he is by himself. Rather, they only looked at him in his relationships. The Son of God holds the entire relationship between God and creation. He alone reveals God, and he alone is the heir of the Father and owns all of creation. God relates to the world through him, and we and angels have our relationship with God through him.

c. The Son established in his full deity

Paul establishes the full deity of the Son by ascribing to him all that is of God.

i. *The Son's role in creation and resurrection life (Col 1.16-18)*

The creator of all things: “For by him all things were created, both in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities” (v 16). Paul reinforces the fact that all was created in (*en*) him by adding that all things were created through (*dia*) him and for him.

His eternal existence: “He is (i.e., exists) before all things” (v 17a). Paul does not stop with the Son's role as creator but moves behind time to eternity. This means that the Son was not generated in the process of creation; if he were, he would be the first part of creation. His existence did not come into being. He exists in the absolute sense in which God ever exists.

In these first two points made about the Son, we see that he has the twofold attribute of God seen through creation: eternal power (Rom 1.20). He has the divine power to create, and he is eternal in his existence.

His divine role through time: “and in him all things hold together” (v 17b). Having gone behind creation, the apostle now moves forward to the time after the work of creation and adds that in (*en*) him all things are held together. This means that he was not left in the past but is ever present holding all things together. The ever present work of God holding the universe together is carried out wholly in him. The apostle leaves no loophole through which a person can access divine power that is not in the Son. The Son's divine role in creation is so complete, that the Father is only God through him.

His divine position through resurrection: Paul moves from the first creation (vv 16-17) to the new creation in v 18. Christ is head of the church, and he is the beginning by being the firstborn from the dead.

The point here is not that he was the first to rise but that the dead will only rise to new life in him. We will only share in his resurrection life. As risen from the dead, the Son is the beginning of the new creation.

Paul points out the divine intention in Christ's place as the beginning: "that he himself will come to have the first place in everything." The Father, in whom the divine purpose is set, does not give the first place in all things to himself but to the Son. In v 19 the divine reason for Christ's first place is opened up: "for it was the Father's good pleasure for all fullness to dwell in him." The word translated "to dwell" is *katoiko* and it means to settle down or to take up permanent residence in a place. It was the Father's will that in Christ all fullness (and that means all the fullness of deity in all the power, presence and workings of God) be permanently present and available in creation (see Col 2.9-10). Paul is not speaking here of Christ in his pre-incarnate state, but of Christ as the beginning of the new creation. Christ entered the world and in him the fullness of deity resides and is present. The idea is parallel to what is said in Jn 1.14-15 of the incarnation: "And the Word became flesh, and dwelt (literally, tabernacled or tented) among us, and we beheld his glory...and of his fullness we have all received; grace upon grace." Take in what this means.

The full deity of Christ means that all that is in God is there for us so that we can have a direct relationship with God in all the fullness of God. This makes God our Father in the fullest possible way. Now we can see what is involved in denying the deity of Christ. People deny the deity of the Son thinking that by this they are giving the Father the first place, but in actual fact they are contradicting the Father and forever stripping him of the glory which is his in the Son. Here we see the formal honour that is a backhanded dishonour. God is left isolated in his absolute transcendence over all creation so that we can have only a remote contact with him through created beings like angels. Such a remote and solitary God can be our Father only in a secondary sense. In himself he is not the Father—he has no direct personal relationship with us and can never be fully known.

People who deny the deity of Christ give God the dry and academic honour of being mathematically one in number, but they deny him the glory of being the Father who has fully revealed himself, makes all that is in him available to us and brings us into a direct relationship with himself that does not go through created beings. No matter how exalted a being the Son was created to be, as a creature he is infinitely below God. If the mediator between God and us is a creature, he separates us infinitely from God. The church must give Christ the first place to give God the glory of being the Father.

ii. *The Son's role in the reconciliation of all things to God (vv 19-23)*

The Godhead is the source of creation and life in creation and in the resurrection of Jesus. The message of Acts 17 goes over this ground, and it is covered in the teaching of Col 1.16-18. Now Paul turns to the Son's work in reconciliation. Again he moves out from the Father in v 19. It was the Father's good pleasure for all fullness to dwell in Christ. The fact that all there is in God is present and available in Christ is established in the divine work of reconciliation. All that the world still needs from God to be reunited with God is found and given only in Christ.

The reconciliation of the universe to God: On the theme of creation and resurrection, we see the Son on the divine side creating and giving life. God is moving out to the world. The theme of reconciliation looks at the movement back to God. Creation which has become alienated from God is reconciled to him. In the total reconciliation of creation, we see the final purpose of God realized in Christ. Paul presents the scope of reconciliation as equal to the scope of creation: things in heaven and on earth (v 20). The point is important. Christ's work of redemption is as great in scope as his work of creation. This means that there is nothing that lies outside of the scope of his work, and we are not to seek any reconciliation of anything to God apart from or beyond Christ.

The reconciliation of the believers: Paul moves from the cosmic to the individual's reconciliation to God (vv 21-22). Notice that people's alienation from God is rooted in the mind's hostility to God (v 21). In the context of the letter as a whole, this hostile mind is the religious and philosophical mind that is fundamentally at variance with the truth of the full deity of Christ. The mind that seeks to bypass Christ and seek God beyond him is the mind that is hostile to the Father, for it is the Father's intention that his Son have the first place in everything and his good pleasure that all fullness dwell in him. The individual has

been reconciled with a view to being presented before God holy, blameless and beyond reproach (v 22). This is the hope of which they heard in the gospel (1.5). Paul adds that the realization of this goal involves that they continue in the faith and be firmly established and steadfast in the hope of the gospel (v 23). Hope is faith oriented for the future and toward the final end. This hope is built into the gospel, and by coming to faith the believers do not simply take Christ as the beginning but as the completion of the work of redemption and the full realization of God's purposes in creation and in their lives. The gospel leaves no door open to go beyond faith in Christ.

Colossians 1.15-23 presents Christ in the divine role from the absolute beginning to the end. He carried out the full work of God in creation, existing from eternity. He carries out the continual work of God in holding all things together (vv 16-17). He is the source of the new creation through his resurrection (v 18). All that is in God is made available in him and his reconciling work takes in God's final goal of reconciling the whole creation to God (vv 19-20). For the believer there is the hope of being presented holy, blameless and beyond reproach before the Father in the Son (v 19). Nothing is left that is not in the Son.

Paul shows us in Colossians 1 how we are to think of the deity of Christ. We must begin with our confession of faith, and we see all in light of that faith. What Christ is to us by faith he is in everything. Paul has shown us the track along which faith thinks about God and the world.

2. Collaborating teaching (Hebrews and John)

It is written that in the mouth of two or three witnesses every word is to be established. We can add to Paul's witness in Col 1.15-23 the letter of Hebrews and the Gospel of John.

a. The deity of Christ in Hebrews 1

In Hebrews 1 the full deity of Christ is presented in a way that is akin to Colossians 1. God appointed his Son the heir of all things because the world was made through him (1.2). This answers to Paul's statement that the Son is the firstborn of all creation. Hebrews 1.3 goes on to say that the Son "is the radiance of his glory and the exact representation of his nature." This answers to the statement that he is the image of the invisible God. The radiance and exact representation is not in a given act of the Son. He is this in his very person. Hebrews 1.3 goes on to say that the Son upholds all things by the word of his power. He is God upholding the universe. The Son's role in creation and in revealing God is put in parallel to his work of redemption, outlined in Heb 1.3b. The writer of this letter goes on to set the Son above angels. Of angels God says that they are ministers (v 7), but the Son is called God who reigns as king (vv 8-9). In vv 10-12, the writer quotes Ps 102.25-27. The Psalm is addressed to YHWH, and now the LORD's role in creation and his eternal nature are ascribed to the Son of God. Finally, God tells the Son to sit at his right hand, and this enthrones him in equality with God (Heb 1.13).

b. The deity of the Christ as taught by John

We saw, in Colossians, that gaining a full understanding of the deity of Christ was a matter of being steadfast and continuing in the faith received through the gospel. John presents the same view. After speaking about the denial of the Son, John wrote to the children, "As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning (i.e., the gospel witness to Christ). If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father" (1Jn 2.24). The confession of the deity of Christ and the relationship of the Son to the Father must be held against all denials, and this is a matter of continuing in the gospel by which Christians came to faith.

John, in the prologue of his Gospel, moves in the same track of thought as we saw in Colossians and Hebrews. He connects the Son's relation to God from eternity and his divine work in creation (1.1-5) with his incarnation and manifestation (vv 14-18). The point in this connection is clear. What was manifested through Christ's life and work on earth shows what he is eternally. When people deny his eternal deity, they fail to recognize and reject what was manifested in him. These people are like the world that did not recognize him as its creator and like the Jews who did not accept him as the LORD to whom the nation of

Israel belonged (Jn 1.10-11). To receive him is to be born again (v 12-13). The gospel and our salvation cannot be divorced from the truth of his eternal deity. This agrees with what Paul says in Rom 10.9-10: the confession of Jesus as Lord (YHWH) results in salvation.

John is combating the explicit denial of the divine relationship between the Father and the Son, as we have already noticed. This means that he makes more explicit the divine status of the Son in relation to the Father. His opening affirmation is: “In the beginning was the Word” (v 1). The key here is in the word *was*. He did not become or come into being. He ever was. Then he points out the relationship the Word had with God. “The Word was with God.” The word John uses for “was *with* God” is *pros* and carries the idea of being oriented towards God. The Word did not exist alongside of but separate from him. He was related to God. As eternally with God, “the Word was God.” Here John uses the word for *God* without the article to put the stress on the fact that he was God in his nature. To underscore the personal distinction between the divine Word and the God with whom he was, John repeats, “He was in the beginning with God” (v 2). The Word was God and was in a relationship with God from all eternity. We must hold to the truth of his full deity as well as to his distinctness from and relationship with God the Father if we are to hold steadfastly to our confession of the Son.

John, in the first two verses of his Gospel, is contemplating what already was in the beginning. He is dwelling on what is eternal. In v 3 he moves to the beginning of time, the act of creation. The Word was the creator of all. To stress that all things were created by him, John adds that apart from him nothing was created. John is saying in a few words what Paul stated descriptively in Col 1.16. Nothing stands outside of the Son’s role as creator so that God the Father has no divine role over anything apart from the Son. Then John moves to the theme of life. In him was Life. Deity is creator and life giver, and Christ is both. The theme of revealing God (touched on in Col 1.15 and Heb 1.3) is taken up in vv 14 and 18. God is invisible, but the Son as God has explained him (v 18).

The apostolic teaching is clear. In the divide between God and creation, the Son stands first of all on the divine side. He is fully God and only through him is God the Father the creator and God over the world. As the firstborn, he also holds in his person the world’s relation to God.

3. The triune Godhead at work (Ephesians)

The passages we have looked at focus on the Son and open up how he holds the full relationship between God and the world. The subject of the Spirit is not treated in the same way. Jesus said of the Spirit, “He shall glorify me; for he shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you. All things that the Father has are mine; therefore I said, that he takes of mine, and will disclose it to you” (Jn 16.14-15). It is the Spirit’s role to teach the disciples, and he makes the Son his subject. This is confirmed in the fact that the apostles, moved by the Spirit, took up as their subject Christ and all that is his in relation to the Father. As a result, the Son’s full deity is taken up as a subject in the NT whereas the truth of the Spirit is not. The Spirit is only brought in as the work of God through Christ is unfolded. The Spirit was sent by the Father and the Son to indwell the believers individually and the church collectively. This fact is reflected in the way the NT opens up the truth of the Spirit. He is only seen in his role in carrying out the Father’s work through the Son in our salvation and spiritual growth.

a. A closer look at the Spirit

The Son is first seen in relation to the Father when he came into the world to carry out the work of redemption, then through his work of redemption we are made to see him in the divine work of creation. With the Spirit, the Bible opens up the truth in reverse order. The opening verses of the Bible show the Spirit at the beginning hovering over creation as the divine condition for creation. God in heaven speaks and the Spirit receives the word to put it into effect. Just as he is seen working in creation, so he works in the NT in the divine work of redemption.

The Spirit is sent down from heaven to put the work of the Father through the Son into effect on earth, convicting the world (Jn 16.8), sanctifying or setting people apart to obey Jesus Christ by faith (1Pt 1.2),

indwelling the believers and the church (1Cor 6.19; 3.16), leading believers as the sons of God (Rom 8.14) and giving gifts for ministry (1Cor 12.9,11). The Spirit activates in us our relationship with God. He makes us confess Jesus as Lord as well as making us cry, “Abba! Father!” (Rom 8.14-15; Gal 4.6). He indwells the believers both as the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8.9; Gal 4.6) and of God who raised Christ Jesus from the dead (Rom 8.11) and so establishes in our lives both the divine equality and the relationship between the Father and the Son. He realizes in us the whole divine work of the Son and the Father, without any diminishment, and so shows his equality with the Father and Son.

Jesus presented the Spirit as having the full capacity of deity. He said that the Spirit would take what was his (and this includes all that is the Father’s) and disclose it to the disciples (Jn 16.14-15). Paul in effect says the same of the Spirit in 1Cor 2.10-12. The things that God prepared for those who love him are not seen or grasped by man. But, the Spirit of God searches all things, even the deep things of God. He alone has the capacity and relationship with God the Father to know all and disclose it. There is no diminishment as the divine things move from the Father and the Son to the Spirit. There is nothing in God not known and taken up by the Spirit. In his capacity, he is equal to the Father and the Son.

While we are on this subject, we will give one further proof from scripture that the Spirit is equal to God. In Acts 5.3 Peter told Ananias that when he lied about the money he laid at the apostles’ feet he lied to the Holy Spirit, and then in v 4 he adds, “You have not lied to men but to God.” Lying to the Spirit is lying to God. Peter stresses the Spirit as the one lied to because he was poured out on the disciples and is the full divine presence in the church. After Peter convicts Ananias of his sin in v 4, he says that he lied to God, for God is the judge—and judge he did in v 5. A similar link between God and the Spirit is made in 1Cor 3.16-17. The local church is the temple of God for the Spirit dwells within it. God the Father is in heaven while the Spirit is on earth in the church, and the Spirit’s presence is God’s presence. In this passage, the concern is with sin against the church as the temple of God, and of this sin God is seen as the judge. The Spirit also indwells the body of the individual believer as a temple (1Cor 6.19).

b. A panoramic view of the divine roles

The roles of the Father, Son and the Spirit are coordinated in the panoramic view of the divine work of salvation in Ephesians 1.13-14. Here Paul celebrates the grand scheme of our salvation. The divine work has its absolute beginning with the Father (vv 3-6). To the Father belongs the divine choice or election before the foundation of the world (v 4) and the predestination by which he from eternity past ordained us to our position in the eternity of the future (v 5, also v 11). The Father’s purpose for us is in Christ, and the complete execution of God’s purpose in history belongs to the Son (vv 7-12). After the Son’s work is outlined, the Spirit is introduced. He secures the believers for the full entrance into the redemption provided in Christ according to the Father’s eternal purpose (vv 13-14).

The Father, Son and Spirit each carry out the full work of God at different levels. If we think of God as **the cause**, we can lay out the order this way:

The Father is *the ultimate and absolute cause* of all God’s work.

The Son is *the mediating and revealing cause* establishing God’s relationship with creation and with us.

The Spirit is *the immediate and actualizing cause* putting God’s work in the Son into effect in the creature.

God’s moves out to bring all to him, and we must see the triune operations in both directions. God relates to the world to relate all to him. The Spirit works in the creature through the Son and the Son does his whole work to bring all to the Father that all might become what the Father has purposed from eternity.

The triune workings of God are built into the very structure of the whole NT. In this study we cannot give all the evidence for it. To do this would require a study of the whole NT. The doctrine of the trinity is not a specific doctrine based on proof texts. It is seen in the whole structure of NT faith and teaching. For now we will simply point out some examples of this trinitarian structure. In 1Cor 12.4-7, the gifts are by the Spirit, the ministries are of the Lord and the effects are of God. The Spirit in giving gifts dwells and works in us, the Lord in giving ministries is over us and through the gifts and ministries the Father works to carry out his purpose in all. Paul highlights the Spirit’s divine sovereignty in v 11: “...distributing to each one

individually just as he will.” The Father and the Son work through him, but what he does is by his own sovereign will (not that the Spirit has an independent will, but he carries out the will of the Father and Son as his own will).

Through Christ, Jews and Gentiles have access in one Spirit to the Father (Eph 2.18), and the church is joined together in Christ the cornerstone into a dwelling of God in the Spirit (vv 20-22). We are called to maintain the unity of the Spirit (4.3) in the oneness that is brought about by the one Spirit, one Lord and one God and Father (vv 4-6). The divine blessing is trinitarian: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all” (2Cor 13.14). Love is the act of giving and in the absolute sense this is the Father’s mark. The grace is the free gift given, and this is in the Son. The fellowship is the common life shared, and this is in the Spirit.

In God’s relationship with us it is: from the Father, through the Son and by the Spirit. In our relationship with God it is: by the Spirit through the Son to the Father.

c. What the total work of redemption discloses about the Godhead

The full scope of divine operations shows us the following:

First, there is *full equality* in the work done. All that the Father purposed is done through the Son and by the Spirit. There is no diminishment as the work moves through the three. If the Son’s work executed less than the Father’s purpose, that purpose would not be a divine purpose at all. If the Spirit in his operations within us fell below the Son’s work, the Son’s work would be in vain and cease to be a divine work. Equality in the work done points to equality in divine capacity, nature and power.

Second, the three are *wholly interrelated*. The Father is only God making the eternal purpose in his relationship with Christ. Without Christ through whom all things are done, nothing would be from the Father. Also, all is achieved through the Son only by the work of the Spirit. Without the Spirit the Son would not execute the Father’s purpose. Each person only has his divine role and identity in relation to other two.

Each person of the Godhead bears within himself the full trinity. The Son brings with him the Father his relation to the Son and the Spirit. The Spirit ever bears in his very being the Father and Son who work by the Spirit.

Third, there is *complete unity*. The three persons are one in their distinct roles. It is not the case that we have three divine parties doing the same thing. This would mean redundancy and not involve real unity. The three in their distinct roles do the one work of God.

Fourth, there is a *definite order*. The Father’s role is first, just as purpose precedes action. The Son’s roles is second, revealing and carrying out the purpose, and the Spirit’s role is third since he receives to put into effect what God reveals through the Son.

Fifth, the three persons carry out *the total relationship* between God and the world. God takes in all points of the divine relationship. The eternal purpose, the communication and mediation of all in time and the reception within the creature to put all into effect are carried out by God. The creature has no share with God in his glory as the cause of anything that is of God.

Sixth, the *personal distinctions and relationships are eternal*. Just as the work of redemption is wholly carried out in and by God, the divine relationships revealed in this work are within God as he exists in himself. In the Father we see the root of all in eternity past. The Father had his distinct place of determining the divine purpose before the foundation of the world, and that means that he is eternally distinct from the Son and the Spirit. Since he is only the Father in relation to the Son and Spirit, it follows that the second and third persons in the Godhead were identified in relation to the Father from eternity. The point we are making is important. The unity of the Godhead consists both in the equality and distinctness

of the persons. They are one in divine nature and power and one in their interrelatedness to carry out as three only one work of God. This wonderful unity is in the very eternal nature of the Godhead.

Seventh, God is *fully revealed*. The unity of the persons of the Godhead means that God is fully made known in the Son and by the Spirit. If the identity of the Son and Spirit were only a matter of God's relationship with creation and not what God is eternally, we would never have God fully revealed. God is only revealed in the Son, and we cannot see God beyond what we see in the Son. It is only in the eternal and absolute nature of God as Father, Son and Spirit that we can know God fully. To deny that the divine relationships in the work of revelation and redemption are eternal is to say that God as he is in himself eternally has not been revealed. This undercuts the very glory of Christ as the one in whose person and through whose work God is fully revealed. Just think of it: in saving us God fully revealed himself. To God be the glory forever, Amen.

The apostolic teaching brings out the importance of the doctrine of the trinity for all other doctrines. God does all of his works as a trinity, and his triune nature determines the structure of all truths. Using the metaphor of a building, we can say that the doctrine of the trinity provides the substructure of all doctrine. That is why it is so important for us.

C. THE SON'S WITNESS: RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE GODHEAD

The focus so far has been on God's relationship with the world, and how this is wholly carried out from the Father through the Son and by the Spirit. Here we see God moving out to bring about and establish creation in a relationship with him. In the way the apostles open up this truth, we get a glimpse of another side to the triune nature of God. It is not just that God relates as a trinity to creation, the three persons stand in a relationship with each other. This is opened up fully by Jesus, and rightly so, for he alone of all men stood within the divine relationships.

Jesus' unique role in opening to us the truth of God is pointed out in John 3.31-32: "He who comes from above is above all, he who is of the earth is from the earth and speaks of the earth. He who comes from heaven is above all. What he has seen and heard, of that he testifies...." A witness can only testify to what he has seen and heard. Those who are of the earth can only testify about the truth of God as they see things from the earthly point of view. They stand outside of God and can only speak about how God relates to man on earth. Here the Son of God stands apart because he came from heaven, and this marks the difference in his witness. He could speak of what he has seen and heard in heaven as the one who is always in the bosom of the Father (Jn 1.18), and that means that he testifies to who God is and how God works from within the divine being. In John 5 Jesus showed how he and the Father interact within the Godhead.

1. The relationship between the Son and the Father (John 5)

We will focus our study on Jesus' witness in Jn 5.19-29. Jesus had just performed a miracle on the Sabbath through a command that was above the Sabbath law (vv 1-9). By this he set before the Jews two facts. First, the miracle showed that his work was the work of God. Second, he showed that he worked the same way God works. As God has broken off his Sabbath rest after creating the world to take up the work of redemption, so the Son works and in the divine work does not keep the Sabbath. He pressed the point in v 17 by identifying himself as the Son of the Father who worked like the Father. The Jews understood his claim, as their immediate response showed (v 18). He claimed to be Son in the fullest and in the unique sense that he both works from God and does the work of God equal to God. Rather than clearing himself before the Jews by stepping back from the charge, Jesus explained his relationship with the Father in a way that heightened his claim to equality with God (vv 19-29). We will simply outline the dynamics of the relationship between the Son and the Father opened up here.

a. The Son in relation to the Father (Jn 5.19)

The Son's limitation: "The Son can do nothing of himself, unless it is something he sees the Father doing..." (v 19a). The limitation is of extreme importance for the doctrine of the trinity. The Son cannot do what creatures, angelic or human can do. A creature has been given his own will and can sin, i.e., act contrary to God. The Son has a genuine will, and exists as a person distinct from the Father, but he has no independent will or existence. He is limited to his union with the Father as the sole source of his action. By the way, if he were divine with an independent will and existence, he would be another god, and this would mean polytheism.

The Son's full divine scope of action: "...for whatever the Father does, these things the Son does in like manner" (v 19b). The word "whatever" refers to all the works of the Father. There is not a divine work that the Son does not do. He is thus equal in his working to the Father. This equality of work requires an equality of capacity to work, which means he has the same divine nature as the Father.

b. The Father in relation to the Son (Jn 5.20-23)

The Father's full disclosure to the Son: "For the Father loves the Son, and shows him all things that he himself is doing..." (v 20a). The Father's love is his will and act of imparting all that is his to the Son. The Father had this love for the Son before the foundation of the world (17.24). This is an eternal love, which means that the relationship between the Father and Son is eternal. This love is total and establishes the full equality of the Son with the Father, for Christ could say, "All things that the Father has are mine" (16.15).

There is an order in the divine relationship. The Father shows what he does to the Son for the Son to do, and not the other way around. We have two divine persons doing one work but not being redundant. No, the Father does all of his work through the Son, and the Son is working from the Father.

The full scope of divine works: "...and the Father will show him greater works than these, so that you will marvel" (v 20b). The greater works Jesus referred to are the divine works of giving life and making the dead alive (vv 21,29). The Jews believed that God, the invisible God in heaven, would raise the dead, and this is the highest of divine works for God alone is the source of eternal life. By stating that the Father has given this work to be carried out by the Son, Jesus declared that he does not stop short of full equality with God. Jesus went on to say that the Father will not judge any but has given all judgment to the Son (v 22). The Jews also attributed this to God. The act of judging is not the same as the work of giving life. Judging is carried out by declaration. It is not an act of giving life or creating. In judging, the Son acts by speaking what he hears from the Father (v 30). Jesus' point is clear. The Father gives the Son the full divine role on earth. In the end, there is nothing that God will do, right up to his final work of giving resurrection life, that the Son does not do and that the Father only does through the Son. Jesus could not affirm his equality and unity with God in clearer terms while maintaining the distinction of the two persons in the divine relationship.

The Father's purpose: "...so that all will honour the Son even as they honour the Father. He who does not honour the Son does not honour the Father" (v 23). The Father does all his works so that all will honour the Son *as* they honour the Father. To give the Son an honour not equal to the honour given to the Father is not to honour the Father. Here we have to give full weight to the terms. Father and Son are terms that are entailed in each other. A man is only a father in his son. Without a son, the man is not a father. To deny God's Son is to deny his Fatherhood. To the degree that the Son is given an honour below full deity, to that degree the Fatherhood of God is denied. In relation to his creatures, God can only be Father in a limited and relative sense, for this Fatherhood is the result of his work in creation. Jesus revealed God as Father in a much higher sense. He is the Father in his essential relation with his Son, and it is in this relationship that God relates to the world. So, God did not become Father through his creatures but he is the Father in and of himself by reason of his eternal relationship with the Son.

We must not define God in relation to us. Rather, we must see how God relates within himself. Only the Son could reveal this, for in him God is related from within himself. The Spirit brings us into the reality

and working of this relationship and makes us know it. But, even this aspect of the relationship is within God. In John 14 to 16 Jesus opens this up to his disciples.

2. The Spirit made known through the Son

Jesus showed that he is the Son of the Father in the world (John 2 to 12), but he only made the Spirit known to his disciples when he withdrew from the public ministry. Jesus points out the reason in Jn 14.17. The world does not see or know the Spirit, and this was proven by the fact that the world did not recognize Jesus as the Son of God. One can only recognize the Son by the Spirit, seeing the Spirit's operation in relation to him (Jn 1.31-14). At the same time, one only knows the Spirit in his work of making the Son known and making us confess the Son. If one does not confess Jesus as the Son of God, he has failed to recognize the true identity of the Spirit working through Jesus. Jesus pointed out that the Spirit was with the disciples, for he was upon Jesus, and in his relation to the person of Christ they knew him. The point Jesus is making is important for the doctrine of the trinity. The focus is on the person of the Son—here is the focal point of revelation. The Spirit works as the invisible divine presence to manifest Christ, but he is only known to us as we confess Christ.

Those who confess Christ as the Son, receive a new view of God. In the Son they see God as the Father and see that God exists in true and full personhood in a divine relationship. When we see this about God's very identity, then we see that the Spirit is also as a divine person. This is how Jesus introduces and makes him known to the disciples. The world at best senses the Spirit as a presence of power more akin to wind (Jn 3.8, remember that the Hebrew and Greek words for spirit have the sense of moving air as wind or breath), but the believer knows the Spirit as a full divine person within the personal relationships of the trinity.

a. The Spirit's role in relation to the Son

Jesus gave his personal introduction to the Spirit as his successor on earth. He introduced the Spirit in his relationship to the disciples (14.16-17), his teaching role (14.26), his witness (15.26-27) and his role in convicting the world and glorifying the Son (16.8-15). The role of the Spirit, however, does not define his identity. Jesus identifies him by his relationship to the Son and the Father. In John 14 to 16 the Spirit is identified within the relationships in the Godhead. He is not seen as a power or influence working on us but as a divine person who is related to the Son and Father. This defines his whole work.

The Spirit takes the place of Christ: Jesus introduced the Spirit as “another helper” (14.16). This means that the disciples already had a “helper” whose place the Spirit would take, and this first helper was Jesus. The Greek word for another here is *allos*, and it strictly means another of the same kind in contrast to *hetros* which refers to another of a different kind. The Spirit is another of the same kind as the Son. Jesus points out two differences involved in the coming of the Spirit. First, whereas Jesus was with the disciples for a while and had to leave, the Spirit would be with them forever, and that includes eternity (v 16). Second, the Spirit who was *with* them while Jesus was on earth would be *in* them after he returned to his Father (v 17).

The Spirit works exclusively in relation to the Son: Jesus said to his disciples, “He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you” (14.26). In the context of the world's rejection of Christ, Jesus said that the Spirit would testify about him, and the disciples would also testify (15.26-27). The Spirit testifies as he who proceeds from the Father and so is the direct and full divine witness to the Son, and the disciples would be the historical eyewitnesses of Christ. The Spirit will convict the world of sin, righteousness and judgment by pressing on the world the great facts that the world did not believe in the Son, that the Son went to the Father and that through the cross the ruler of the world has been judged (16.8-11). The Spirit gives the divine witness to the great realities that transpired through the cross and resurrection of Jesus. He also discloses those things of Christ that are beyond what Jesus could tell the disciples while on earth. Whatever was still to come and to be unfolded in the work of the Son, the Spirit would disclose. Here Jesus makes the Spirit's role total: all that is the Father's is the Son's and the Spirit

would take all of this and disclose it to the disciples (16.12-15). This means that the Spirit's work has the same scope as the Father and Son's work. There is nothing that belongs to the Father and the Son that the Spirit does not take and disclose. In this he will glorify the Son (v 14) for he will establish the full deity of the Son and put into effect the Son's work of making the Father fully known in his person.

There is a parallel between the Father-Son relationship and the Son-Spirit relationship: Jesus sets forth the Spirit's relationship with the Son in Jn 16.13 in a way that is parallel to the Son's relationship with the Father in Jn 5.19-20,30. Like the Son, the Spirit will not act or speak of his own initiative. As the Son only said what he heard from his Father, so the Spirit will only speak what he hears. He will take what is the Son's and disclose that. Here Jesus makes clear that the Spirit is a person, with a will and intelligence, who operates in a personal relationship just as the Son works in a personal relationship with the Father.

b. The Spirit establishes the truth of the trinity

When we follow what Jesus says about the Spirit in relation to the Son and the Father we see him within the trinity of divine persons. More, he establishes in his very presence in us the reality of the trinity.

The Spirit brings with him the presence of the Son and the Father: Jesus was leaving the disciples to be with the Father in heaven, but in the coming of the Spirit to be in the disciples the Father and the Son would make their abode with them (14.23). The Father was in the Son so that whoever saw the Son saw the Father (14.9-10). Similarly, the Father and Son are in the Spirit and where the Spirit dwells the Father and the Son make their residence. This means that in the Spirit the whole trinity is represented and present.

The Spirit establishes the full unity of the trinity: The Spirit will glorify the Son by taking of what is the Son's and disclosing it to the disciples (16.14). Jesus is being very precise here. He does not take from the Father and give to us. He only takes from the Son, but he takes from the Son as having in his own person all that the Father has (v 15). This means that the Spirit makes the Father known to us as being in the Son. He does not know of the Father as separate from the Son in anything. He makes the Son known as having as his own all that is the Father's. At the same time, the Spirit knows no separation from the Son. He does nothing of his own initiative and takes all that is in the Son as that with which he works. All that is the Father's is the Son's and all that is the Son's is taken up by the Spirit in his work, so that in the Spirit we have the whole reality of the triune God.

The Spirit establishes the equality, interdependence and distinctions in the trinity:

The Father and the Son: Both the Father (14.16,26) and the Son (15.26; 16.7) send the Spirit, and this establishes the equality between the Father and the Son in our life. The Spirit also establishes the interdependence between the Father and the Son. The Father gives the Spirit at the Son's request (14.16) and sends him in the Son's name (14.26). The Son sends him from the Father as the Spirit who proceeds from the Father (15.26).

The Son and the Spirit: The fact that the Spirit is sent by, and ever proceeds directly from, the Father makes him equal to the Son who comes from the Father. The Spirit is not one step removed from the Father and so is not inferior to the Son. The Spirit's work has the same extent as the Son's work. He takes all that is the Son's and discloses this. In this he has the same capacity as the Father, for in taking all that is the Son's he actually takes all that is the Father's (16.15). He is truly and in every way "another helper" who, in the life of the disciples, takes the place of the Son in the fullest way.

The distinctions among the divine persons: The Father's distinctive is that he gives all that is his to the Son. The Son's distinctive is that he does and speaks all that he sees and hears from the Father. The Spirit's distinctive is that he takes all and discloses it to us.

Jesus identified the Spirit within the relationships of the trinity. As a person in the Godhead, he has his role in fully realizing the divine work revealed in Jesus as the Son of the Father. He is not seen as a divine power that simply influences or works on us with divine might. Rather, he is a real person who works only within the personal relationships of the trinity. Thus, his work in us is not the experience of spiritual influence or power but the awareness and knowledge of the Son.

3. Taking in the witness of the Son and the Spirit

The apostolic teaching on the triune workings of God is a truth beyond and even contrary to human religious and philosophical thought, but the person who has faith has a real connection with it. We know God in the way he relates to us and has carried out his work for us and works in us. The order of the divine operations are comprehensible to and appreciated by the believer: the Father is the eternal cause of all of God's ways, the Son executes God's purpose and reveals him in time and the Spirit makes all real and actual within us. The vantage point from which we can see the truth of this is simply the position in grace—all is done by God. The apostles taught this much. What Jesus testified to in the Gospel of John agrees with this but goes deeper. He disclosed how the three are related, not first of all to creation and God's people, but to each other, and here the mind is faced with a reality that is wholly outside of human experience and thought.

Jesus opened up to the disciples the unique reality of the Godhead in Jn 14.1-11. He began the discussion with the command, "...believe in God, believe also in me" (14.1). We must take in the full implications of this command. The disciples are not to believe in God and only believe what Jesus said, as if he was a mere prophet. No, Jesus presents himself as the object of faith along with God. Here the Christian begins in his grasp of the trinity—he equally believes in the Son and in God the Father. Jesus pointed out how the Son and the Father are linked in our faith in v 6: the Son is the only way to the Father (v 6). No one comes to the Father but by him, and this means we can only believe in the Father and have him as we believe in the Son. For faith, the Son and the Father are inseparable, and we only have the Father in the Son. The fact that the identities of the Son and Father are inseparable escaped the grasp of the disciples.

The disciples conceived of the Father as a being who exists apart from the Son so that Jesus could show him by himself just like I can show my father by presenting him as standing apart from me (v 8). The disciples did not realize that this was impossible due to the relationship between the divine Son and the Father. Jesus pointed out that the he is in the Father and the Father is in him, so that to see the Father is to see the Son (vv 9-10). The Father and the Son are not separable beings that can be shown on their own. They have their identity and very being in each other so that each is in the other. We can grasp something of the concept involved by looking at the identities of a father and a son. A man cannot be a father in himself. He is only a father in his son. Yes, in an interesting way, the son makes the man a father. Conversely, a son is only a son via his father. Let's apply this to demonstration. The father cannot show his fatherhood in himself. Only the son can reveal that he is a father. Also, a son cannot prove that he is a son by himself. The fact must be shown by the father. Father and son are correlated and interrelated identities. In the case of human beings, the identities of father and son are added to the existence of the two males. The father is a man independent of the boy, and the boy is a person separate from the father. But, in the Godhead this is not the case. God the Father is only God and the Father in his Son and the Son is only God and the Son in his Father. They cannot be conceived of as solitary beings, and they cannot be known outside of their relationship with each other. This reality determined the revelation of God. No one can see the Father (Jn 1.18; 6.46), but then the Father has no independent existence. He is what he is only in relation to the Son so that he can only be seen in the Son. Also, no one knows the Son except for the Father (Matt 11.27) and only the Father can reveal the Son (Matt 16.17; Jn 6.44-46).

Jesus' question in v 10, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in me?" shows the disciples were dumbfounded. It's not that they did not want to believe but that they just could not grasp the concept Jesus was presenting. Jesus gave them directions in their struggle by pointing to his works (v 10) and saying, "Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; otherwise believe me because of the works themselves" (Jn 14.11). If they could not comprehend, they still could "believe because of the works themselves." Jesus' works showed the dynamics of the relationship between the Father and the Son, and he opened this up in John 5. The disciples had to begin here. What he set before the people through his works was that God is one, not as a solitary being in heaven, but in a relationship. The one invisible God is from within himself related as Father to Son. A believing heart could believe the works, but the struggle was to believe the unique relationship between the Father and the Son manifested through the works. Here the disciples came to their wits end.

The answer to the disciples' inability to comprehend is given in the Spirit (14.16-17). The Son returned to the Father so that he is seen with the Father as the object of faith instead of sight (see Jn 20.29). From heaven the Father and Son together sent the Spirit to the disciples, and the Spirit makes them see the fact that the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son. To see how this works we must understand the relationship between the Spirit and the Son. The Son is not known in himself but only in the Spirit's relationship with him (Jn 1.32-34). The Son's full equality with the Father is seen in that the Spirit is sent by him as well as by the Father. The Spirit also makes real to us that the Father, Son and Spirit are in each other, for in the indwelling Spirit, the Father and the Son (who are in heaven) make their abode in us. The Spirit who indwells us is related to and points us to the Father and Son in heaven as distinct from him, but at the same time in his person the Father and Son reside in us. So by the Spirit the believer is made to see the three persons in the way they are interrelated to each other.

Jesus testifies to one further feature in the Godhead. The three relate to each other freely by their will. It is a unity of voluntary self-limitation (that they will do nothing in separation or independence from the others), full sharing (not withholding or stopping short of anything in giving and receiving) and free interaction. The Father gives out of love for the Son and shows and speaks to him. The Son sees, listens, obeys and reveals. The Spirit takes, discloses and gives all back to God. They are real persons, distinct but inseparable. They have their own personal will, but are totally one and will never, yea cannot ever, part in will. Each carries out the whole work of the Godhead in his relation with the others.

Our problem in grasping this revelation of God lies in the fact that there is nothing like the trinity in creation. Within creation, personal creatures, i.e., angels and human beings, have their existence and will as independent from each other. Though created by God they exist outside of God and have a solitary identity over against God, and this makes sin and separation from God possible. In our experience, to be one personal being is to be a separate Self and a solitary being who has a will of his own that can turn against others, including God. I am one person and the relationships in which I live are given to me and external to me. With God it is different. He is one in a profounder and fuller way. The relationships in which he exists are not external to him. He exists by his very nature in the perfection of personal relationships, and this is love. God is personal and wholly self-existing and self-sufficient. This means that the relational nature of personhood is in him eternally, and for this reason God is love.

Jesus, in Jn 14.1-17, outlined the path along which we learn the truth of the triune nature of God. We begin by believing in God as well as in the Son and seeing the Son as the way to the Father. We have the Father by receiving the Son. The concept of the Father and Son as two persons who are one is difficult to grasp at first. The Christians begin by seeing the reality of the triune nature in the works of the Son, not so much in his miracles but in his greater works of dying for our sins and giving us life and the Spirit. The indwelling Spirit makes us see God from within making us relate to God through the way the divine persons work in the triune relationships. In this living reality, we grasp the truth itself and believe, not simply because of the works, but because of the truth of the triune nature of God. We do not believe because we understand but we understand because we believe, and the believing leads to profound understanding.

The doctrine of the trinity explains God, not as defined by our creaturely self-consciousness, but by the unity in which God exists. The very concept is not thought up by the human mind but revealed in Christ, and this opens up the deep conflict. God as revealed in Christ contradicts our natural way of thinking about God and ourselves in relation to him. To fully grasp the truth of the trinity we must understand this conflict, for here we learn what we have to surrender and what grace we need to know God in the Son.