

# The Trinity: *An Introduction*

SCOTT R. SWAIN



SHORT STUDIES *in*  
SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

*Edited by* Graham A. Cole & Oren R. Martin

“The often-repeated baptismal words ‘in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ contain the profoundest truth Christians ever hear. They show us who God is, and they teach us who we are. That is why we need to grow in our understanding and experience of them. Scott Swain helps us to do that in this welcome contribution to Short Studies in Systematic Theology. The book lives up to its description: it is *short* (Swain gets straight to the point); it invites you to *study* (no superficiality here); and it is *systematic theology* (and Swain is exceptionally gifted in it). Plus, you will be able to understand Swain; and you can trust what he writes. What more could you ask for in such a compact treatment?”

**Sinclair B. Ferguson**, Chancellor’s Professor of Systematic Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary; Teaching Fellow, Ligonier Ministries

“Only a very gifted teacher can select the most important things to say about the holy Trinity, especially for a wide audience. Lucid, rich with scriptural interpretation, and deeply informed by the Christian tradition, this is the first book I will recommend to anyone looking for clarity that yields a harvest of delight in the triune God.”

**Michael Horton**, J. Gresham Machen Professor of Systematic Theology and Apologetics, Westminster Seminary California

“What a powerful instrument this little book is, meeting the need of our moment for clear and precise teaching on this most important subject. Would you rather read a book on the Trinity that invites you into the worship of God and gives profound insight into his ways or a book that is guaranteed to provide safe, reliable, and responsible instruction? There is no need to choose: this book does it all, and in admirably brief compass.”

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

“Swain here takes up the practice of the ancient church, teaching the company of the baptized the grammar of the name of the one God into whose life they enter by water: ‘Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.’ This is a wonderful primer to the grammar of ‘Trinitarian discourse,’ a grammar that is needed not simply to talk theological shop with the professionals but, more importantly, to read the Bible fluently, to name God correctly, to discern the true triune God from idols, and to praise the name of the one who invites us into the fellowship of the Father and the Son through the Spirit. This book edifies even as it educates.”

**Kevin J. Vanhoozer**, Research Professor of Systematic Theology, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School; author, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?*; *The Drama of Doctrine*; and *Biblical Authority after Babel*

“Through his attentive comprehension of Scripture and with prudence and ease, Scott Swain creates a profound and engaging portrayal of the triune God whom Christians worship. *The Trinity* will doubtless become the standard text for those requiring an accessible primer for this foundational doctrine. But the book’s concise nature should not lull the expert, for Swain also offers persuasive verdicts defending classic orthodoxy against both contemporary and ancient challenges.”

**Malcolm B. Yarnell III**, Research Professor of Theology, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; author, *Who Is the Holy Spirit?* and *God the Trinity*

“This book is easily the best introduction to the doctrine of the Trinity that I know of. Scott Swain shows not just *that* the Bible teaches the Trinity but *how* it does so. With lucid brevity he introduces crucial, classical distinctions that help us discern the Bible’s Trinitarian grammar. Reading this book will help you to proclaim and praise the triune God more fluently. I plan to give away many copies to members of my church.”

**Bobby Jamieson**, Associate Pastor, Capitol Hill Baptist Church, Washington, DC; author, *Jesus’ Death and Heavenly Offering in Hebrews*

# The Trinity

## SHORT STUDIES IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Edited by Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

*Faithful Theology: An Introduction*, Graham A. Cole (2020)

*The Trinity: An Introduction*, Scott R. Swain (2020)

# The Trinity

*An Introduction*

Scott R. Swain

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To four friends  
valiant for the truth and honor  
of the blessed Trinity

Aimee Byrd  
Liam Goligher  
Todd Pruitt  
Carl Trueman



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## Series Preface

The ancient Greek thinker Heraclitus reputedly said that the thinker has to listen to the essence of things. A series of theological studies dealing with the traditional topics that make up systematic theology needs to do just that. Accordingly, in these studies, theologians address the essence of a doctrine. This series thus aims to present short studies in theology that are attuned to both the Christian tradition and contemporary theology in order to equip the church to faithfully understand, love, teach, and apply what God has revealed in Scripture about a variety of topics. What may be lost in comprehensiveness can be gained through what John Calvin, in the dedicatory epistle of his commentary on Romans, called “lucid brevity.”

Of course, a thorough study of any doctrine will be longer rather than shorter, as there are two millennia of confession, discussion, and debate with which to interact. As a result, a short study needs to be more selective but deftly so. Thankfully, the contributors to this series have the ability to be brief yet accurate. The key aim is that the simpler is not to morph into the simplistic. The test is whether the topic of a short study, when further studied in depth, requires some unlearning to take place. The simple can be amplified. The simplistic needs to be corrected. As editors, we believe that the volumes in this series pass that test.

While the specific focus varies, each volume (1) introduces the doctrine, (2) sets it in context, (3) develops it from Scripture, (4) draws the various threads together, and (5) brings it to bear on the Christian life. It is our prayer, then, that this series will assist the church to delight in her triune God by thinking his thoughts—which he has graciously revealed in his written word, which testifies to his living Word, Jesus Christ—after him in the powerful working of his Spirit.

Graham A. Cole and Oren R. Martin

# Acknowledgments

Under God's good providence, the present work has a deep cause and a proximate one. The deep cause is the long-standing encouragement of my wife, Leigh, that I write something on the Trinity for a popular audience. Though her suggested title, *You, Me, and the Trinity*, did not survive the publisher's scrutiny, this book is in large measure a response to her encouragement.

The proximate cause for the book is the Trinitarian controversy of 2016. That controversy revealed severe cracks in the foundation of evangelical Trinitarian theology. It also revealed the need for significant re-catechizing of the evangelical mind. I hope to make a small contribution to such re-catechizing in this study.

In addition to these two causes, thanks are due to many others who contributed to making this book possible. Chancellor Ligon Duncan and the Board of Trustees of Reformed Theological Seminary (especially Chairman Richard Ridgway and Admiral Scott Redd) have continued to encourage my pursuit of scholarship amid administrative and teaching responsibilities. Keith Whitfield, vice president for academic administration at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, North Carolina, generously provided a hospitable setting for research and writing on the beautiful campus of Southeastern in the summers of 2018 and 2019. Christina Mansfield provided

research and administrative assistance with characteristic excellence and good cheer. My colleague Leigh Swanson read the entire manuscript and offered helpful recommendations for its improvement.

Justin Taylor and the good folks at Crossway have been a pleasure to work with on this project. I am also grateful to Graham Cole and Oren Martin for the invitation to contribute to their series and for their wise editorial oversight and advice.

Over the summer of 2016 I had hundreds of exchanges about the Trinity with four friends in particular: two pastors (Liam Goligher and Todd Pruitt), a lay theologian (Aimee Byrd), and a professor of church history (Carl Trueman). In gratitude for their courageous defense of orthodox Christian teaching on the Trinity in various settings and their recommendation that I contribute something to the discussion as well, I dedicate this book to them.

# Introduction

## **Praising the Triune God**

Christians praise one God in three persons, the blessed Trinity. We do so by proclaiming God's triune name in baptism (Matt. 28:19), by invoking his name in benedictions (2 Cor. 13:14), by binding ourselves to his name when confessing our faith (1 Cor. 8:6; 12:3), and by hymning his name in our songs, joining the chorus of heavenly beings with all the saints in heaven and earth (Rev. 4–5).

Christians praise God the Trinity because he is supremely worthy of our praise. The blessed Trinity is supreme in being, beauty, and beatitude.

The LORD is a great God,  
and a great King above all gods. (Ps. 95:3)

His “glory” is “above the heavens” (Ps. 8:1). He is “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords” (1 Tim. 6:15). Though the triune God is worthy of all the praise he receives (Rev. 4:11; 5:9–10, 12), our praise falls far short of his majestic greatness. He is God beyond all praising (Neh. 9:5), beyond all human comprehending. “His greatness is unsearchable” (Ps. 145:3).

Christians praise the triune God not only in response to the greatness of his being, beauty, and beatitude. We also

praise him in response to the wonder of his works of creation, redemption, and consummation. The thrice-holy God is worthy “to receive glory and honor and power” because he “created all things” (Rev. 4:11). The Lamb who sits on the throne is worthy

to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might  
and honor and glory and blessing! (Rev. 5:12)

For he redeemed us by his blood and made us a kingdom of priests to our God (Rev. 5:9–10). The Spirit is worthy of our praise because he opens our eyes to behold the majesty of God’s being and works (Rev. 4:2–3), because he enables us to receive every spiritual blessing by his indwelling presence (Eph. 1:3), because he opens our lips to declare God’s praise (1 Cor. 12:3; Gal. 4:6), and because he assures us that God will one day consummate his kingdom, in which—in and with our Lord Jesus Christ—we will reign on the earth as a kingdom of priests (Eph. 1:13–14; Rev. 5:10).

In praising God’s triune name, we do not praise him as mere spectators, stunned before the magnificence of his being and works. Christian praise of God the Trinity is self-involving. The God who *is* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the author and end of all things, wills to be *our* Father, through the Son, in the Spirit. The blessed Trinity who dwells in a high and holy place, who inhabits eternity, whose name is holy, wills also to dwell among us and to make us eternally blessed through union and communion with him, to the praise of his glorious grace (Lev. 26:12; Isa. 57:15; John 14:23; 2 Cor. 6:16, 18; Eph. 1:3–14).

The self-involving nature of Christian faith in the Trinity is exhibited, perhaps most clearly, in Christian baptism. There the name of the triune God is proclaimed in the word of the

minister and put on us with the washing of water (Matt. 28:19; Eph. 5:26). In baptism the God who is Father, Son, and Spirit signifies and seals to us that he is our Father, through union with the Son, by the indwelling of the Spirit and that we are God's sons and daughters, fellow heirs with Christ of an eternal kingdom (Rom. 8:17; Gal. 3:26; 4:6–7). Thereafter, the entire Christian life is about learning to “put on” the reality signified and sealed to us through baptism in God's triune name (Gal. 3:27), about receiving all that goes with having the triune God as our God, and about growing up into his praise within the communion of saints.<sup>1</sup>

### **A Short Study in Systematic Theology**

In keeping with the aims of the larger series of which the present study is a part, this book is intended to be a “short study in systematic theology.” Systematic theology, as a field of discourse, takes God and all things in relation to God as its object and Holy Scripture as its supreme source and norm. In doing so, systematic theology seeks to promote fluency, formation, and fellowship with the triune God among its major ends. A word about how each of these elements of systematic theology relates to the present topic is in order.

Systematic theology takes God and all things in relation to God as its object. Systematic theology focuses on God: his being, attributes, persons, and decrees; as well as the works of God: creation, providence, redemption, sanctification, and consummation. In each instance, God is the organizing principle of systematic theology. When considering any doctrine, systematic theology asks, how does this doctrine relate to God as its author and end (Rom. 11:36)? Thus, for example,

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1. Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 10.26.

systematic theology does not consider human beings in general terms. It considers human beings as creatures made in the image of God, as rebels who have sinned against God, thereby bringing misery upon themselves, and as objects of God's redeeming, sanctifying, and consummating work. The specific focus of the present study is the principal subject matter of systematic theology: the blessed Trinity in his being and works.

Systematic theology takes Holy Scripture as its supreme source and norm. God reveals himself in a multitude of ways: through creation and conscience, through miracles and theophanies, and supremely through his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 1:18–32; Heb. 1:1–4). Holy Scripture is God's Spirit-inspired testimony to Jesus Christ. As such, Holy Scripture is the supreme source and norm for our knowledge of the triune God in his being and works (2 Tim. 3:15–17). In this book, our main focus is on the scriptural patterns of naming the triune God and the way those patterns have been received and confessed by the church in response to the triune God's self-revelation in Holy Scripture.

Among its major ends, systematic theology seeks to promote fluency, formation, and fellowship. Because it focuses on God and all things in relation to God as these realities are revealed in Holy Scripture, systematic theology aims at making us more fluent readers of Holy Scripture. Because the God who reveals himself in Holy Scripture also writes its message on our hearts by the Holy Spirit, systematic theology seeks to serve the Spirit's work of forming in us the image of Jesus Christ. In this regard, systematic theology seeks to shape our judgment, our affections, and our actions. Finally, systematic theology seeks to promote fellowship with the object of theology, God himself. God is the sovereign good that systematic

theology pursues, and fellowship with God (and with one another in God) is the supreme means of engaging with God the sovereign good.

How does this volume relate to these various ends? It seeks to cultivate greater fluency in following the basic “grammar” of Scripture’s Trinitarian discourse.<sup>2</sup> In so doing, the present study seeks to form Christian judgment—specifically, the capacity for distinguishing the true and living God from idols. This study also aims to shape our capacities for receiving and responding to the blessed Trinity as he presents himself to us in his word: directing our faith to receive the triune God as our God, to hold fast to the triune God in love, and to call upon the triune God in prayer, proclamation, and praise. Finally, the present study seeks to promote fellowship with the triune God, the sovereign good of systematic theology. Ultimately our fluency as readers of Holy Scripture and our formation in Christian virtue are ordered to this supreme end, the triune God himself, who gives himself to us as our supreme good in the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 13:14).

As a species of catechetical theology, this “short study” in systematic theology intends to offer a brief introduction to Christian teaching on the holy Trinity, with a focus on scriptural patterns of divine naming. The book’s limitations in space and focus mean that it will not give extensive attention to the doctrine’s historical development, polemical uses, or more

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2. In order to grasp any distinct field of discourse, we must grasp not only the meaning of various terms used within that field (i.e., its “lexicon”) but also the relationships that obtain between various terms used within that field (i.e., its “syntax”). Taken together, the lexicon and syntax that distinguish a particular field of discourse constitute its basic “grammar” (Paul J. Griffiths, *The Practice of Catholic Theology: A Modest Proposal* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016], 97–105). If Scripture provides the primary discourse of Trinitarian doctrine, theology is that discipline concerned with understanding and communicating Scripture’s basic grammar so that Christians may become fluent, well-formed readers and speakers of scriptural teaching.

sophisticated dogmatic elaborations. Nevertheless, I hope that by introducing the basic grammar of scriptural Trinitarianism, this book may encourage more advanced study of these other topics as well.<sup>3</sup>

This work is designed to serve beginning students of theology, whether enrolled in a formal program of theological study or not, pastors seeking to review the main contours of Trinitarian teaching, and interested laypersons. In each case, it is written to help Christians enter more fully into the praise of the triune name into which we are baptized. How shall we proceed?

## **An Overview of Chapters**

Christians praise the triune God because that is how God presents himself to us in Holy Scripture: as one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. By his word, God reveals his triune name in Holy Scripture. By his Spirit, God takes his triune name, as revealed in Holy Scripture, and writes it on our hearts, training us to call upon his name in prayer, proclamation, and praise. For this reason, the God-breathed Scriptures are the primary discourse of Trinitarian theology. Thus, we commence our study with a survey of scriptural teaching on the Trinity.

Taking the triune name in which we were baptized as our starting point (Matt. 28:19), chapter 1 considers various patterns of biblical discourse that reflect the grammar of God's triune name. Chapter 2 then moves to consider representative biblical texts that can assist us in gaining greater fluency in the praise of God's triune name, concluding with a summary of biblical teaching on the Trinity.

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3. For further discussion of the historical development of the doctrine of the Trinity, see Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History, and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012); and Carl L. Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity* (Ft. Wayne, IN: The Luther Academy, 2016).

Following our survey of the Bible's primary Trinitarian discourse, we turn to a more thematic treatment of the doctrine in chapters 3–8. Because baptism identifies God in himself (Matt. 28:19), we contemplate, first, the one God in his internal relations as Father, Son, and Spirit (chaps. 3–6). Because baptism also identifies God in relation to us (Gal. 3:26–27), we contemplate, second, the one God in his external relations whereby, through his external works, he becomes our Father, through the Son, by the Spirit, to the praise of his glory (chaps. 7–8).

Christian teaching on the Trinity is teaching about the one God. Chapter 3 thus considers the doctrine of divine simplicity, an essential feature of orthodox Trinitarian theology. Chapters 4–6 then look at the three persons that constitute the life of the one God. Chapter 4 considers the person of the Father, chapter 5 the person of the Son, and chapter 6 the person of the Holy Spirit. Over the course of these chapters, I address topics such as the nature of analogical language, the nature of divine persons, and important matters of controversy in Trinitarian theology (e.g., the question of eternal relations of authority and submission between the Father and the Son).

Chapters 7–8 then consider the triune God in his external works. Chapter 7 looks at the shape of God's triune work, giving attention to the "appropriation" of specific works to specific persons of the Trinity, as well as to the "missions" of the Son and the Spirit.

Chapter 8 looks at the end of God's triune work (i.e., God himself), along with the beneficiaries of God's triune work (i.e., his beloved children) and the means whereby God communicates himself to his beloved children through the ministry of word and sacrament, which are received by faith, hope,

and love. In attending to the latter topics, chapter 8 sketches in brief outline a Trinitarian theology of ministry and the Christian life.

## Conclusion

No topic of study is more rewarding, or more challenging, than the doctrine of the Trinity. Nor is any topic of study fraught with greater possibility of error.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, we may enter our study with confidence because the triune God has revealed himself in his word. It is God's good pleasure that we would know him, that we would receive him, and that our souls would find rest in him (Matt. 11:25–30).

Moreover, in spite of the many limitations of our study—we know only in part, not yet face-to-face (1 Cor. 13:12); we are both finite and fallen—God has promised sure help for our study through Jesus Christ our Redeemer, the Lion and the Lamb (Rev. 4–5). In union with Jesus Christ, by the Spirit, we have access to the Father (Eph. 2:18). And so we may confidently pray,

Let my soul live and praise you,  
and let your rules help me. (Ps. 119:175)

Learning to praise the blessed Trinity holds broad implications for many fields of discourse, from metaphysics to epistemology, from ethics to aesthetics. That said, learning to praise the Trinity does not derive its importance or usefulness from its ability to serve other enterprises. Learning to know the triune God, to receive the triune God, to rejoice in the triune God—and learning to help others do the same—is an end in itself, because the triune God is the ultimate end of all things (Rom. 11:36).

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4. Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. Edmund Hill (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991), 1.5.

Here is the treasure hidden in a field and the pearl of great price: knowing, receiving, loving, and praising the Father, through the Son, in the fellowship of the Spirit (Matt. 13:44–46; John 17:3). To him be glory forever.



# The Bible and the Trinity

## The Basic Grammar

Christians praise the triune God because that is how God presents himself to us in Holy Scripture: as one God in three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the primary discourse of Trinitarian theology. Fluently, almost effortlessly, the prophets and apostles narrate, bless, pray, and sing the name of the triune God. In its own mysterious way, the Old Testament speaks of the Trinity, portraying God as a sovereign speech agent who created all things by his Word and Spirit (Gen. 1:1–3; Ps. 33:6, 9), inviting us to overhear conversations between the Lord and his anointed Son (Pss. 2; 110), and prompting us to wonder about the threefold repetition of YHWH's name in the Aaronic Benediction (Num. 6:22–27) and about the true identity of Wisdom in Proverbs 8.

The veiled riddles of Old Testament Trinitarian revelation are resolved in the New Testament's announcement of the

incarnation of the Son and the outpouring of the Spirit. Often-times taking up the express language of the Old Testament, the New Testament draws more definitive lines in portraits only sketched in Old Testament texts (compare Gen. 1:1–3 with John 1:1–3), clarifies the identity of speakers in otherwise ambiguous Old Testament conversations (compare Ps. 2 with Heb. 1, and Ps. 110 with Mark 12:35–37), and recognizes Wisdom as more than a literary personification, identifying him as God’s beloved Son, the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation (Col. 1:13–20; Heb. 1:3). The primary discourse of New Testament Trinitarianism includes the heavenly pronouncements overheard at Jesus’s baptism and at the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 3:17; 17:5), the praise and petitions Jesus offers his Father (Matt. 11:25–27; John 17), and the various triadic patterns that occur in baptismal formulas (Matt. 28:19), blessings (Eph. 1:3–14), and benedictions (2 Cor. 13:14).

The climax of God’s work of redemption brings with it the climax of God’s triune self-revelation.

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God. (Gal. 4:4–7)

The God who is Father, Son, and Spirit has reached out through the Son and by the Spirit to embrace us as sons and daughters to the end that we may call God our Father in the Spirit of the Son.

What we find in later Trinitarian creeds, confessions, and doctrinal summaries are not improvements upon a latent or

undeveloped biblical Trinitarianism but, rather, the church's attempt to fathom the depth of the riches of biblical Trinitarianism for the sake of various liturgical, pedagogical, and polemical ends. Some of the church's creeds, confessions, and doctrinal summaries represent such faithful expressions of scriptural teaching and enjoy such wide-ranging ecclesiastical consensus that we dare not transgress the lines they have drawn. Rather, taking them on our own lips, we gladly join the church's chorus of Trinitarian praise.

Even then, scriptural Trinitarianism retains its status as primary Trinitarian discourse, not just in the sense that the Bible's Trinitarian discourse is the source and norm of Trinitarian doctrine, but also in the sense that the Bible's Trinitarian discourse is Trinitarian theology's normative "pattern" (2 Tim. 1:13) and generative "standard" (Rom. 6:17) for fluent, well-formed Trinitarian praise: its grammar, its lexicon, and its syntax. Everything else is commentary.

If this is so, then the primary task of Trinitarian theology is to gain fluency in the Bible's primary Trinitarian discourse. We must learn to read it well. We must learn to grasp its terms, to follow its patterns, to make the identifications it makes, to mark the distinctions it marks. We must master its grammar. And we must learn to put that grammar to use in our own well-formed speech acts of prayer, proclamation, and praise of God's triune name. The purpose of the present chapter and the next is to assist us in this task.

As we saw in the introduction, we were baptized into God's triune name so that we might learn to praise God's triune name. The triune name into which we were baptized, "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19), encapsulates the basic grammar, the ABCs, of scriptural Trinitarianism. It thus provides a helpful

starting point for familiarizing ourselves with the basic patterns of the Bible's Trinitarian discourse. Following a discussion of the basic grammar of scriptural Trinitarianism in this chapter, the next chapter will consider three types of scriptural texts that give us a fuller sense of the Bible's Trinitarian discourse.

### **Baptized into the Name of the Triune God**

By encapsulating the basic grammar of the Bible's Trinitarian discourse, Matthew 28:19 provides a helpful rubric for tracing various patterns of biblical Trinitarian discourse and for gaining facility in Trinitarian praise.

#### *"The Name . . ."*

The first thing to observe in Matthew's baptismal formula is that "the name" into which we are baptized is singular, not plural. The faith into which we are baptized is faith in the one God. "For us there is one God," "one Lord" (1 Cor. 8:6), "one Spirit" (Eph. 4:4).

Note, then, a first pattern: *the Bible's Trinitarian discourse consistently affirms the existence of the one God.*

The Bible acknowledges the existence of many religions that worship many gods, and it constantly warns us of the snare that these gods pose to God's people. However, the Bible also insists that these gods are gods in name only (1 Cor. 8:5). In truth, they are "no gods," "the work of men's hands" (Isa. 37:19; Jer. 2:11, 28).<sup>1</sup> The Lord alone is "*the God*" (Deut. 4:35, my trans.). He alone is

a great God,  
and a great King above all gods. (Ps. 95:3)

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1. When the existence of other gods is acknowledged, they are identified as "demons" (Deut. 32:17; Ps. 106:37-38; 1 Cor. 10:20-21; Rev. 9:20; see also 2 Cor. 4:4).

He alone is the author and end of all things (Gen. 1:1; Isa. 41:4; 44:6, 24; John 1:1–3; Rom. 11:33–36; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:15–20), “the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last, the beginning and the end” (Rev. 22:13). What Moses teaches, Jesus confirms: the Lord is one and there is no other besides him (Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; Mark 12:29, 32).

One way Paul, the apostle to the Gentiles, signals God’s uniqueness over against the gods is by appealing to the distinction, common in antiquity, between those that are “called” gods for honorific reasons (e.g., Caesar) and those that are gods “by nature,” the latter possessing perfections, such as immortality, which are exclusive to the divine nature (Rom. 1:23; 1 Cor. 8:5; Gal. 4:8–9). Unlike much of antiquity, however, Paul insists that there is only one God who fits the bill in this regard. *All* other gods are “those that by nature are not gods” (Gal. 4:8). The significance is clear: the one God of Christian confession is not a member of a larger class of gods. He alone is God because he alone is God by nature, “the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light” (1 Tim. 6:15–16).

The Bible’s primary way of signaling God’s uniqueness is by means of God’s proper name, YHWH, often referred to as the “tetragrammaton” because it is composed of four Hebrew letters. As we have seen, the Bible frequently uses the title “god” to refer both to the one God and to those that are not actually gods. Furthermore, as I will discuss more fully in later chapters, the Bible uses an almost endless variety of creaturely terms to refer to the one God. God is called “Father,” “King,” “Maker,” “refuge,” and so forth. However, the Bible reserves the proper name YHWH for God alone. It is the one God’s “holy name” (Ps. 145:21), the glory he will not share with another (Isa. 48:11).

Because of its uniqueness, YHWH is a name that only God can interpret to us. Thankfully, God has done just that. The book of Exodus is, in many respects, YHWH's self-interpretation writ large. According to Exodus, the name YHWH signifies God's self-existence. He is the consuming fire that requires no fuel in order to burn (Ex. 3:2–3). The name YHWH signifies God's self-identity or simplicity (Ex. 3:14). God is identical with his existence (John 5:26) and his attributes (1 John 1:5); from age to age, he is the selfsame, eternal and unchanging (Ps. 102:27). The name YHWH also signifies God's self-determination to accomplish his sovereign purpose, unrivaled in the face of his enemies (Ex. 9:16), and to demonstrate his unbounded sovereign goodness in maintaining steadfast love and faithfulness toward unworthy sinners (Ex. 33:19; 34:6–7). This is the name of the Lord according to the Lord. "Holy is his name" (Luke 1:49).

Greek translations of the Old Testament often render God's proper name, YHWH, by the Greek term *kyrios* or "lord," a convention that the New Testament follows as well, along with many English translations. So, for example, where the Hebrew Bible of Joel 2:32 commends calling on the name of YHWH, the Greek translation of this passage, as well as the New Testament passages that quote it, commend calling on "the name of the Lord" (Acts 2:21; Rom. 10:13).

### *"The Name of . . ."*

This brings us back to Matthew 28:19. "The name" (singular!) in Matthew's baptismal formula is likely an "oblique reference" to God's proper name, YHWH.<sup>2</sup> Much like the title "Lord," it serves as a "surrogate" for the tetragrammaton.<sup>3</sup> This leads

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2. R. Kendall Soulen, *The Divine Name(s) and the Holy Trinity*, vol. 1, *Distinguishing the Voices* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2011), 176.

3. Soulen, *The Divine Name(s)*, 12.

us, in turn, to a second observation regarding Matthew's baptismal formula. If "the name" is a reference to God's proper name, YHWH, then, according to Matthew, the holy name of the Lord, the name that signifies—above all other names—the uniqueness of the one God, belongs to these three: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are the one God.

Note, then, a second pattern: *the Bible's Trinitarian discourse consistently identifies the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit with the one God.*

As we observed above, though the Bible recognizes the worship of many gods, occasionally acknowledging their (demonic!) existence, the Bible clearly affirms the existence of only one true God, the author and end of all things. The Bible, moreover, distinguishes the one God not only from all other would-be gods but also from all creatures by his unique name, YHWH or "the Lord," and by his unique perfections. The Lord God does not share his glory with another (Isa. 48:11). According to the entire witness of Holy Scripture, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are not three gods. Nor are they some confederation of the one God with lesser gods. These three are the one God.

First Corinthians 8:6 is representative of a broad pattern of biblical teaching in this regard: "For us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." This text identifies the Father and Jesus Christ with the one God, appropriating the language of Deuteronomy 6:4. And it places both the Father and Jesus Christ on the divine side of the distinction between the one God and "all things." We see similar patterns of identification in other biblical texts with respect to the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is identified with the one Lord God (Acts 5:3–4; 2 Cor. 3:17–18; Eph. 4:4), the

Maker of all things (Gen. 1:2; Ps. 33:6), to whom all praise and devotion are due (Matt. 12:31; 28:19).

***“The Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”***

The third thing to observe in Matthew’s baptismal formula is that, while the three are identified with the one God, they are nevertheless distinguished from each other by their personal names “the Father,” “the Son,” and “the Holy Spirit.” As should be clear by now, the distinction between the three persons<sup>4</sup> does not amount to a distinction between three Gods: there is *one* Spirit, *one* Lord, and *one* God the Father of all (Eph. 4:4–6). Nevertheless, the distinction between the three persons is real. The three are truly identical with the one God, and they are truly distinct from each other. What, then, is the nature of the distinction between the three? The answer lies in the personal names themselves—“Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit”—and in the way these names are illustrated and coordinated in the Bible’s Trinitarian discourse.

Note, then, a third pattern: *the Bible’s Trinitarian discourse consistently distinguishes the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit by their mutual relations, which are “relations of origin.”*

According to the Bible’s Trinitarian discourse, the personal names “Father,” “Son,” and “Spirit” name *mutual relations*—that is, relations between the persons. The Father is the “Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Eph. 1:3; 1 Pet. 1:3). The Son is the Father’s “beloved Son” (Matt. 3:17; Rom. 8:32; Gal. 4:4). The Holy Spirit is “the Spirit of God” (Matt. 3:16; 1 Cor. 2:11) and “the Spirit of Christ,” “the Spirit of his Son” (Rom. 8:9; Gal. 4:6). What distinguishes the persons of the Trinity from each

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4. I will discuss the origin of the term “person” in Trinitarian theology below. I will discuss the meaning of the concept in later chapters.

other are their relations to each other, not their relations to us. In fact, as we will see more fully in later chapters, the relations that the three persons hold toward us—for example, Creator, Redeemer, Lord—are something that the three persons hold in common as the one God, not something that distinguishes them from each other.

These relations, while mutual, are also *asymmetrical*. The Father eternally begets the Son (Ps. 2:7; John 1:18; 3:16; Heb. 1:5), not vice versa. The Father and the Son eternally breathe forth the Spirit (John 15:26; 20:22), not vice versa. In other words, the personal names of the Trinity distinguish the persons by means of “relations of origin.” The Father personally originates from no one. The Son personally originates from the person of the Father. And the Spirit personally originates from the persons of the Father and the Son.

The Bible further illumines these relations of origin by employing various titles or illustrations to describe the persons, which are often drawn from the Old Testament and other Jewish writings.<sup>5</sup> The Son is identified as the “Word” of God (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13), the “image” of the invisible God (Col. 1:15), and the “radiance” of the Father’s glory (Heb. 1:3). Each of these titles or illustrations reveals two things about the Son. On the one hand, these titles reveal that the Son is the one God in common with the Father. The Word is God (John 1:1). The image of the invisible God is the one by whom, in whom, and for whom creation exists (Col. 1:16–17). The radiance of God’s glory is the exact imprint of the Father’s substance (Heb. 1:3). On the other hand, these titles or illustrations also indicate what distinguishes the Father from the Son within the one God, namely, that the person of the Father is the eternal source of the

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5. This and the following paragraph draw closely upon Scott R. Swain, “Divine Trinity,” in *Christian Dogmatics: Reformed Theology for the Church Catholic*, ed. Michael Allen and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016).

person of the Son: the Son is the Word of God, the image of the invisible God, the radiance of the Father's glory. Relations of origin are relations of "from-ness."

In similar fashion, the Bible illustrates the Spirit's relation to the Father and the Son as a relation of origin. Particularly instructive are illustrations that associate the Holy Spirit with water. The Spirit is "poured" out by the Father (Rom. 5:5) and by the Son (Acts 2:33). He is the element with which Jesus baptizes his disciples (Mark 1:8; 1 Cor. 12:13). And he is the living water that flows from the throne of God and of the Lamb (Rev. 22:1). This imagery at once identifies the Holy Spirit with the one God as the divine source of spiritual life and as one who personally proceeds from the person of the Father and from the person of the Son.

### **Conclusion: Common Predication and Proper Predication**

We will explore these patterns more fully in the chapters that follow. For now, it is important to take stock of what we have observed. As we noted above, gaining fluency in the Bible's Trinitarian discourse requires learning to make the right identifications and to mark the right distinctions. In surveying the Bible's Trinitarian discourse under the rubric of Matthew's baptismal formula, we observed patterns of divine naming that *identify* the three persons with the one God and patterns that *distinguish* the three persons from each other. In light of these two patterns, it will be useful to give each of them a label: *Common predications* are patterns of speech that refer to what the three persons of the Trinity hold in common with each other as the one God. They are "the Lord." They are the author and end of all creatures. And so forth. *Proper predications* are patterns of speech that refer to that which distinguishes the three persons of the Trinity

from each other within the one God. This one is the Father of the Son. That one is the Son of the Father. And that one is the Spirit of the Father and the Son. And so forth.

Familiarity with these two patterns of divine naming, and the ability to identify them by their labels, will grant us greater fluency in reading the Bible's Trinitarian discourse moving forward and in understanding important discussions in the chapters ahead. Familiarity with these patterns will also grant us greater fluency as we seek to fulfill our baptismal vow in petitioning, proclaiming, and praising God's triune name, which is the point of Trinitarian theology.

## *The Trinity is one of the most essential doctrines of the Christian faith.*

The eternal God existing as three distinct persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—can be difficult to comprehend. While Christians often struggle to find the right words to describe this union, the Bible gives clarity concerning the triune God’s being and activity in nature (creation), grace (redemption), and glory (reward). In this concise volume, theologian Scott Swain examines the doctrine of the Trinity, presenting its biblical foundations, systematic-theological structure, and practical relevance for the church today.

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