

The Doctrine of the Trinity

The Trinity: Understanding the Person-Nature Distinction

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“Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 [John 2:22–23, ESV](#)). These words, written by the apostle John to Christians who were suffering the departure of some from among them into great error, strike us with a weightiness not easily missed. The confession of the Father and the Son is one unitary confession such that to deny one Person is to deny the other.

When we take a little time to contemplate these words, we are reminded of some other statements that are made in Scripture. For example, the Lord Jesus challenged his disciples to consider his identity. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is? . . . Who do you say that I am?” ([Matt 16:13, 15](#)). The answers of the multitudes are varied as some identify him with John the Baptist, Elijah, and Jeremiah. Earlier, some even identified him—at least in terms of the power at work within him—with Beelzebul (i.e., Satan), the prince of demons ([Matt 12:24](#)). This is not Peter’s answer, however. His answer was one that corresponds with what is required in [1 John 2](#): “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” ([Matt 16:26](#)). Jesus tells Peter that the Father revealed this reality ([Matt 16:17](#)). Not only does the Father reveal who the Son is, but the Son reveals the Father as well.

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Jesus had earlier told his disciples, “no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” ([Matt 11:27](#)). What John says many years later, that confession of the Father and the Son are inseparable, fits with what he had learned at Jesus’ feet in those opening days of the gospel. In fact, John would go further, as would Paul ([1 Cor 2](#)), to say that this Confession is because the Holy Spirit bears witness to the identity of the Son ([1 John 4](#); cf. [Jn 15:26](#)). The Spirit of God is indeed God, one with the Father and the Son, into whose singular Name we are baptized. The one God is confessed throughout the Scriptures, and this God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, distinct in Persons, the Son from the Father and the Spirit from the Father and the Son.

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From even this brief tracing of the Christian’s knowledge of God in Christ, we can see that, in reality, to be a Christian is to be Trinitarian. Though precise terminology was developed through testing, we can say with the Athanasian Creed that whoever would (“*Quicumque vult*”) be saved must hold to the true faith, which is faith in the Trinity, and that the Trinity is that “which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved.” There are many things that go into a right understanding of the Trinity, and of course, our understanding will never be comprehensive (2LBCF 2.1), but here we are considering the fundamentals of the “Person-Nature distinction.” In working through this distinction, we are, in many ways, laying the groundwork for the articles that follow, so we will first look at some key Trinitarian grammar. Because Christians have been working at this for a long time, the precision can sometimes be difficult to understand immediately, so feel free to reread as you find yourself needing to.

BASICS BY NUMBER

The reason for “paint by number” sheets is to help the aspiring artist create something in which the necessary colors all end up in the right place, preventing distortion of the image you are aiming to present. Perhaps something like that can be helpful to us here in Trinitarian theology. In Trinitarian theology, counting to five helps us to prevent distortion in our presentation of the Trinity.

One: Essence. Of course, believers have always confessed that God is one. He is the self-existent Creator ([Gen 1:1](#)), who visits Moses in the burning bush with the name “I AM” ([Exod 3:14](#)), and places a confession on the lips of his people, “Hear, O Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is One” ([Deut 6:4](#)). While the pagans may worship the many so-called gods, for us, there is one God ([1 Cor 8:6](#)). When we refer to the essence of God, we are

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referring to the “whatness” (in Latin, *quiddity*). When we say God is one in essence, of course, we do not believe that his “oneness” is a oneness of specialty (as though we worship one among many options, or that there is a *genus* into which this God fits). Nor do we think that he is one result of a collection of different things to make him what he is (i.e., he is not composite). In terms of Trinitarian theology, we must also say that these Persons are not a divine community, like a gathering of the gods that form some sort of society.

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Two: Processions. In God, there are two processions, or “goings forth from.” As we saw at the opening of this article, the Persons are clearly presented in the Scriptures, so our numbers 2, 4, and 5 are largely helping us to say what we can about the three Persons of the Trinity. Since we are speaking here of the Trinity as such, we should be careful not to include merely the missions in which the Son comes from the Father *into the world*. The mission includes the procession (i.e., it has the “going forth from” as part of its definition), but there is an eternal going forth. The Son is eternally from the Father (which we call *generation*), and the Spirit is eternally from the Father and the Son (which we only call procession).

Three: Properties, or Persons. Because of the two processions, we can identify three Persons, each with distinct properties that identify the Persons in their real distinction. The Father’s property of “paternity,” the Son’s property is “filiation,” and the Spirit’s property is “procession.”

Four: Relations. While there are three Persons, this actually causes us to say there are four relations. These four include the three properties we have already noted. The Father’s relation to the Son is as Father (paternity), and the Son’s relation to the Father is as Son (filiation). The Spirit’s relation to the Father and the Son, is procession, but what is the Father-and-Son’s relation to the Spirit? It can not be as Father, since the Spirit would then be another Son and/or the Son would become another Father. Since Christians have not wanted to say more than we can about the inner life of the Trinity, we have simply applied the language from “Spirit” to the relation: “spiration.” In fact, often, instead of saying both procession and spiration, theologians have simply called it *active* and *passive* spiration.

Five: Notions. Of course, we are counting to five, so there must be one last thing to mention, and this is the idea of “notions.” The Reformed theologian Francis Turretin explains that a “‘notion’ designates the same character [as property and relation] inasmuch as it signifies that one person is distinct from another (so as to be the index and mark of distinction between the persons)” (*Institutes of Elenctic Theology* 1:257). The Father’s relation to the Son is paternity, and that marks him out regarding the Son’s

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origin, the Son's origin from the Father is marked out by his filiation, and the spiration and procession marks out the Spirit's origin from the Father-and-Son ("*filioque*"). But, though we know the Son is from the Father, how do we mark out the Father's origin? The Father has no origin, so we simply say he is "unbegotten" (or, to use some additional technical theological terms, he is *agennetos* or *inascible*).



While the five points of Trinitarianism, or perhaps the latter four, seem like they are saying a lot, we should not miss the fact that they are actually saying very little. If we could boil the latter four down to a single statement, it is this: the Father is from no one, the Son is eternally from the Father, and the Spirit is eternally from the Father and the Son. Many problems in Trinitarian theology today occur because of too much eagerness to jump into saying more than we have been given to say. The reality is that once more begins to be said about the eternal relations as such, theological problems begin to arise, as will be shown in other parts of this series. As dense as the things said above may seem, again, it is actually simply a further explanation of the idea that the Father does not proceed, but the Son is from the Father and the Spirit from the Father and the Son. That said, we are left with some further questions to answer.

PERSON AND NATURE

While there were five things mentioned above, we can distinguish them into the two main ideas of the Persons and the essence, or nature. The question that we run into at this point is this: how can it be said that the Persons are three while the nature is one? We begin with humility, acknowledging that we are finite humans who will never comprehend the Trinity.

There are two key affirmations that we make at this point: each of the Persons is God, and the Persons are really distinguished from each other by their relations of origin. Again, these are simple affirmations made by all Christians, but we can move further into our explanation of the affirmations a little bit here.

Each of the Persons is not *really* distinct from the divine nature with a result that there are four things, the three Persons and the nature. When we say that the Father *is* God, we mean that he is identical with the divine essence. Likewise, the Son is identical with the divine essence, and so is the Holy Spirit.

Each of the Persons of the Trinity is God, and the Persons are really distinguished from each other by their relations of origin.

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However, the Son is really distinct from the Father, and the Spirit is really distinct from the Father and the Son. The Son is not the Father, and the Spirit is not the Father or the Son. We would want to say both that the Son is God and that he is from the Father. The way or manner or *mode* by which he is God is as from the Father. Turretin and others would say that, since the Persons are really distinct from one another, and since this distinction is in their mode of subsisting as God, it is best to refer to the Person-Nature distinction as a real minor distinction or real modal distinction (*Institutes* 1:279). Or, we might use the words of John Owen, “Every person has distinctly its own substance . . . but each person has not its own distinct substance” (*Works* [Banner of Truth] 2:409). Each person is truly and distinctly God, but they are not distinct gods. Of course, these are not merely modes of revelation, as the Modalists (Sabellians) would say. They are modes, or ways, of subsisting. This Person is God as the Father, who is from no one, and this Person is God as the one begotten from the Father, and this one is God as the Spirit who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Again, while many words have been used, we are not pressing beyond our simple confession that there is one God; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is each this one God; that these Persons are really distinct; and that the Father is from none, the Son is from the Father, and the Holy Spirit is from the Father and the Son. This “doctrine of the Trinity is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him” (2LBCF 2.3).



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