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Part I

Doctrines

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1 The Triune God

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Christian doctrine focuses upon God and the way in which God grants not just life but also meaning to all other things. To turn to the doctrine of God, therefore, is to consider both a particular item of concern (namely, God or *theos*) and a specific way of considering all things (a theological view of all reality). Here we must remember that Christian theology should have both a contemplative and an active element. Contemplative reason considers God for his own sake, seeking to know and to intelligently perceive God as fully and faithfully as possible. This one is worthy of praise and honor and, no less, of our intellectual efforts. Active reason also looks to God, now not simply as a discrete object of study but as the horizon of all studies, casting light on our study of topics ranging from nature itself to human being in particular.

This chapter will introduce Christian thinking about God by addressing four concerns. First, the insistent necessity to attend to the living and true God will be explored, along with its consequent fixation on fleeing idolatry of every sort. Second, the triune nature of the Godhead – Father, Son, and Spirit, equal in honor and glory – will be explored. Third, the self-presentation of this living, triune God as being perfect and transcendent as well as present and near invites reflections on how eternity and history should be related. Fourth, these more specific reflections on this particular God revealed in these specific ways will return us to the exercise of both contemplative and active reasoning in seeking to develop not only a theology of the triune God but also a trinitarian theology of all things.

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THE LIVING AND TRUE GOD

First, we begin where Scripture begins: differentiating the living and true God from all rivals and possible peers.[1]

The Bible begins with a creation account that says much about the created order but speaks just as emphatically of the Creator. "In the beginning God" marks out the fundamental reality upon which all else will be said. Some interpreters will interpret that prepositional phrase "in the beginning" not so much to speak as the first moment or the beginning of time itself but as the ongoing fundament and ground of all times and spaces. Whether or not that is the most appropriate rendering of the phrase, the structure of the text does differentiate and prioritize God with respect to all other reality. God's speech ushers created reality into being and order (signaled by the subjunctive "let …" repeated seven times and followed by the eighth "let us make [hu]man[ity] in our image, after our likeness"). The cosmological account does not itemize everything that might be named, though its span is surely global (taking in the heavens and the earth, every quadrant and category of occupant). Ancient Near Eastern study helps show that the specific references in Genesis 1 refer to created beings that were representative of the deities of that time. Israel's peers might worship the sun, moon, and stars; Genesis 1 clarifies that the Creator God of Israel made them of nothing but by his own Word. There is a whole panoply of gods on offer in the ancient Near East, yet only one God stands as the beginning and the creator of all.

Not only creation but also redemption serves to mark out God's singularity. Significant acts of deliverance occur earlier in Genesis (i.e., the rescue of Israel from famine in the Joseph narrative told in Gen. 37–50) and are later alluded to in the prophets (Amos 9:7). The Exodus account serves, however, as the great paradigm of redemption in the Old Testament and the Bible more broadly. God has heard the cries of the Hebrew slaves and remembered his covenant promises to their ancestors (Exod. 2:23–25). These liberated slaves flee polytheistic Egypt and journey toward pagan Canaan. The polyphony of gods swarms all round them, so it is not surprising that God's instruction will convey his divine jealousy and his legislation will summon them to single-minded devotion. This pedagogical purpose can be seen in two moments, two texts, by peering at Exodus and then at Deuteronomy.

[1] For the argument that one must begin with the one true God prior to reflection on either three persons or the incarnation of the Son of God, see especially Katherine Sonderegger, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2015).

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First, the Exodus was intended from its first plotting not only to deliver slaves from Pharaoh's clutches but also to lead them to the worship or service of the LORD (Exod. 3:12 *et passim*). The deliverance comes slowly, surprising for an act of the Almighty Creator. He slowly presses the point through the cycle of ten plagues. What we glean from reading this narrative over against its Egyptian setting, however, shows that this patience plays a pedagogical role. The Lord's slow defeat of Pharaoh takes in ten signs whereby his mastery of the religious icons of Egypt proves potent; whereas Egyptians look to the frog as an insignia of Pharaoh's divine rule, Israel's God shows that he can fashion thousands upon thousands of those beings by a mere word. In so working plague by plague, God shows his "outstretched hand" and "strong arm," terms that had been regularly used to speak of Pharaoh's own might. The Exodus has given not only freedom to Israel but witness to God's singularity as King of Kings and Lord of Lords. Not surprisingly, then, the First Commandment offered atop Sinai to God's people says: "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. You shall have no other gods before me" (Exod. 20:2–3).

Second, the subsequent giving of the law in the book of Deuteronomy will serve as an enduring foundation for Israel's religious devotion and a basis for the ministry of Israel's prophets and kings. Deuteronomy 5 recites the Decalogue as an abiding canon of her ethical pattern. Deuteronomy 6–11 reflects more fully upon that First Commandment. The famous and oft-recited lines of Deut. 6:4–5 offer perhaps the single most significant statement of the oneness of God in the entire Bible: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might." The Exodus puts to death fealty to an exploitative poser in Egypt and brings to life total devotion to the one true God, whose service alone is perfect freedom. Israel is called to hear (Hebrew *shema*) that her LORD is one or singular. While some have argued that this is merely a statement of her monogamous piety, lexical comparison with over 300 parallel constructions leads to reading verse 4 as a metaphysical statement of reality.[2] It speaks not only of Israel having one God but of her God being one or unique.

[2] R. W. L. Moberly, "'YHWH Is One': The Translation of the Shema," in *From Eden to Golgotha: Essays in Biblical Theology* (South Florida Studies in the History of Judaism 52; Atlanta: Scholars, 1992), 75–82.

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Deut. 6:5 follows and extends this metaphysical point into an ethical corollary: because Israel's God is uniquely divine, all of her life ought to be given unto him – and him alone – in loving devotion. Here too stands a contrast with the ways of Egypt and Canaan alike. In those societies, gods were service providers (over the harvest or fertility or war), and so one's devotion had to be spread widely to cover all the varied needs of one's life. Israel shall not deal with such middlemen but must bow lovingly before the God of all. Jesus will take up this command repeatedly in addressing the rabbinic question regarding the greatest commandment (Mt. 22:38; Lk. 10:27).

This primary theological teaching regarding divine singularity expresses itself methodologically in the divine insistence that the great spiritual error is not atheism but idolatry. Even the Christian – like the non-Christian – continues to flirt with the tendency to remake God in one's own image for, as John Calvin said, our "nature, so to speak, is a perpetual factory of idols."[3] Theology bears a purgative and ascetical task, then, in fixing its sights upon the self-revelation on the one true God, alert and intent to have its own prejudiced presumptions challenged.

THE TRIUNITY OF GOD

Second: the living and true God reveals himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, without in the least qualifying or compromising this one's singularity and oneness, therefore prompting us to reflect on what it would mean for God to be triune.

Father, Son, and Spirit are revealed in varied ways in Scripture from the beginning (God, divine speech or *logos*, and Spirit or wind are all present in the creation account of Genesis). Yet clarity about personal distinctions comes later when the incarnational mission of the Son offers occasion for extensive reflection on his relationship with and to the Father. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (Jn. 1:14). Here and elsewhere, the incarnate Son is shown to be fully God ("full of grace and truth" applies the divine attributes to him that were acclaimed of YHWH in the Greek translation of Exod. 34:6–7) while also referring to him as Son from the Father. That chapter also

[3] John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Library of Christian Classics; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2006), 1:108 (I.xi.8).

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illustrates the way in which New Testament reflection on that Father–Son relationship provides occasion for viewing earlier revelations as being personal. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him" (Jn. 1:1–3). Riffing on Genesis 1, one can no longer read "and God said" in that creation account without seeing God's speech or *logos* as personal and distinct, divine, and a perfect image of Son from the Father.[4]

Language of trinity or triunity will be developed to honor both concerns – the common divinity of Father, Son, and Spirit and also, simultaneously, the differentiated and ordered life of the one true God of Israel. Thomas Aquinas would speak of how this means we attend to both what is "common" to the whole Godhead and what is "proper" to each particular person therein. The challenge is that these categories operate in a qualitatively distinct way: proper distinctions in no way diminishing or modifying common life and being and common existence in no wise undercutting the similarly basic differentiation of persons by means of what is proper to each of them. Temptation frequently arises to try to somehow modify one claim to alleviate a perceived tension with the other, but that logic falsely assumes that they exist within the same plane or category (as if more commonality involves less proper distinction).

Arians in the fourth century have been the paradigmatic offshoot with respect to modifying a claim (in this case common eternality and full divinity of Father and Son) for the sake of making space for another tenet (the personal distinction of Son alongside or beneath Father). They stand in for what could be called a subordinationist or adoptionist approach to the Son, who they viewed as a latecomer to the divine family, firstborn among creatures, to be sure, but nonetheless lacking in God's eternity. Athanasius and others argued that an Arian Christ could not be worshiped, indeed could not show forth the Father, restore life in God, or grant immortality to anyone. The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 would respond philosophically by saying that the Son is *homoousios* ("of one being") with the Father. Further, the Son is begotten, not created; in so doing, the Creed did not

[4] On the two-testament witness of Scripture as ingredient to the development of the doctrine of the Trinity, see David Yeago, "The New Testament and the Nicene Dogma: A Contribution to the Recovery of Theological Exegesis," *Pro Ecclesia* 3, no. 2 (1994), 152–164; and C. Kavin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 3 (2002), 295–312.

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define begetting, but it emphatically differentiated it from the term used to describe the making of all creatures. The Creed also underscored those concerns poetically: "God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God." The Son is from the Father, to be sure, but the Son is God, Light, and True or Fully God just as much as the Father is those glorious things. The philosophical and poetic language of that Creed serves both polemical and positive purposes: ruling out subordinationist approaches like Arianism but also exemplifying ways of keeping alert to the divine oneness without missing their distinctness either.

In the same era, theologians were busy working on the exegetical imagination incumbent in trinitarian thinking. Many texts speak of the Son in a humble manner, ranging from speaking of his birth to his thirst to his very death. Other texts acclaim him in divine fashion, as one able to forgive sins or as one who created all things. Gregory of Nazianzus offered an exegetical rule that the former sort of text applies to the Son in his incarnate state and according to his humanity, while the latter text speaks of the Son in his divine person and nature.[5] The route to an orthodox consensus regarding trinitarian confessions was overlain with the development of alert exegetical categories to tend to the breadth of scriptural teaching. A generation later, Augustine of Hippo would also highlight a third category: texts not only spoke of the Son in the form of God (*forma dei*) or the form of incarnate Servant (*forma servi*) but sometimes also in his eternal, personal differentiation from Father and Spirit.[6] "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself" (Jn. 5:26) attests full divinity (the Son's "life in himself"), to be sure, but also conveys an ordered distinction vis à vis the Father (who grants him that life in himself). That granting of self-existent life is neither an incarnational reality of his servant form, nor is it something to be overlooked. In that and other verses, the Scriptures show us not only that he is one with God the Father but that he is Son to that Father and personally distinct.[7]

The Nicene Creed uses the language of eternal processions to gesture toward or prompt reflection on those personal distinctions. The Son is "eternally begotten of the Father"; this eternal generation is unlike the later making or creation of all other beings and is instead

5 Gregory Nazianzus, "Oration 30: On the Son."
6 Augustine, *The Trinity* (Works of St. Augustine I/5; ed. John E. Rotelle; trans. Edmund Hill; Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991), 98–99 (II.i).
7 On the need not only for a high (that is, divine) Christology but also for right mapping of the personal relations of origin in the triune life, see Wesley Hill, *Paul and the Trinity: Persons, Relations, and the Pauline Letters* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015).

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"before all time." The Spirit proceeds from the Father in eternity as well. In the Western Church, the Spirit has been confessed to proceed also from the Son (*filioque*). That creedal addition occurred later (at the Council of Toledo in 589) without input from the Eastern Church, and both its procedural roots and its principled claims have been a matter of perennial dispute. Whether in Eastern or Western form, the language of the Spirit's eternal procession serves to differentiate his own divine life. These divine processions are eternal, which stands against another perennial threat to trinitarian theology: modalism. In the mid-fourth century, opposition to Arius was widespread, but it soon became apparent that his opponents were not necessarily united in their positive affirmations of God. Many believed the Son to be truly God albeit for a season in time. They thought God was first Father to Israel, then Son in the incarnational sojourn, and now was known to be Spirit after Pentecost. Divine persons in this approach were really modes of the divine life, true and fully divine but temporary and changing; hence, these approaches were termed "modalist." Yet Scripture reveals the three persons engaged interpersonally at simultaneous moments: Father and Son engaged in prayer repeatedly, or Father, Son, and Spirit each involved in the event of Jesus's baptism in the Jordan River. As one historian described the exegetical and doctrinal challenge involved in refining the Nicene approach to the Trinity, then, "fourth-century Trinitarian orthodoxy was the net product of rejecting modalism's claim as the necessary cost for defeating subordinationism."[8]

This second theological teaching manifests another methodological principle, namely, that God is to be known not only over against his created beings but also in his own self-differentiated and triunely ordered perfect existence. A Christian doctrine of God cannot be satisfied with a high (divine) view of Christ and the Spirit but also must tend to their personal relations within the life of the one true God.

THE ETERNAL AND HISTORICAL

Third: we learn of God from God's works, and yet those works include revelation of the divine life beyond history; this self-revelatory illumination of eternity helps us to perceive God in himself and also history in him.

[8] Michel Rene Barnes, "The Fourth Century as Trinitarian Canon," in *Christian Origins: Theology, Rhetoric and Community* (ed. Lewis Ayres and Gareth Jones; Christian Origins; London: Routledge, 1998), 62 (47–67).

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In the last section, God's eternal processions (Son from Father, Spirit from Father [and also from the Son, in the Western expansion of the original Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed]) were explored. Each of these personal processions comes to manifestation (and becomes a matter for our knowledge) in that they extend into divine missions in what we call the divine economy: the work of Son and Spirit in creation and redemption as they are sent by the Father. The way God acts here in nature and grace manifests something – analogically, not univocally – of who God is in himself eternally. The eternal processions of the persons are the root of the divine missions in creaturely history. The divine missions in this history reveal to us something of that glorious life of divine procession.[9] Thinking well of this God, then, demands we explore the relationship of these missions and those processions, of this history and that eternity.

The challenge can be framed in various ways. Eternity and temporal existence. Infinity and finite reality. Changelessness and flux. These pairings are jarring and may seem to posit a gulf that cannot be traversed. Theologians wrestle with the challenge in thinking about God's relation to all that is not divine. Guidance can be found, however, in Scripture's own metaphysical and covenantal teaching and in thinking along the way that Christian theologians have sought to unpack its further entailments. No text functions as significantly as does Exodus 3.[10] Israel's God has heard her cries, seen her plight, and remembered his covenant. God summons Moses to the burning bush and commissions him to approach Pharaoh with a message of deliverance. Amid Moses's varied words of hesitant pushback comes the following question and divine answer:

> If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, "The God of your fathers has sent me to you," and they ask me, "What is his name?" what shall I say to them? God said to Moses, "I AM who I AM." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Say this to the people

[9] On the Thomistic language of processions and missions, see Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 51–77 and 360–412.

[10] See Michael Allen, "Exodus 3 after the Hellenization Thesis," *Journal of Theological Interpretation* 3, no. 2 (2009): 179–196; repr. in *The Knowledge of God: Essays on God, Christ, and Church* (London: T&T Clark, 2022); and Andrea Saner, *"Too Much to Grasp": Exodus 3:13–15 and the Reality of God* (Journal of Theological Interpretation Supplement 11; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2015).

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> of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." (Exod. 3:13–15)

Moses needs proof that his mission is not the result simply of too much time in the sun, so God offers a new name. Augustine of Hippo identified two names given here: a "name of mystery" and then a "name of mercy." First, God names himself YHWH or I AM. In fact, God names himself first with a longer line: 'I AM who I AM' (YHWH and I AM abbreviate this fuller language). This initial name could be rendered in the past ("I have been whom I have been") or future tense ("I will be who I will be"). The Apocalypse will later attest each of these as well as the present tense: "I AM the first and the last and the living one" (Rev. 1:17–18). What is most significant depends not on the tense, however, but on the syntactical construction of the line. "I AM who I AM" identifies this God tautologously, showing that, strictly speaking, God cannot be compared to anyone or anything else. God exists in his own class or category, not ultimately like unto any other point of comparison. By contrast, reflect on how often we identify others relative to their and our peers: "so-and-so is someone's sibling or neighbor or coworker." Uniquely, God cannot be likened to anyone else. Kathryn Tanner speaks here of what could be called "qualitative divine transcendence," wherein God's distinction from all else is not merely quantitatively greater but actually qualitatively other.[11] This name YHWH accents the distinctive transcendence of the living and true God. Not surprisingly, Augustine says that this name denotes mystery.

This holy and high God does not leave Moses with mere caution, however, but goes further and offers a second divine name. This triune God is also "the LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." Here the very same God identifies himself quite differently. As transcendent, he is also known amid the family history of Israel. He was present and thus manifest in the tales of the patriarchs. While distinct, he truly disclosed himself through his address of, provision for, and covenant with those early "fathers" of Israel. God's perfection does not foreclose his presence. Divine transcendence – at least of this radically qualitative sort – actually makes immanence possible. Augustine, therefore, identifies this second

[11] Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment?* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1988).

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