Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance is the remarkable accomplishment of one of the finest scholars in the land. Because the essence of it was a presentation to a pastors' conference, Bruce Ware has succeeded in doing what many scholars can never do. He has written a thorough theological treatise that any biblically literate layman can understand. Finally, we have a volume that reaches beyond the academic community and into the life of the local church.

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Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary

Thanks to the clear thinking and biblically solid perspective of my friend, Bruce Ware, we are now blessed with this stimulating and edifying description of our God who is worthy of wonder and awe. Here is a theology that will launch your heart in worship—as all good theology should!

—JOSEPH M. STOWELL, President
Moody Bible Institute

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—NANCY LEIGH DEMOSS, author, host of
Revive Our Hearts radio program

With all of the material available on the doctrine of the Trinity, I am thrilled to finally have a resource that will help the person in the pew understand how to properly articulate the doctrine and also grasp why it matters. Bruce Ware has brilliantly demonstrated that the manner in which the members of the Trinity relate to one another has a direct impact on marriage, parenting, work relationships, and more. His book is a great combination of theological precision and pastoral application. Pastors should make sure their members are familiar with this work.

—RANDY STINSON
Executive Director, CBMW

The truth that God is three equal yet different manifestations of one nature is at the very heart of the Christian faith. Knowing God means knowing him as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the truine God created male and female in his image. He intends that his very nature be expressed in human relationships. The doctrine of the Trinity thus has enormous implications for our everyday lives. This book will help you behold God's wondrous beauty and undestand how it can be reflected in the way you interact with others. It is both awe-inspiring and immensely practical. If you think that theology is boring or irrelevant, you haven't read Bruce Ware. Ware does a mastrful job of helping the ordinary person understand and apply this important doctrine.

—MARY KASSIAN, author and speaker,
Alabaster Flask Ministries

FATHER, SON, & HOLY SPIRIT

RELATIONSHIPS, ROLES, & RELEVANCE

BRUCE A. WARE

CROSSWAY BOOKS

A MINISTRY OF
GOOD NEWS PUBLISHERS
WHEATON, ILLINOIS

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance

Copyright © 2005 by Bruce A. Ware

Published by Crossway Books
a ministry of Good News Publishers
1300 Crescent Street
Wheaton, Illinois 60187

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Cover design: Jon McGrath

First printing 2005

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Ware, Bruce A.
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit : relationships, roles, and relevance / Bruce A. Ware.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 1-58134-668-9 (tpb)
1. Trinity. I. Title.
BT111.3.W37 2005
231'.044—dc22 200402768

VP 13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05
15 14 13 12 11 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

I

Beholding the Wonder of Our Triune God: Importance of This Doctrine

INTRODUCING GOD TO THOSE WHO KNOW HIM

Why should we devote our time and attention to a study of the Trinity? While many answers can be given, and several will be provided later in this chapter, I'll begin with one primary answer: would God have chosen to reveal himself to us as the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, unless he knew that this would be important to our understanding of him and of our faith? Must it not be the case that God cares greatly that we "get it," that we see him for who he is? And must it not matter to our own lives whether or not we understand him as the triune God that he is?

By analogy, what would a husband think if his wife said to him, "You know, there's something about me that is very near and dear to my heart that you don't know, something that I've tried to tell you in the past but you just haven't gotten it; you haven't paid attention or listened when I've talked about it. And it really matters both to me and to our relationship that you understand this. But it isn't the easiest thing to understand. I'm asking you, 'Will you listen? Will you let me share with you something very,

very important to understanding who I am, something that can make a big difference in the quality of our relationship with each other?'"

Perhaps God would say something similar about his revelation of his triune nature. He might say, "There is something about me that I've told you, but it is something that you've just not been interested in understanding. To be sure, it isn't the easiest thing to understand, but it matters, and I really care that you see this. I am one God, but I am also three. I am one God only as I am Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and this makes a difference in how you see me and how we relate with one another. This matters in terms of how I do my work, who I am eternally, and how I have made you. I've told you about this in my Word, but you haven't yet seen the beauty and wonder of what I've said. So now, will you listen to something I care about very dearly and deeply, and will you take it to heart?"

It is my hope and prayer that, through this study, we will be able to hear the voice of the Lord helping us to understand the beauty and glory of the God whom we already know as God. But do we know him as we should? Do we know him as he truly is? We will explore, then, what he has to tell us about his triune nature; his eternal existence; his work in his created order; the way he manifests himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; and what this means for our lives. I trust that this will be a rich and deeply rewarding study, and that we will see how relevant and applicable the doctrine of the Trinity is to our own lives. Yes, our understanding of who God really is, and our understanding of how this affects our lives and ministries—both of these areas can be greatly enlarged through looking more carefully at something God cares much about: that he is the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The focus of our study of the Trinity will be to examine especially the ways in which the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *relate to one another,* how they *relate to us,* and what *difference this makes in our*

lives. If you've shied away from this doctrine, fearing that it is just too complicated or mysterious, I would encourage you to look again. Without question, there are aspects of the doctrine of the Trinity that are beyond our comprehension, but since God has deemed it good and right to reveal to us what he has about how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate and work, we must endeavor to understand what he's told us. And the glorious thing is that as we look more carefully at this triune nature and see better how the Persons of the Godhead relate within the Trinity and with us, we will discover a whole new vista of practical application that has the potential of greatly enriching our own lives. So for the sake of understanding God as he is, and for the sake of experiencing the richness of these truths in application to our lives and ministries, I propose that we see what we can learn about the triune God.

Here are ten additional reasons why understanding the Trinity is important and beneficial to our lives as Christians. As we consider these, I believe we'll see both the deepened understandings that await us, and the growth in our relationships with God and others that can occur by seeing God better for who he is—the one God who is only one as he is also the three Persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

TEN REASONS TO FOCUS ON THE WONDER OF THE TRINITY

Why should we devote the time and effort needed to think carefully about the triune nature of God? Consider these ten reasons, and marvel at the glory of God manifested as triune.

1. The doctrine of the Trinity is one of the *most important distinguishing doctrines* of the Christian faith and therefore is deserving of our careful study, passionate embrace, and thoughtful application.

As one considers the distinctiveness of Christianity compared to other religious traditions and ideas, clearly the doctrine of the Trinity not only distinguishes the Christian faith from all others, it also establishes the basis for all that we hold dear as Christian believers. This doctrine shows us in essential and glorious ways what it is to be "Christian." To know the Christian faith, and to know what it means to be a Christian, one must see more clearly what it means for God to be triune.

More personally, I believe that many Christian people will one day stand before the Lord aware as never before that they spent too little time getting to know the depth and the wonder of who God really is—including his revelation of himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the one God over all. If we are to know God rightly, we must know him as he is, as he has revealed himself. And this means knowing him as the one God who is the triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Christians down through the ages who have known God testify of the beauty, glory, and wonder that they have come to see in him as the triune God. How enriched our lives can be, and how much more joyful our experience and fruitful our service, when informed by an intimate knowledge of who God is. Let us press on, then, to know with greater clarity the one God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This distinguishing doctrine of our faith is crucial to the Christian faith itself, and it is rich, wondrous, and fully deserving of our careful attention and joyful embrace.

2. The doctrine of the Trinity is both *central and necessary for the Christian faith* to be what it is. Remove the Trinity, and the whole Christian faith disintegrates.

Can the Christian faith survive, as it were, if the doctrine of the Trinity is omitted? Are we aware of just how crucial this doctrine is to all else we believe as Christians? As one ponders this question, it

becomes clear that the work of God (e.g., creation, redemption, consummation) can be rightly understood only as the work of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit unified in the purpose of the work but distinct in the participation and contribution of each member. To illustrate the significance of the Trinity to our faith, consider just briefly the relation of the doctrine of the Trinity to the Christian understanding of salvation. In order for us sinners to be saved, one must see God at one and the same time as the one judging our sin (the Father), the one making the payment of infinite value for our sin (the divine Son), and the one empowering and directing the incarnate—human—Son so that he lives and obeys the Father, going to the cross as the substitute for us (the Holy Spirit). The Christian God, to be savior, must then be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. That is, our salvation comes as the Father judges our sin in his Son, who became incarnate and lived his life in the power of the Spirit as the perfect and sinless God-man, and accomplished his perfect obedience to the Father through the power of the Spirit. Disregard the Trinity and you necessarily undermine salvation. More can be said, but this example is sufficient to demonstrate how crucial this doctrine is to the whole of our faith as Christians.

3. *Worship* of the true and living God consciously acknowledges the relationship and roles of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

As Paul demonstrates in Ephesians 1:3-14, the whole of God's work is accomplished in a trinitarian framework, and hence the worship of this God—the true and living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—necessarily requires a conscious understanding and honoring of the Trinity. The very opening of Paul's praise of God here sets out Christian worship in trinitarian terms. He begins, "Blessed be the *God and Father* of our *Lord Jesus Christ,* who has blessed us *in Christ* with every *spiritual blessing* in the heavenly places."[1] In light of verses 13 and 14, where Paul focuses on the gift

of the Spirit, who mediates to us the blessings of Christ's work, it seems clear that the "spiritual blessings" of verse 3 are really blessings of the Spirit, given to us by the Father, in his Son. Paul is saying that praise to God must be given to God the Father, through the Son, in light of his blessings being mediated to us by his Spirit. So here we have in one verse the praise of God, who is none other than Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Christian worship recognizes this reality and order. Thus Christian worship is inherently trinitarian.

4. The Christian's life of *prayer* must rightly acknowledge the roles of Father, Son, and Spirit as we pray to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit.

Recall for a moment the opening line of Jesus' instruction regarding how we should pray. "Pray then like this," he said. "Our *Father* in heaven, hallowed be your name." May I suggest something both clear and radical? If Jesus taught us to pray to the Father, then we ought to do this. For one reason or another, we sometimes follow a different practice. We may encourage our children, especially, to open their prayers with, "Dear Jesus," despite the fact that Jesus said to pray "Our Father in heaven . . ." Perhaps we do not think about prayer as we should because we do not understand the doctrine of the Trinity. As Jesus taught us, we should pray to the Father through the Son. Jesus Christ is the mediator. He is the one through whom we address the Father. He is the one who brings us access to the Father. Our prayers bring spiritual benefit only when we pray in his name. And prayers that bring fruit in the kingdom are those offered in the power of the Spirit. We pray as the Spirit prompts and urges us to pray. So prayer rightly understood—Christian prayer—is prayer to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Spirit. To pray aright, we need a deep appreciation for the doctrine of the Trinity.

5. The Christian's *growth in Christlikeness or sanctification* is rightly understood and enriched when seen as the work of the triune God.

In Christian sanctification, the full work of the triune Persons is involved, together in harmonious unity, but each with his distinctive contribution. First, the Father ordains and secures our holiness. As noted above in Ephesians 1, we are to give praise first and foremost to the Father, since "he chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph. 1:4). This ordained plan then moves toward becoming a reality in the lives of sinners as the Son lives the pattern after which we are to be remade, and then dies to pay for and defeat our sin (vv. 7-10). The Father sent his Son into the world precisely to accomplish the saving work necessary for those whom he had chosen to be made holy. But even with the plan of the Father and the saving work of the Son, we are not declared holy or remade as holy until we put our faith in Christ. Then, by faith, we begin the life-long process of conformity into his likeness, and here the Spirit directs us to the Son and his work in opening our eyes to see the glory of the Son (2 Cor. 4:6) and in making us like Christ (2 Cor. 3:18). So our sanctification is done by the triune God, with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each participating in different but complementary ways. How wonderful is the unity and diversity of the trinitarian Persons. Rich harmony is heard from heaven as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each sing their respective parts of one glorious and intricately unified composition.

6. The triune relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to marvel at the *unity* of the triune God.

The three persons are never in conflict of purpose, never jealous over another's position or specific work, never prideful over

one's own position or work, and they are always sharing fully the delight in being the one God and accomplishing the unified purpose of God. Here is a unity of differentiation, where love abounds and where neither jealousy nor pride is known. Each divine Person accepts his role, each in proper relation to the others, and each works together with the others for one unified, common purpose. It is nothing short of astonishing to contemplate the fundamental and pervasive unity within the Trinity, given the eternal differentiation that exists in the three Persons.

7. The triune relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to marvel at the *diversity* within the triune God.

The three Persons of the Godhead exhibit distinct roles in relation to one another. Distinct tasks and activities in accomplishing their common plan characterize nearly all of the work that the true and living God undertakes. Yet all the while, they carry out this work in complete harmony of activity and unity of purpose. As amazing as the fundamental unity of God is, so too is his fundamental "division of labor." The Father is the eternal Father, the Son the eternal Son, and the Spirit eternally distinct from both Father and Son. This diversity speaks of the richness of God, while never allowing the richness of differentiation to lead to discord. As we rightly marvel at the unity of God, we also rightly marvel at how the eternal relations among the triune Persons constitute an eternal yet harmonious differentiation within the one God.

8. The triune relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to wonder at the *social relationality* of the triune God.

God is never "alone." He never experiences, whether with or without the world he has made, a sense of individual isolation and "loneliness." He never has been lonely or alone, in this sense, nor

could he ever be, even in principle. The one God is three! He is by very nature both a unity of Being while also existing eternally as a society of Persons. God's tri-Personal reality is intrinsic to his existence as the one God who alone is God. He is a socially related being within himself. In this tri-Personal relationship the three Persons love one another, support one another, assist one another, team with one another, honor one another, communicate with one another, and in everything respect and enjoy one another. They are in need of nothing but each other throughout all eternity. Such is the richness and the fullness and the completion of the social relationship that exists in the Trinity.

9. The triune relationships of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit cause us to marvel at the *authority-submission structure* that exists eternally in the three Persons in the Godhead, each of whom is equally and fully God.

An authority-submission structure marks the very nature of the eternal Being of the one who is three. In this authority-submission structure, the three Persons understand the rightful place each has. The Father possesses the place of supreme authority, and the Son is the eternal Son of the eternal Father. As such, the Son submits to the Father just as the Father, as eternal Father of the eternal Son, exercises authority over the Son. And the Spirit submits to both the Father and the Son. This hierarchical structure of authority exists in the eternal Godhead even though it is also eternally true that each Person is fully equal to each other in their commonly possessed essence. The implications are both manifold and wondrous as we ponder this authority-submission structure which not only is accepted but is honored, cherished, and upheld within the Godhead.

10. The doctrine of the Trinity—one God existing in three Persons in the ways we have described—provides one of the

most important and neglected *patterns* for how human life and human relationships are to be conducted.

In the end, the doctrine of the Trinity is eminently practical, and the church can benefit much from understanding and modeling its own life, work, and relationships after the Trinity. As we understand better the nature of the Trinity—the unity and diversity in the ways God has revealed himself to us—we have the opportunity to pattern what we do after God's design. We are made in the image of God, and so we can live rightly and best only when we mirror in our relationships the relationships true of the eternal God himself. Yes, we are called to be like God in character, but we also are created to be like God in relationship with one another. To miss this is to miss part of the wonder of human life, and it stems from failing to see something more of the wonder of God himself. May we see in the Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, how their relationships are expressed, and may we learn from this something better about how our relationships and work ought to be lived out, for our good and for the glory of his great and triune name.

2

Beholding the Wonder of Our Triune God: Historical Overview

INTRODUCTION

God cares that we know who he is, and he longs for us to understand him rightly, according to what he has revealed in his Word. And not only must we seek to know God from Scripture, we should also seek to understand how the doctrine of the Trinity was formulated by early Christians—and how it has endured as generation after generation has reaffirmed this understanding of God. If we fail to understand rightly what the church has held in this crucial doctrine, we run the risk of having misconceptions of God and even of promoting heresy. On the other hand, to understand rightly just how God is both one and three is to enter into some of Scripture's most glorious truths and to share with Christians through the ages the joy of beholding the wonder of our triune God.

In this chapter we will sketch a brief overview of just how early Christians came to understand God as Triune. What is it that we Christians affirm when we sing and recite and pray to the true and living God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit? One God, yet a Godhead of three; three Persons, yet one God—how did we arrive

at this understanding? Is it truly the teaching of Scripture, and must we believe this same truth today? Why did the church insist so early that we hold this doctrine of God? Does it have any impact upon our larger theological understanding? Further, does it matter in terms of our own lives of faith and worship and prayer? Let us consider, then, just why Christian believers have come to affirm this doctrine.

WHY DID CHRISTIANS COME TO ACCEPT THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY?

Scriptural Monotheism

Just how did the early Christians arrive at the doctrine of the Trinity?[1] The story here is fascinating, and we owe much to their hard work, prayers, and struggles to understand what Scripture requires us to see about God. Most of the earliest Christians, of course, were converted out of Judaism. Judaism, as you know, is a monotheistic religion. That is, the Jews believed that there is only one God, and this God is Yahweh, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Importantly, the early Christians continued to affirm their belief in one God. In agreement with their Jewish heritage, the early church affirmed as strongly as ever that there is only one God, that the God of the Old Testament was the same God as the God of Christians, and that both Old and New Testaments taught clearly that true religion must be monotheistic.

It was remarkable, however, that the early church never seriously considered wavering in its monotheism. The early Christians lived in the midst of cultures in the Graeco-Roman world that were dominantly polytheistic. That is, most people in first-century Greek and Roman societies believed in a multitude of gods. Recall for a moment the experience of the apostle Paul when he arrived in Athens. As recorded in Acts 17:16ff., Paul went into Athens expecting friends to join him. And while he waited for them, he walked

up and down the streets of Athens and observed the multitude of altars and shrines and inscriptions, giving evidence that the Athenians worshiped a full pantheon of gods. When later he was asked to speak to them about the God he knew, he began by noting what a religious people the Athenians were, yet that tragically they were worshiping false gods.

In light of the predominance of polytheism throughout the Graeco-Roman world, wouldn't it have been the most natural thing—the easiest thing for Christians to do—simply to adjust their previous monotheistic conviction, and now assert that actually Christians believe in three gods? "You know," they might reason, "we thought there was one God, and that's what we believed from the Old Testament, but now we see that, in fact, there are three Gods—Father, Son and Holy Spirit." But remarkably (and thankfully), this did not happen! Given cultural pressures, given that this would have been the easy way out for the early church, it is noteworthy that the early Christians never seriously entertained this option. Rather, they took the hard way. As we'll see, they continued to affirm, with the Old Testament and with their Jewish heritage, that there was one and only one God, even though the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Why did they do this? They went the hard route simply because they believed the Bible. Let's rehearse briefly some of the evidence that the early Christians considered which makes it clear that both Old and New Testaments affirm a monotheistic faith.

Old Testament support for monotheism. The Old Testament declares in no uncertain terms that there is one and only one God. In fact, the opening verse of the Bible, rightly understood, declares this truth with boldness and clarity. Genesis 1:1 reads, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." Whatever else Genesis 1 is about, the main thing it teaches is that there is *one God.* But how does it do that? It does so by affirming that God created all that is,

the heavens and the earth; there are no other gods claiming territorial jurisdiction. There is not one god of the sun, one god of the moon, one god of the stars, one god of the mountains. No, there is one God of the stars, the moon, the sun, the mountains, and everything! "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" is a straightforward affirmation of monotheism. As was true for the early church, the Old Testament covenant people of God were surrounded by polytheistic cultures. The Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Phoenicians, the Philistines, and all of the other cultures around Israel affirmed the existence of a variety of gods, each having some territorial authority and rulership. But for the people of Israel, it was not so. From the very first verse of the Bible forward, Old Testament religion declared and celebrated that there is one and only one God. He created everything, and he is Lord of all by virtue of his being Creator of all.

Besides this opening declaration of monotheism, consider some other Old Testament affirmations of monotheism. In Deuteronomy 4:35, Moses says, "To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is no other besides him." Echoing this same thought, Moses again declares in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: the LORD our God, the LORD is one." The last phrase can be translated either as "the LORD is one" or "the LORD alone," but in either case it emphasizes that there is but one God. The Lord alone is God.

First Kings 8:59-60 proclaims Israel's monotheistic faith in beautiful terms. Here, in Solomon's address after the temple has been built, he declares, "Let these words of mine, with which I have pleaded before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires, that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other." What a statement! Again, recall the polytheistic environment surrounding Israel when Solomon made this pronouncement. He was declaring

that no one else is God—not Baal, not Ashteroth, nor any of the gods of the nations around Israel—only Yahweh is God. There simply is no other God.

In another remarkable passage, the Lord speaks through the prophet Isaiah and says, "I am the LORD, and there is no other, besides me there is no God; I equip you, though you do not know me, that people may know, from the rising of the sun and from the west, that there is none besides me; I am the LORD, and there is no other" (Isa. 45:5-6). God wants to go on record that he is able to do his work—in this case raising up Cyrus, though Cyrus will never know how God is using him—only because he alone is the true and living God. Four times in these two verses, God declares that he has the sole claim on true deity ("there is no other," "besides me there is no God," "there is none besides me," and "I am the LORD and there is no other"). God alone, then, is God, and his declaration of this through Isaiah is unequivocal and absolute.

Finally, reminiscent of the previous passage is Isaiah 46:9, in which God again declares, "Remember the former things of old; for I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me." Clearly God wants his people to know that there is only one God, and that he—Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel—is the true and living God.

The early Christians, then, had strong and clear reason from Old Testament revelation to affirm that God is one. But does the New Testament affirm there is one God? Does this teaching carry forward, or is monotheism somehow compromised or rejected when Jesus comes as the eternal Son of the eternal Father? We turn now to some of the most important New Testament teaching affirming monotheism.

New Testament support for monotheism. The New Testament also declares in no uncertain terms that there is one and only one God. For example, John 17:3 asserts, "And this is eternal life, that they

know you the only true God." Only God can give eternal life, and the God who does this is one. And 1 Corinthians 8:6 says plainly, "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist." The truth of this passage is reminiscent of Genesis 1:1, where we first learned that the one God created the heavens and the earth. Only one God is Creator of all, and he likewise is Lord of all he has made. As he owns all that is, he owns us. He has rights over us. We exist for him. There is one God, and to this one God we owe our absolute allegiance.

First Timothy 2:5 likewise declares, "For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus." While this verse would wrongly be interpreted to say that Jesus is *only* a man and therefore is not God, it rightly teaches that that there is but one God. We will consider later just how Jesus relates to the monotheistic teaching of both Old and New Testaments. Here again, though, we see that God is one.

Romans 3:29-30 asserts, "Or is God the God of Jews only? Is he not the God of Gentiles also? Yes, of Gentiles also, since God is one. He will justify the circumcised by faith and the uncircumcised through faith." The God of the Jews and the God of the Gentiles, who brings both together by faith in Christ, is one God. He is not one god for the Jews and a different god for the Gentiles. He is one God—the God both of the circumcised and the uncircumcised, who come together to this one God through faith in Christ.

Finally, James 2:19 declares, "You believe that God is one; you do well. Even the demons believe—and shudder!" How sad it would be if the church were to deny what even the demons get right! Thankfully, this was not the case. Rather, early Christians uniformly affirmed what both Old and New Testaments declare with consistency, clarity, and forcefulness, namely, that there is but one God, and that the covenant God of Israel and the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ are one and the same God. The God of both Testaments, then, is the one true and living God.

Scriptural Trinitarianism: Key Biblical Teachings

Now here is where the story becomes even more interesting, because early Christians noticed that there was more taught in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, than that there is one God. Clearly, both Testaments are monotheistic, but the New Testament especially also taught truths about Jesus and the Holy Spirit that raised questions in the minds of thoughtful early Christians. How are we to understand who Jesus is when there is one God? All agreed that there was really no question but that the Father is God. Whose will did Jesus come to obey, if not the will of God, his Father? And, whom did Jesus seek to glorify if not God the Father who sent him? Therefore, there simply was no serious dispute in the early church over the full and unqualified deity of the Father. But how should we understand Jesus? Yes, he is our Lord, and we honor and worship him as our Savior. But how are we to affirm with Thomas in his confession in John 20:28, what he exclaims regarding the risen Christ, "My Lord and my God!"? If the Father is truly God, and we believe in only one God, what do we say about Jesus?

To add to this fundamental question regarding the true identity of Jesus, the early Christians noticed that even some of the very passages affirming that there is one God raised questions regarding the identity of Jesus in relation to their monotheistic conviction. Look again at John 17:3. I purposely quoted only part of the verse earlier. Consider now the whole verse: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent." Now think carefully about what this is saying. The "and" that couples together "the only true God" and "Jesus Christ whom you have sent" seems to indicate the one true God and Jesus Christ are equivalent. "Who can give eternal life?" one might inquire. And the answer to that question from all of Scripture clearly is, "Only God can give eternal life." Given this, consider again what this verse asserts. Eternal life comes by knowing the only true God *and* Jesus

Christ whom the Father has sent. In other words, because it says eternal life comes from both the Father and Jesus Christ, the passage displays Christ as equivalent to the Father. Only God can give eternal life, yet here both the Father and the Son give eternal life. The one God, it would seem, is both the Father and the Son. But this is not all. The "and" also indicates that the Father and Jesus Christ are distinct. There is no unnecessary redundancy when John writes that eternal life is found in knowing "the only true God and Jesus Christ." Rather, while both give eternal life, so indicating their commonality, yet the two are distinguished, indicating their distinction from each other. So we have in this one verse an indication of the Father's and Son's equivalency and also their difference, of their identity with one another and their distinction from one another. But just how can it be both ways? How can we have both at the same time? These questions loomed large in the early centuries of the church.

Or consider again 1 Corinthians 8:6. In this case as well, we have looked at only the first half of the verse. Here is the whole verse: "Yet for us there is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." We have the same kind of tension here as we saw in John 17:3. After all, who is Creator of all that is? Answer: Only God can create the heavens and earth, as Genesis 1:1 makes abundantly clear. But here we have in this one verse an affirmation that the one God, the Father, is Creator of all, *and* (note again the significance of the "and" joining these two concepts) the one Lord Jesus Christ, who likewise is said to create all things. So which is it? Is God the Father Creator? Or is the Son the Creator? The answer according to this verse is this: they both are. So, once again we see that since only God can create, yet both the Father and the Son are said to create, the Father and Son are thereby identified together as the one Creator. Yet since the two are spoken of separately, we must affirm also a proper distinction between the

Father and the Son. The one God is identified as both Father and Son, while Father and Son are distinguished from each other. Identity and distinction, equivalency and difference—this is the reality the early Christians faced as they pondered carefully and seriously what the New Testament taught them about Jesus and his relation to the Father.

Many other New Testament passages raise this same question of the relation of the Son to the Father. For example, John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God [distinction], and the Word was God [identity]." The profundity of this opening verse of John's Gospel is beyond full human comprehension. Notice first that John intentionally begins with echoes of Genesis 1:1 by asserting "In the beginning" and then following immediately in John 1:3 with an affirmation of the Word as Creator: "All things were made through him [i.e., the Word], and without him was not any thing made that was made." So, exactly who was "in the beginning" as Creator of all that is? Answer: the Word! This Word, then, must be understood as God. And this is only confirmed as John declares at the end of John 1:1, "and the Word was God." No question, then, the Word who was in the beginning, who was Creator (clear connections with the God of Genesis 1) is himself God. Both by direct statement and by conceptual linkage with creation, the Word is God.

But this is not all. Amazingly, this Word of John 1:1, who is God, is also said to be "with God." There is a distinction, as well as an identity, between "the Word" and "God." Some difference exists between the Word and God, while the Word simultaneously is God. And in case we wonder just who this Word is, all we need do is read a bit further and we realize this Word is none other than the incarnate Son of the Father, Jesus Christ. For John 1:14 declares, "And 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." So, how can we talk about Jesus in a way that understands

him as identical to God ("the Word was God," linked with the Creator God of Genesis 1) while simultaneously being distinguished from God ("the Word was with God")? He has the same identity as God, as the Father, and yet he is different from the Father. He is with God, yet he is God. How can we understand all of this together?

And consider also just a few of Jesus' own claims. One of the most famous and most important here is Jesus' self-affirmation in John 8:58, where he said to the Pharisees, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I am." Let's not miss the significance of this claim. Jesus is not merely saying that he already existed before Abraham existed. This would be remarkable enough in itself (since Abraham lived roughly 2,000 years before Christ!), but it was not his main point. That is, it is not that Jesus was "merely" claiming to have lived before the time of Abraham. If that's all he was saying, you would think that this poor Nazarene was a crackpot; you'd want to call for the men in white coats to come and pick him up. But clearly the Pharisees did not respond this way to Jesus. No, rather, they responded by picking up stones to throw at him—because they considered that here, again, Jesus had committed blasphemy. They knew his claim was, at its root, a claim of deity.

For you see, in Exodus 3, Moses asked the Lord, When I go back to the people of Israel and they ask me who sent me to you, what shall I say to them? We read in Exodus 3:14, "God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.' And he said, 'Say this to the people of Israel, "I AM [Yahweh] has sent me to you."'" Jesus, then, is claiming to be none other than Yahweh of the Old Testament, the God whose name eternally is "I am." No wonder the Pharisees concluded that Jesus had uttered blasphemy.

Another very instructive passage is Mark 2. You'll recall that here some friends of a needy paralytic man lowered him through the roof of a house where Jesus was, and Jesus said something fully unexpected. In verse 5 we read, "And when Jesus saw their faith, he said

to the paralytic, 'My son, your sins are forgiven.'" Mark then records the response by some who heard Jesus: "Now some of the scribes were sitting there, questioning in their hearts, 'Why does this man speak like that? He is blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?'" (vv. 6-7). Amazing! Chalk one up for the scribes: they got this one right. "Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Absolutely no one can forgive sins but God, so what, then, must be Jesus' point? To put it simply, Jesus was declaring before all, "I am God." And so as to reinforce the point, in verses 10-11 Jesus says, "'But that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins'—he said to the paralytic—'I say to you, rise, pick up your bed, and go home'." The physical miracle attested to the spiritual truth about Jesus. He was, in fact, the Son of Man who was God in human flesh with the authority to forgive sins; therefore, Jesus was God.

Another remarkable chapter upholding the deity of Christ is Hebrews 1. Consider from this single chapter six separate and strong indications that Jesus is God. First, the letter to the Hebrews begins, "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Heb. 1:1-2). As in John 1:3, 1 Corinthians 8:6, and (as we shall see) Colossians 1:16, Christ is here specified as the Creator of all that is. Yet because only God can create, Christ clearly must be God.

Second, Hebrews 1:3 continues, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature." In Isaiah 42:8, God declares in no uncertain terms, "I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other, nor my praise to carved idols." And yet, Hebrews declares that Jesus (alone) fully and exactly exhibits the very nature and glory of God. Jesus is the exact representation of his nature. But God is incomparable, and none will share his glory. Therefore, Jesus must be himself God, for only God can possess the nature of God and share the glory of God.

Third, Hebrews 1:3 also affirms that the Son "upholds the universe by the word of his power." Not only is the Son Creator of all (Heb. 1:2), he is also the Sustainer of all (v. 3). Only God possesses the almighty power necessary to uphold and sustain this vast universe, and the Son is here declared to do just this. The Son, then, is God.

Fourth, Hebrews 1:6 states, "And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he [God] says, 'Let all God's angels worship him.'" We should be astonished at the significance of this statement for understanding the New Testament's portrayal of Christ. For here, God is envisioned commanding his angels to *worship the Son* who comes into the world. And, of course, we know this actually happened, when with the shepherds, the angels worshiped the Son at the announcement of his birth (Luke 2:13-14). But notice: Who is it in Hebrews 1:6 who commands the angels to worship the Son? *God* does. Yet remarkably, the Old Testament clearly taught that only God is to be worshiped, as Jesus himself declared when tempted by the devil. Jesus cited Deuteronomy 6:13 when he responded to Satan, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve" (Luke 4:8). Therefore, only God is to be worshiped, as God himself had declared and Jesus himself knew full well. Yet Hebrews 1:6 tells us that when the Son comes into the world, God *commands* the angels to *worship him.* That is, the God who knows and declares that only God is to be worshiped, commands that his Son be worshiped. By God's own declaration, then, Jesus himself can only rightly be understood as God.

Fifth, Hebrews 1:8 records for us, "But of the Son he [God] says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of your kingdom.'" Whereas in Hebrews 1:6 we see God commanding the Son to be worshiped, commanding an action appropriately directed only toward God, here we have God actually calling Jesus "God." The Greek word *theos,* the most common Greek word for God, is here used by God of Jesus.

And sixth, Hebrews 1:10-12 quotes Psalm 102:25-27, applying this Old Testament text to Jesus. But as one examines the Psalm quoted in its context, it is clear that the psalmist is extolling the greatness, the eternity, the immutability of the true and living God. Unlike all else that changes and comes to an end, the God of Israel, the true and living God, never changes, and his life never comes to an end. But Hebrews 1:10-12 quotes this marvelous text from Psalm 102 and indicates that these truths are about none other than the Son! Jesus, then, is the eternal and immutable (cf. Heb. 13:8) God over all. He, the Son of the Father, is God, while the Father likewise is God. How remarkable and how amazing this is. But how shall we understand these teachings of the New Testament in light of our commitment to monotheism?

My main point in all of this is not, in itself and alone, to demonstrate the deity of Christ. While this is gloriously true, the main purpose has been to demonstrate the tension faced by the early church fathers in endeavoring to understand who Jesus truly is in relation to the Father (God), and in light of the Bible's clear teaching that there is one and only one God. Early Christians continued to believe there is one God, but they came to a growing conviction that not only is the Father God, but Jesus likewise must be understood as God. How could this be, and just "what language shall we borrow" to affirm and explain this teaching of Scripture?

Scriptural Trinitarianism: The Church's Formulation

Of course, some did not think it possible to make sense of both the Father and Jesus being eternally divine, without compromising monotheism. Some, in an endeavor to protect the "monarchy" or exclusive kingly rulership of the Father, sought to explain who Jesus is differently than the final orthodox formulation would later suggest. Two views in particular played an important role in helping the early Christians think more carefully about Jesus in contrast to these views that were seen, ultimately, as heretical.

First, an early Christian by the name of Sabellius proposed that there is only one God, who is the Father, but that the Father decided to manifest himself at one point in human history in the "mode" of the Son, coming into the world as Jesus Christ of Nazareth. So, the one God and Father of all was now manifested as the Son and not the Father, whereas before the incarnation, he had always subsisted in the mode of being the Father. Then, after the resurrection and ascension of Christ, the one God came in the "mode" of the Holy Spirit, so that during this time when the Holy Spirit is present and at work, God subsists as the Holy Spirit and not as the Father or as the Son. This view, called "modalism," proposed then that while the Father is fully God, the Son is fully God, and the Holy Spirit is fully God, nevertheless God manifests himself in only one such "mode" at a time. God, then, is *successively* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; he is not *simultaneously* Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. No church council was needed to convince Christian people that this view simply could not account for Scripture's teaching. All one need do is consider the baptism of Jesus, or Jesus' prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, to realize that the Bible requires that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must each be present and subsisting at the same time. God, then, must be simultaneously Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, not just one of these "modes" of the divine expression at a time.

Second, a bishop by the name of Arius proposed that while Jesus is highly exalted and worthy of being honored, yet Jesus should be seen merely as the first and greatest creation of the one true God, not as God himself. Arius proposed this idea in order to maintain the belief that there is one God and one God only, and not to jeopardize that fundamental conviction. So, argued Arius, although Jesus is far above us, nonetheless, he is a creature who is not himself the eternal God. Unlike the modalistic view of Sabellius, the Arian view gained a large following, and to address it, a church council was called at Nicea in A.D. 325. At the Council of

Nicea, a number of Arians were present arguing the position of their leader. But the hero of the Council of Nicea was a bishop by the name of Athanasius. Athanasius was a very gifted, godly theologian who defended the deity of Christ against Arius's view that Christ was merely a highly exalted created being. No, argued Athanasius, the New Testament record is so clear and strong for Christ's deity that we must affirm that Christ is of the very *same nature* as the Father. The Greek word that Athanasius used here is *homoousios* (from *homo,* "same," and *ousios,* "nature"), indicating that Christ possessed the identically same nature as the Father. Some at Nicea proposed that perhaps if we said that Christ was *homoiousios* (from *homoi,* "similar," and *ousios,* "nature") with the Father, this would be sufficient. But Athanasius prevailed, and the Nicene Creed that was written, and that is still recited in many of our churches today, insisted that Christ was "one nature" or the identically "same nature" (*homoousios*) with the Father.

But what about the Holy Spirit? Did the church also believe the Holy Spirit was God? Yes, the church came to the strong conviction, also, that the Holy Spirit was fully God; but this issue was not taken up directly until after the question of the Son was settled at the Council of Nicea. The big question to solve, obviously, was, What do we say about Jesus? But now, having settled that Jesus is fully God, and that he possesses the identically same nature as the Father, attention turned to how we should understand the Holy Spirit. And, as with the question of the nature and identity of the Son, here also a number of Scriptural passages came to the fore as demonstrating that the Holy Spirit is God. Consider briefly just some of the biblical evidence for the Spirit's deity.

Acts 5:3-4 is a telling passage in this regard. As the account in Acts 5 unfolds, we are told that Ananias and Sapphira had sold property and received the proceeds from this sale, but had brought only a portion of this money to the apostles while claiming to give all of it. By the Spirit's illumination, Peter was able to know that they had

lied, and so he said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to *lie to the Holy Spirit* and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not *lied* to men but *to God"* (Acts 5:3-4). So to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God. As Peter here indicates, the Holy Spirit truly is God.

Consider also 1 Corinthians 2:10-11. Here Paul says that God has revealed truth to him and to other apostles "through the Spirit." But notice further what he says: "These things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God." Even if we were to stop reading at this point, there still would be sufficient reason for concluding that the Holy Spirit is God, because only God can search the depths of God. But the next verse makes this conclusion even stronger. Paul continues, "For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." Is it not the case that if the Spirit "comprehends the thoughts of God" the Spirit is omniscient? But since only God can fully know the thoughts of God, it follows that the Spirit truly is God.

By analogy, another text speaks powerfully of the Spirit's deity. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul asks, "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" From an Old Testament perspective, consider the richness of the metaphor Paul uses, this notion of the temple. Who, from the time the temple was built, resided in the temple? Whose glory was manifested in the temple? Clearly, it was the glory of God that descended and was manifested in the temple. Here Paul says that the Spirit of God is now inhabiting the temple, indicating by this that the Spirit of God is God himself. Since God inhabits the temple, and Paul now applies this concept to the Spirit, it follows that the Spirit is God who indwells the temple. Though the temple now changes, amaz-

ingly, from an external building to our very bodies and lives, yet the point about the Spirit is clear. Because God inhabits the temple, and because we are now the temples of God whose Spirit indwells our lives, God dwells in us as his Spirit indwells us. Therefore, the Spirit of God is God.

One last passage in support of the Spirit's deity is both brief and clear. Hebrews 9:14 makes reference to the work of Christ on the cross, noting simply that ". . . Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God . . ." accomplished our salvation. So, how did Jesus go to the cross? How did Jesus obey the greatest, hardest, most challenging of all the commandments that the Father gave him to do? Yes, he was "obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:8), but how did he accomplish this greatest of all works? Hebrews answers here with the brief but profound comment that Christ offered himself up *by the eternal Spirit.* The Spirit that worked within him all through his life empowered him to obey the Father and go to the cross. This was God's work in Christ, and it was accomplished in him by the eternal Spirit. The eternal Spirit of Hebrews 9:14, then, can be none other than the Spirit who is himself God.

The church saw these and many other passages supporting the deity of the Spirit; and despite opposition to the Spirit's deity following the Council of Nicea, the church affirmed also the full and equal deity of the Holy Spirit. Another ecumenical council was called, this one at Constantinople in A.D. 381. Here, the heroes were the Cappadocian Fathers, whose names are Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. These three courageous theologians defended the Spirit's deity, and in the end, the Council of Constantinople expanded the Nicene Creed to affirm that the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-Giver, proceeds from the Father and is to be worshiped with the Father and the Son. He too, then, is only rightly understood as fully God.

And yet there is one God! Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each is

fully God, but there is one and only one God. This obviously was puzzling to many, yet the early Christians saw in Scripture itself language that suggested exactly this three-in-one relationship of the Godhead. Many so-called "triadic" passages were noted, texts of Scripture where God is spoken of as one, yet all three members of the Godhead are mentioned. Think here of two in particular. First, in Jesus' great commission to his disciples, he instructs them, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). Notice that believers are to be baptized into the *name* (singular) of God, yet the name of this one true and living God is Father, Son, Spirit. The fact that Jesus uses the singular "name" rather than the plural "names" indicates that God is one and that his nature, signified by his name, is singular, not plural. There is one God, not many. Yet this singular name is itself differentiated among three Persons, so that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comprise the one God in whose name we are baptized. Yes, God is one, but God is three. Jesus here affirms monotheism, but it is not a unitarian monotheism. Rather, the triadic mention of three Persons of the Godhead shows that only the three together constitute the nature of the true and living God.

Second, Paul concludes his second letter to the Corinthians with this benediction: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14). A benediction offers the writer or speaker the opportunity to say, "May God be with you," or "May God richly bless you." But for Paul, the God of the Bible will bless his people as the grace of Christ, the love of the Father ("the love of God"[2]), and the fellowship of the Spirit are present with us. In other words, the one God of New Testament understanding is the God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The collective wisdom of the early church fathers culminated finally in the work of Augustine, painstakingly written over nineteen

years (from A.D. 400–419), under the title *De Trinitate,* or *Treatise on the Trinity.* In this masterful work, Augustine put together for the church one of the most influential and helpful of all discussions on the doctrine of the Trinity. Essentially, Augustine proposed that we understand the triune nature of God in such a way that we distinguish the senses in which God is one and three, respectively. God is *one in essence* or *nature,* but God is *three in person.* There is no logical contradiction here even if the concept is beyond our complete comprehension. If God were one in essence and three in essence, or if he were one in person and three in person, then we would have a straightforward contradiction. The so-called doctrine of the Trinity, then, would be total nonsense. But this is not the case. Rather, God's "oneness" and "threeness" are in different respects or senses. He is one in essence, so the essence of God is possessed fully by each member of the Trinity. But he is three in person, so the Father is not the Son or the Holy Spirit, although the Father possesses the identically same nature as does the Son and the Holy Spirit.

An orthodox definition of the Trinity, taking from Augustine's and other church fathers' insights, then, would assert the following:

> The doctrine of the Trinity affirms that God's whole and undivided essence belongs equally, eternally, simultaneously, and fully to each of the three distinct Persons of the Godhead.

Now think what this is claiming. It affirms that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit each possesses the divine nature *equally,* so as to avoid Arianism; *eternally,* so as to avoid thinking of God's nature as created; *simultaneously,* so as to avoid modalism; and *fully,* so as to avoid any tri-partite understanding of the Trinity (e.g., like a pie divided into three equal pieces). The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not each one-third God, but each is fully God, equally God, and this is true eternally and simultaneously.

In *essence,* then, each member of the Godhead is identical; but in *person* each is distinct. Much of the doctrine of the Trinity deals with these ideas of both unity and difference, of identity and distinction. In God we find the eternal and singular being of God existing and expressing himself in the three Persons of Father that is not Son or Spirit, Son that is not Father or Spirit, and Spirit that is not Father or Son.

And the three members of the Godhead work together in harmony. Not in unison, but in harmony. "Unison" expresses a form of unity, yet it has no texture and richness. "Harmony," however, communicates the idea of unified expression but only through differing yet complementary parts. You have different voices in different pitches. One carries the melody, but just one. Others carry the strains of harmony to fill out and complement the melody. If you think that only one part matters, you are sorely mistaken. For again, to achieve the kind of textured and rich unity that harmony accomplishes, all the parts are important. Yet each part has to be an expression of the same score, the same composition, expressing the mind of the composer.

So it is with the Trinity: it is God's unified nature expressed richly and beautifully in the three equal and full possessions and manifestations of that one nature, with each "voice" contributing variously, yet with complete unity and identity of nature or essence. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not identical Persons, but they are harmonious in accomplishing the one undivided purpose, one undivided goal, one common work, since they each possess fully the one, undivided divine essence. So, unity and difference, identity and distinction—this marks the triune nature of God most centrally. Just how this identity and distinction gets worked out among the Persons of the Godhead, and what this means to the lives of us who are made in his image—these questions are what will occupy us through the remaining chapters of our study.

Notes

Chapter One
Beholding the Wonder of Our Triune God:
Importance of This Doctrine

1. All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version of the Bible. All emphases in these quotations were added by the author.

Chapter Two
Beholding the Wonder of Our Triune God:
Historical Overview

1. For more thorough discussion of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity in the early church, see J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines,* rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978); and Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600),* vol. 1 of *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975).
2. Paul often uses "God" for the Father, specifically. So, here, it is clear that he speaks of the Father by his use of "God," and he does not for a moment mean to indicate that the Son and the Holy Spirit are not God. The benediction form of this statement demonstrates otherwise. Paul's way of saying "May God be with you" is "May Father [God], Son, and Spirit be with you." For further discussion of Paul's common usage of "God" for the Father specifically, along with Paul's deliberate use of *theos* (Greek: "God") for Jesus Christ, see Murray J. Harris, *Jesus as God: The New Testament Use of "Theos" in Reference to Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1998).