



PREACHING THE TRINITY

Sarah Hinlicky Wilson

Instead of being the culminating festival that draws together the meaning of Christmas, Easter, and Pentecost, Trinity Sunday all too often gets demoted to a strange ritual in celebrating (or not) a “dogma.” The common mistake is to think that the most interesting or important question to address is: “How can three be one?” The Trinity becomes a math problem—a philosophical curiosity—a mystery to be ignored, not understood. But the three-in-one part is really only the final conclusion after a long narrative build-up. The fact is, you cannot make any sense of the New Testament exegetically, or of the Christian faith spiritually, apart from the Trinity. It is the exegesis and the spiritual life together that lead to, and are summarized by, the dogmatic shorthand of three-in-one and one-in-three.

The real question of Trinity Sunday is: “Who do you say that God is?” The entire New Testament demands an answer to this question, just as the Old Testament did. The Old Testament’s conclusive answer is: the one true God is the God of Israel—so worship and magnify the LORD of lords! The New Testament accepts this answer but adds to the knowledge of the God of Israel, declaring that the God of Israel is none other than the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—so worship and magnify the LORD of lords! The doctrine of the Trinity is therefore not an esoteric matter for philosophers. It is the answer to the demand for confession and praise emanating from every page of the Scriptures. What follows is an attempt to shed a fresh light on the biblical sources of trinitarian doctrine. The fact that this review cannot even begin to be exhaustive is its own testimony!

The Father

The Father enjoys a certain immunity, for even if the Son and Spirit are booted out of divine status, the Father always

remains. The creator as true God has almost axiomatic status. And it helps that the New Testament not infrequently uses the terms Father and God interchangeably. This is the reason the Eastern church in particular has always insisted on the “monarchy” of the Father as the source of the Son and Spirit; it’s also the reason why subordinationism was the first and favorite trinitarian heresy.

And yet, as soon as the true God and creator is named equally as *Father*, everything changes. A Father cannot exist apart from His offspring. If the offspring were creation itself, God the Father would be Baal, or Zeus, or some other candidate from pagan pantheons, oozing divine essence and creating a sliding scale of divinity to be mounted by the religiously persistent. This could not possibly be an acceptable account of divine Fatherhood for the God of Israel. The Father-God-Creator must have a Son, and the Son of God must be of the same “stuff” (ousia!) as the Father Himself, if “Father” is a true name of God. The relationship can’t be subject to a change of nature or change of heart. So if the Son really is the Son of the God, then God really *is* the Father (and therefore also the Son).

In Matthew’s gospel, Jesus the Son openly declares his unity with the Father: “All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and 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” (11:27, ESV; only direct quotations will be cited here). And yet the Son is profligate in extending the claim of Fatherhood to all who hear. “Whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother” (12:50). Of the nearly forty references to the Father in this gospel, just under half of them call God not “my Father,” as in Jesus’ private property, but “your Father.” Yet the fatherly status of this God is not a fait accompli. It is called into question by rival fathers, whether as venerable as Abraham or as

despicable as the fathers who killed the prophets. “Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven” (23:9)—such a command would hardly have been necessary if God’s Fatherhood were such an easily accepted fact. Indeed, it is only through the Son and his righteousness, his revelatory presentation of the Father through his ministry, death, and resurrection, that the Fatherhood of God can be extended to all the people of the earth.

Luke’s very first reference to God the Father is in the context of this disputed fatherhood, for Mary has chided the boy Jesus: “Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress!” To which he replies: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (2:48–49). He goes home to be a faithful and obedient son to them, but right from the beginning his true Father has been established—and is perhaps why the evangelists all neglect to tell us what became of Joseph, lest we focus our attention on the wrong father. After this, Luke’s references to the Father are much the same as Matthew’s and Mark’s: the address of prayer to “our Father”; the warning that the one who is ashamed of Jesus, Jesus will in turn be ashamed of before his Father; the joy that the Father has revealed things to infants and kept them from the wise; that no one knows the final hour, not even the Son, except the Father. To this Luke adds two separate promises of the Father’s intention to give His little flock a kingdom and one final promise of “power from on high” to be sent by the Father (24:49) foreshadowing the necessity of the Spirit.

John, of course, is so famously preoccupied with the relation between the Father and the Son—most briefly in 10:30, “I and the Father are one”—that barely a chapter goes by without reference to both of them, often accompanied by extensive discussion (see especially chapters 5, 6, 8, 10, and 14–17 and the many references across the johannine epistles). Again, God cannot be known, in John’s theology,

apart from being known as Father, and that only through knowledge of the Father’s Son. Here again there is a dispute about fatherhood. The Samaritan woman wonders if Jesus really can claim to be greater than her father Jacob, but Jesus tells her that her real Father is looking for people who will worship Him in spirit and truth. The Jews protest the sufficiency of their own fathers, who ate manna in the wilderness—though Jesus points out that, despite this, they died in the wilderness, which means that the bread from heaven, from the Father through the Son, is the real sign of the real God. Jesus’ claim to be the Son of God is doubted because “we know” his father and mother already (6:42), and the very question, “Where is your Father?” reveals unbelief (8:19). The Jews claim Abraham as their father, but Jesus rejects this claim, on the grounds that a true Abrahamic fatherhood would lead to recognition of the Father by the works of the Son; thus their real father is the devil, the father of lies. There is simply no having the Father, which means God, apart from the Son: “No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also” (1 John 2:23). Even the disciples have a hard time wrapping their minds around this. After all of Jesus’ signs and discourses, Philip is still capable of making the request, “Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us” (14:8). What does he expect? “No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known” (1:18), for he alone “has seen the Father” (6:46). Jesus replies with astonished patience, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (14:9).

The pauline and deutero-pauline letters inevitably begin with the greeting “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (or some close variant thereof), this Father being the Father of our Lord and therefore also our

Father, when through Christ we have been adopted and receive the Spirit of adoption, making us able to call upon our “Abba! Father!” (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6). Glory dominates in Paul’s talk of the Father: “as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (Romans 6:4; see also Romans 15:16, Philippians 2:11 and 4:20), while the deutero-pauline epistles concentrate on gratitude: we are to give thanks “always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Ephesians 5:20; also Colossians 1:3 and 3:17). In 1 Corinthians 8:6, Paul pulls together the three essential facts about the first person of the Trinity. “There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist,” which means: God is known as God by being the Father of the Lord Jesus and also of us, as well as by being the creator of all things. Jews dispute the first qualification (Father) and Gentiles the second (creator), but there is no knowing God for real apart from those two other names.

The Son

The difficulty in confessing Jesus Christ as Lord has never been His Sonship; if anything, he is brimming over with Son-titles: Son of Man, Son of David, son of the carpenter, son of Joseph, son of Mary, Son of God. It almost turns into a joke: the Pharisees suppose the Christ must be the Son of David, but Jesus counters, with reference to Psalm 2, “If David calls [the Son] Lord, how is he his son?” Matthew (22:41–45) and Luke (20:41–44) both report this exchange (which they got from Mark 12:35–37) despite the fact that they have been careful to trace Jesus’ lineage to and through David. Jesus *is* the Son of David—the Pharisees got that right—but they are missing the far more important Sonship. The issue is what Jesus’ Son-status implies about him, his origins, and his precise relation to the God the Father. As the evangelist John puts

the problem so succinctly, Jesus “was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (5:18). If Jesus is equal with God, is he then simply God? The question demanding confession and praise then is the divinity of Jesus—for it is only some removal from his person over time that can call his humanity into doubt, as was done by Ebionites and Docetists. The plain sense of the New Testament is that Jesus is indeed truly human. The dramatic challenge lies in showing how this human can also be “equal with God.”

Mark lays the stakes with the very first sentence: “The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” and a mere ten verses later this Son is indisputably claimed by the heavenly Father: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.” But what does this mean? Mark does not engage in lyrical or metaphysical descriptions as we find in John. Instead he illustrates the point through a series of episodes, all of which demand a confession. Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic, leading the outraged scribes to murmur to each other, “Who can forgive sins but God alone?” (2:7). They are right, of course; but they fail to draw the correct inference from Jesus’ marvelous demonstration of power in healing the paralytic’s infirmity, which presumably is more difficult than uttering words of forgiveness. A stunning sequence of miracles reveals that nature, demons, disease, and death all obey Jesus (humans alone possess the capacity to resist!). “Who then is this,” the disciples wonder, “that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (4:41). Again, there is only one possible answer; but Mark requires you to confess it yourself; he will not hand it to you. Jesus himself challenges shallow and unthinking praise of his person. “Why do you call me good?” he responds to the rich young man’s warm greeting. “No one is good except God alone” (10:18). Jesus is, in fact, good—on account of his being God—but the description “good” may not be applied cheaply or in flattery. When asked by

the high priest, “Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” (14:61) Jesus replies in the words of God’s own name: “I am” (a name that John picks up and explores at greater length in his own gospel; there the soldiers actually collapse to the ground when Jesus says “I am”). Even the verbs of resurrection testify to Jesus’ divinity and its necessary interconnectedness with God’s Fatherhood of His Son. Sometimes Mark uses *egeirō*, stressing that the Father as subject *raises* the Son as object or, more subtly, that Jesus in the passive voice “has been raised” (most intriguingly in the conclusion to the gospel in 16:1–8, where there is no mention made of “God” at all, only of the “raised” Jesus of Naza-

*You cannot make any
sense of the New
Testament exegetically,
or of the Christian
faith spiritually,
apart from the
doctrine of the Trinity.*

areth). Other times the verb of choice is *anistēmi*, to stand up or arise, used by Jesus of himself each of the three times that he foretells his own death and resurrection, grammatically in the active or middle voice, putting the accent on his own divine agency. As with the “I am” sayings, John follows this logic and insists more than any other New Testament writer that Jesus rose from the dead rather than only being raised by his Father. This is the significance of Lazarus’ resurrection in John 11. *Getting* raised is not altogether extraordinary; a mere human, albeit with God’s power, could make it happen (both Peter and Paul manage to raise the dead in Acts, as had Elijah and Elisha in the Old Testament). But *rising* from the dead is a divine prerogative alone.

There is a point on which Mark and John differ in their testimony, however, and that is Jesus’ final words from the cross. Matthew follows Mark in reporting Jesus’ so-called cry of dereliction: “My God, my God, why have You forsaken me?” At the front end of his gospel, Matthew had contributed his own vote for Jesus’ divine Sonship in the birth narrative, where Joseph is instructed to name the child “Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (1:21). The name means “YHWH saves,” so the fact that Jesus is the one doing the saving identifies him with YHWH. In case you didn’t get the hint the first time, Matthew also adds a reference to Isaiah 7:14, “They shall call his name Immanuel,” God with us (1:23). Between the testimonies of Mark and Matthew, it’s amazing they had the courage to follow through with the final shocking cry of Jesus from the cross. This is really the point at which Jesus’ Sonship (hence divinity) comes into question. It confirms the opinion of the rabble, who have set their own standards for divine Sonship. “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Matthew 27:40). “He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if He desires him. For he said, ‘I am the Son of God!’” (Matthew 27:43). And yet ironically it is in his death that one unlikely candidate, a centurion, recognizes Jesus for what he is, in categories defying Roman understanding: “Truly this man was the Son of God!” (Mark 15:39). But the real proof lies ahead, and that is where Mark and Matthew meet up again with John and with Luke, too. Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus is God, because he has risen from the dead. His trust in his Father is vindicated every bit as much as his own divinity. The resurrection’s retrospective light shows that the Son’s obedience unto death, even death on a cross, does not call his divinity into question but confirms it. It is the *human* expectation of divinity that is called into question instead.

The divine Sonship, beyond doubt now because of the resurrection, implies a duration to the Son’s

own existence co-equal with God the Father. In other words, the Son is eternal and as such must have a role in the whole story of the world, starting with its creation. John proposes that “in the beginning was the Word,” which is matched by I Corinthians 8:6’s declaration that there is “one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist.” Building on these insights and II Corinthians 4:4’s observation that “Christ is the image of God,” Colossians 1 paints the whole portrait of the Son from before creation all the way to our reconciliation through the death and resurrection. God the Father

has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation... All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. (1:13–20)

Hebrews too connects divinity and Sonship through exegesis of the Scriptures of Israel, for only to the Son, “through whom [God] created the world” (1:2), did God ever say: “You are my Son, today I have begotten you,” “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to Me a son,” and “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, the scepter of uprightness is the scepter of Your kingdom” (1:5, 1:8).

The Holy Spirit

If the Holy Spirit sometimes appears to be the missing or invisible member

of the Trinity, it cannot be for reasons of neglect on the part of the Scriptures. Every bit as much as the Father and the Son, the Spirit appears early and often as a distinct agent (hypostasis!) with distinct activities.

The gospels paint a common picture of the Spirit. The Spirit is responsible for Jesus’ conception in Mary’s womb and for early recognition of his Sonship, especially by Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Simeon. John the Baptist warns that his baptism is with water only, not with fire and the Spirit, which the Christ alone can bestow; and indeed when Jesus is baptized the Spirit descends on him—only to drive him out at once in the wilderness to be tempted. Jesus’ teaching authority and miracles are the work of the Spirit, as he reads in the synagogue from Isaiah 61:1–2, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me.” The Holy Spirit will similarly give the disciples the words they need to speak as witnesses. Those who attribute Jesus’ works to the devil instead are fast approaching blasphemy against the Spirit, the one unforgivable sin, for they fail to make that critical distinction between the *Holy* Spirit and all the other competing spirits out there. Jesus, in fact, must constantly cast out spirits that are not the Holy Spirit of God—but getting rid of the other spirits is not enough; the Holy Spirit must come to take their place, or else “the last state of that person is worse than the first” (Matthew 12:44). John adds a promise of the Spirit, the advocate—in the dual sense of one who encourages and one who prosecutes, for the divine Spirit is the Spirit of truth—and after Jesus rises he breathes on the disciples to bestow the Spirit upon them and enable them to forgive sins.

In Acts, the Holy Spirit shines as the real star of the story, with about fifty-five mentions across the twenty-eight chapters. The central conviction of the book of Acts is that God has indeed poured out His Spirit on all flesh as promised through the prophet Joel (a key text for Peter’s Pentecost sermon). Further, this prophetic promise

is the work of the ascended Jesus, who at last has baptized his disciples with fire and the Holy Spirit as John the Baptist had foreseen. On Pentecost both fire and the Spirit arrive with a single intention: to drive the mission from Jerusalem out through Judea and Samaria to all the ends of the earth. The rest of Acts is the rippling impact of this gift. The Holy Spirit falls on believers and fills them. The Spirit gives specific directions: telling Philip to join the Ethiopian eunuch’s chariot, instructing Peter to make no distinction between Jews and the newly-believing Gentiles, prophesying through Agabus that a famine would ensue, setting apart Paul and Barnabas for ministry, forbidding ministry in places not yet ready for the word of God, appointing overseers for the flock. Precisely because the Holy Spirit fell on Cornelius and the other Gentiles in his entourage were Peter and the other Jews able to recognize their inclusion in Jesus’ salvation. When Paul discovers believers who have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit, he quickly ascertains that they have only received John’s baptism; once they have received Jesus’ baptism, not only do they know the Holy Spirit but are empowered by this same Spirit to prophesy and speak in tongues. By contrast, the sons of Sceva who try to exorcise in Jesus’ name apart from baptism and the Spirit quickly find themselves overpowered by the violent demoniac. This Spirit is clearly the Spirit of Jesus and his Father, yet we encounter the Spirit in Acts not as a subservient or secondary entity, like an angel without wings, but as a free and distinct agent Who always acts to create and confirm faith in the Son of God and empower the missionary task.

For Paul, there are countless competing claims on human beings; the Holy Spirit of God is the one righteous claimant against all other non-holy spirits as well as against the law and the flesh. Since “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit Who has been given to

us” (Romans 5:5), we now “walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit,” for “to set the mind on the Spirit is life and peace” (Romans 8:4, 6). This is “the Spirit of Christ” (Romans 8:9) as well as “the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead” (Romans 8:11a), and for this Spirit to indwell is to have the promise of resurrection. Possessing the firstfruits of the Spirit, we groan for the transformation of the whole creation as we pray in the Spirit with sighs too deep for words. The *Holy Spirit* further contrasts with “plausible words of wisdom” (I Corinthians 2:4) that appeal to the world, for the Spirit searches the depths of God and reveals the true, foolish wisdom from on high. Those who are now temples of the Holy Spirit receive a variety of spiritual gifts, for the good of the whole, as many members of one body, “for in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit” (I Corinthians 12:1–13). Together believers are to live by love, not by the old law—for “the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (II Corinthians 3:6) and “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (3:17)—and by faith, not by works. The flesh has lost its claim on us, for the Spirit dwelling in us produces fruit contrary to the flesh: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. And so on throughout the pauline corpus. Be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the body of peace” (Ephesians 4:3). We “worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh” (Philippians 3:3). Paul has heard all about “your love in the Spirit” (Colossians 1:8). “You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit” (I Thessalonians 1:6). “God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth” (II Thessalonians 2:16). Christ was “vindicated by the Spirit” (I Timothy 3:16). “By the Holy Spirit

who dwells within us, guard the good deposit entrusted to you” (II Timothy 1:14). Christ “saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit” (Titus 3:5). And all that is to say nothing of the multiple invocations of the Spirit in Hebrews, I Peter, I John, and Revelation!

Across the New Testament the witness is consistent: the Holy Spirit is experienced distinctly from the Father-Creator and Jesus the Savior, as the source of truth and power, as direction and confirmation in ministry, as the giver of gifts and fruit, as the convoker of the church and the maintainer of its unity, as the bestower of freedom from the flesh and the law—and yet in doing all these things constantly leads back to worship of the Father through the Son. How could this Spirit not be fully and equally God? It must be so: “The Lord is the Spirit” (II Corinthians 3:17).

Holy Trinity, One God

The New Testament and the Christian life reflected in it as well as formed by it together confess and praise these three—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—Who are yet one, because the God of Israel “is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4) and because they always act together, from creation to redemption to the final consummation. As distinct agents, it is possible to talk about them individually, as we have seen. At the same time, no word about any one of them ultimately makes sense apart from reference to the other two. As such it is not surprising that we frequently find all three spoken of in the same breath, testifying to the “complete” Trinity.

Some of these are quite familiar. At Jesus’ baptism the three are most “visible”: the Spirit descends on Jesus as the Father speaks from heaven, “You are my beloved Son.” The most fundamental trinitarian reference is Jesus’ commission at the end of Matthew: “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” (28:19). The one other verse to match this one in liturgical significance is II Corinthians 13:14, “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.” In John, Jesus commissions the disciples by saying, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you,” and immediately thereafter breathes on them and says, “Receive the Holy Spirit” (20:21–22).

Other trinitarian conjunctions are less known but equally essential to understanding the God confessed and praised by the New Testament. For Luke, the very conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb requires the participation of the Father and the Spirit: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (1:35). When Jesus prayed, “he rejoiced in the Holy Spirit and said, ‘I thank you, Father!’” (10:21). If evil men know how to give good gifts to their children, Jesus says, “how much more will the heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask him!” (11:13). At the very end of Luke’s gospel, the Son’s final words are on behalf of the Father and foreshadow the coming of the third: “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high” (24:49). The Father is not fully known, and His promise of a kingdom cannot be fully realized, even through the work of the Son. Just as there is no Father without a Son, there is no life with and true knowledge of either without the Spirit. The Father’s work of creation and the Son’s work of redemption have fallen short and missed their mark unless they are received in the lives of their objects, in justifying faith, which is the work of the Holy Spirit, that we might believe in the Son who fulfilled his Father’s desire for reconciliation with us. The whole plan of salvation is trinitarian.

Luke follows this logic into Acts. Peter testifies in his Pentecost sermon: “Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, [Jesus] has poured out this that you yourselves are seeing and hearing” (2:33). In like manner, Peter explains the gospel to the Gentiles: “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power” (10:38). In this light, Stephen’s vision right before his martyrdom could not have been otherwise: “He, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God” (7:55). Long before the church councils resolved the language and concepts needed to articulate the precise divine interrelationships, the faith of the church was a trinitarian faith with a trinitarian spirituality.

John too sees the role of the Holy Spirit in acting to create and confirm faith in the Son of the Father. Twice in his final discourse Jesus promises that “the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name” (14:26) or, alternately, “whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father” (15:26) will teach the disciples all things and help them remember what he has said (but not, perhaps, to solve the filioque controversy, which seems to have its seeds right here!). Of course, many spirits will compete to teach the nascent Christian community many things, not all of which are true. A rule is needed, thus, “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (1 John 4:2). Right teaching and holy spirituality must be trinitarian.

In Paul’s “systematic theology,” as the epistle to the Romans is sometimes called, the letter opens with a short but comprehensive statement of “the gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy

Scriptures, concerning His Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord” (1:1–4). Resurrection is assured because “the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you” (8:11). Paul’s own calling is to be “a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (15:16), and for this he appeals to fellow believers “by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God on my behalf” (15:30). The spiritual ramifications appear in other letters, too: Galatians 4:6 tells us that “God has sent the Spirit of His Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” and Ephesians 2:18 assures us that “through [Christ] we both [that is, Jews and Gentiles] have access in one Spirit to the Father.” The spiritual life and the Trinity are inconceivable apart from one another: “It is God Who establishes us with you in Christ, and has anointed us, and Who has also put His seal on us and given us His Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (11 Corinthians 1:21–22). In the negative case, we “grieve the Holy Spirit of God” when we fail to “be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:30–32).

Hebrews meanwhile points out that, if the blood of goats and bulls could accomplish reconciliation, “how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (9:14). The opening lines of 1 Peter address the “elect exiles... according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, in the sanctification of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling

with his blood” (1:2). And Jude exhorts the beloved: “Building yourselves up in your most holy faith and praying in the Holy Spirit, keep yourselves in the love of God, waiting for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ that leads to eternal life” (20–21).

It is no accident that, right after 1 John’s discussion of the Spirit’s role in leading believers to a right confession of the Father’s Son in the flesh, comes one of the few “ontological” statements of the New Testament: “God is love” (4:8). For God has shown such tremendous love to sinful humanity—in sustaining the good creation even after human sin broke it, in the incarnation’s willing acceptance of suffering and death, in creating faith and bestowing power to lead new lives at peace with God instead of at war with Him. But could this love only exist after and on account of human beings and their sin? No; it must be that God’s own being is love even before there was a created object on which to bestow it. Yet love can’t be an abstract thing, a platonic form. Love can only exist in the happening. The final reason that God is love is because God *is* the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Who live one life in an everlasting fellowship of one love. With God, what we see is what we get (which is why modalism is out; otherwise God would be something else lurking behind those three masks). What we see and what we get is the love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit reaching out to draw us into this divine love.

Who do you say that God is? Who created you? Who redeemed you? Who brought you to saving faith? Who is love without beginning and without end? Whom do you therefore magnify and glorify, worship and praise? It is none other than the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, holy Trinity, one God, now and forever. ✠