

God the Holy Trinity, Part II

The Triune Shape of Christian Theology

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I. **Articulating Mystery: Three Primary Affirmations About the Trinity**

Theology, in its truest and most faithful expression, *articulates* mystery. With respect to the Trinity, theology describes who it is that we trust, worship, confess, and obey; yet not in such a way or to such an extent—as if such were possible!—that God should somehow cease to be infinite and incomprehensible. The purpose of theology is not to “solve” God!

Scripture allows us to make three biblically-sourced, biblically-sound affirmations about the Trinity. These affirmations safeguard rather than solve the mystery of the Trinity. And at the same time, they establish the boundaries of orthodoxy—the scope and sphere, the theological playing field, as it were, for continued trinitarian reflection. These affirmations are:

1. God is three persons. That is, God is three personal “subsistences,” or centers of self-awareness, each being an “I” in relation to the other two, who are thus “thou/you.”

- The Father is neither the Son nor the Spirit.
- The Son is neither the Father nor the Spirit.
- The Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son (Matt. 3:16; John 1:1-2; 7:37-39; 14:6, 14-17, 26; 15:26; 16:5-7; 17:24; Rom. 8:16, 27; Gal. 4:4-6; Heb. 7:25).



2. Each of these three persons is truly and fully God. That is, each participates/partakes equally and eternally in the triune life that constitutes God's nature and existence.

- The Father is God; this is assumed throughout Scripture.
- The Son is God (John 1:1; Col. 2:9; Rom. 9:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:1-3; John 20:28).
- The Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4; 1 Cor. 2:10-11; John 3:1-8; 14:13-20).
- The God who is Father, Son, and Spirit neither changes nor evolves. With respect to his deity, he is and shall always be who he has always been—always and ever exactly like himself.
- There is no priority in essence, such that the Father conveys or imparts/gifts his deity to the Son and Spirit. For Father, Son, and Spirit are of the same essence, being equally and eternally God.
- There is, however, an order of relations that cannot be altered or reversed (because this is basic/essential to authentic personhood). The Father is *principium* (prior in relational order) in that he is the eternal Father of his eternally *begotten* Son, just as the Son is the eternal Son of his Father in the communion of the eternal Spirit, who eternally *proceeds* from the Father (and in his messianic, mediatorial mission, from the Son).
- With respect to deity, everything that can be said of the Father can be said of the Son and Spirit, except “Father.” Everything that can be said of the Son can be said of the Father and Spirit, except “Son.” And everything that can be said of the Spirit can be said of the Father and Son, except “Spirit.”

“Within himself God is love, as seen in the Father giving all he has to the Son, and the Son seeking all he has in the Father. In this life of love between the Father and the Son, the Spirit is the bond of fellowship. The Father is the Loving One, the Fountain. The Son the Beloved One...ever receiving and ever giving back. The Spirit is the Living Love that makes them one. In him the divine life of love has its ceaseless flow and overflowing. It is that same love with which the Father loves the Son that rests on us and seeks to fill us too, and it is through the Spirit that this love of God is revealed and communicated to us... The Spirit comes to us freighted with all the love of God and of Jesus: the Spirit is the love of God.” ~Andrew Murray, *The Spirit of Love*



3. *There is one God.* *That is, these three persons are not only one in outlook and purpose, sharing merely a moral or missional union, but are one in nature, essence, reality, being.*

- God's oneness is affirmed in the Old Testament (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 44:6; 45:20-22).
- God's oneness is *reaffirmed* in the New Testament (John 10:30; 1 Tim. 2:5; James 2:19).

These three affirmations mark off the sphere of Christian orthodoxy concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. Can more be said? *Of course!* Yet whatever that may be, it should never contradict, deny, or transgress any of these three affirmations. At once, then, these three affirmations give us a context for theological creativity and a safeguard against theological novelty.

II. The “Perichoresis” of Father, Son, and Spirit

God is three persons, which means that any one person of the Trinity is not the other two. Yet it does not follow that each person of the Trinity is not *in* the other two. On the contrary, the distinct persons of the Trinity are not only mutually, intimately involved with one another; the distinct persons of the Trinity mutually indwell, or interpenetrate, one another.

The theological term for this mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Spirit is **perichoresis** (the lesser used Latin synonym is **coinherence**). The perichoresis of Father, Son, and Spirit is taught throughout the New Testament. For example:

- The Father is in me [Jesus] and I am in the Father (John 10:38).
- I [Jesus] am in the Father and the Father is in me...the Father who dwells in me does his works (John 14:10).
- In Christ God [Father and Spirit] was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor. 5:19).
- Jesus “goes away” in order to send the Spirit (John 16:4-15), yet Jesus is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matt. 28:20). How is Jesus with us? In and through the Spirit, who is the effectual presence and power of Christ.
- The Spirit dwells in us (1 Cor. 6:19), and Christ dwells in us (Col. 1:27). How does Christ dwell in us? In and through the indwelling Spirit.
- The Spirit is both the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9-11). Why? Because of the mutual interpenetration of Father, Son, and Spirit.



What is the theological significance of perichoresis?

- All three persons of the Trinity participate in all the works of God, albeit with differences in emphasis and focus. For instance, neither the Father nor the Spirit died on the cross, only the Son. Even so, our salvation is by no means the province of the Son alone.
- All three persons of the Trinity mutually glorify one another.
- By being united to Christ in Spirit-wrought faith, believers actually participate in the life of the Trinity—Father, Son, and Spirit (John 14:16-20; 17:20-26)!

“The only way for a true person to exist is for being and communion to coincide. The triune God offers in himself the only possibility for such an identification of being with communion; he is the revelation of true personhood.” ~John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood in the Church*

“What is needed today is a better understanding of the person not just as an individual but as someone who finds his or her true being in communion with God and with others, the counterpart of the trinitarian doctrine of God.... God is love and has his true being in communion, in the mutual indwelling of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—*perichoresis*, the patristic word. This is the God who has created us male and female in his image to find our true humanity in perichoretic unity with him and one another, and who renews us in his image in Christ.” ~J. B. Torrance, *Worship, Community, and the Triune God of Grace*