

Praise to the Ever Blessed Trinity

Isaac Watts (1674–1748)

Blest be the Father and his Love,
To whose celestial Source we owe
Rivers of endless Joys above,
And Rills of Comfort here below.

Glory to thee, great Son of God,
From whose dear wounded Body rolls
A precious Stream of vital Blood,
Pardon and Life for dying Souls.

We give the sacred Spirit Praise,
Who in our Hearts of Sin and Woe
Makes living Springs of Grace arise,
And into boundless Glory flow.

Thus God the Father, God the Son,
And God the Spirit we adore;
That Sea of Life and Love unknown
Without a Bottom or a Shore.

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In the Nick of Time

Trinitarian Thought and the Bible

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I recall one of my doctoral professors remarking, “We evangelicals have not been serious Trinitarian theologians.” At the time, his remark puzzled me. I recalled seminary theology classes during which the professor spent hours defending the unity of the divine nature and the triplicity of divine persons. He took great pains to establish the full deity of each person from Scripture. He surveyed the anti-Trinitarian heresies and gave biblical reasons for rejecting each one. I wondered how this extensive presentation was not seriously Trinitarian theology.

But even then, in seminary, I was aware that certain questions were left unaddressed. Words like *generation*, *spiration*, and *procession* cropped up in reading, but rarely in the classroom. We were taught that there had been controversy over adding *filioque* to the creed, but we were not told why the point was worth disputing.

Our required reading also indicated that some aspects of traditional Trinitarianism were subject to disagreement, even in fundamental circles. At the time, John MacArthur was still objecting that the doctrine of eternal generation was unbiblical. A fundamentalist theologian, J. Oliver Buswell, questioned certain aspects of traditional Trinitarianism—and, indeed, certain long-held conclusions of traditional theism, such as God’s timeless eternity.

Beyond those terms represented a world of Trinitarian terminology that we rarely heard mentioned. I could not have distinguished a substance from a subsistence, let alone a subsistent relation. We never discussed eternal relations of origin. We learned nothing about personal properties, appropriations, or divine missions. We did learn about perichoresis, at least in brief, but we were not taught about inseparable operations.

To be fair, our professor had the job of instructing students who were nearly theologically illiterate—and who didn’t know it. That is a problem that has only grown worse during the intervening years. For thirty years I have taught my students only a very basic Trinitarianism. They would be overwhelmed by more.



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Also, we are forced to construct the doctrine of the Trinity in a particular order. The fact that I say “we construct” this doctrine is significant. The Trinity is not clearly and unequivocally taught in any one passage of Scripture. We must assemble the doctrine from pieces.

The raw data obviously comes from Scripture, and for that reason we insist that the doctrine of the Trinity is biblical. We can easily point to texts that teach the existence of one and only one true God. We easily find texts that teach the deity of the Father. With only slightly more difficulty we locate texts that teach the deity of the Son. We have more difficulty finding texts that teach the deity of the Spirit, but they do exist. We can also find texts that distinguish the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.

We readily infer the following. There is one true God. The Father is God. The Son is God. The Holy Spirit is God. But the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Spirit, and the Spirit is not the Father.

Even at this point we are doing doctrinal construction. We are pulling together texts that teach various things. We assemble those teachings into a particular construct that seems best to explain Scripture. But when we have done that, we do not yet have the doctrine of the Trinity.

We are forced to ask, how can God be one and yet three? How is this a coherent statement? And our answer must be that God is one of one thing and three of something else. So, we next ask, *how* is God one, and *how* is God three? And here we cannot improve upon the ancient answer that God is one as to being, nature, or essence, while He is three as to person or (if we have taken Greek) *hypostasis*.

And at this point, we are going beyond the direct teachings of Scripture. The Bible does not directly contrast the divine *ousia* with the *hypostases* or the essence with the persons. Those are terms that we have borrowed to try to label what we think we see in the text. These terms, and others like them, add another story of construction to the edifice that is the doctrine of the Trinity.

And it is at this point that things can go awry. For example, another way of speaking about the persons is to call them *subsistences*. A subsistence is a mode of being, and God subsists in three such modes. But if we change “mode of being” to “mode of presentation,” we slip into the heresy of Sabellianism or Modalistic Monarchianism. So, we look for ways to explain subsistence that fortify the distinctiveness of the persons.

If we go too far in that direction, however (as Social Trinitarians do), then we end up not only distinguishing the persons but dividing them and rupturing the unity of the essence. In a word, we run the risk of Tritheism. When that happens, we must look for language that emphasizes the unity of the Godhead and explains how the three can be genuinely one. We go back

to Scripture, looking for clues about how we can express rightly the revealed truth.

In the long run we end up talking about processions, eternal relations of origin, personal properties, eternal generation, double spiration, and the whole vocabulary of Trinitarianism. Naïve biblicists grow impatient with this careful work of construction. They think we are importing philosophy into our theology. They want us to stick with clearly-stated biblical concepts and even terms where possible.

But this constructive work is not philosophy, and it is absolutely necessary. It is the attempt to explain the data of revelation in the face of criticism and denial. It is the effort to find biblical categories that help to explain the questions that arise from a serious confrontation with the data that Scripture itself provides.

By the time we are finished, the temple of Trinitarian thought has begun to resemble a skyscraper. We have erected story upon story. And even then, some questions are still debated or unanswered. Exactly what does the Father communicate to the Son in generation? What does it mean for each person to be self-existent God (*autotheos*)?

This temple of Trinitarian thought is difficult even to enter. Climbing the stairs from one story to the next can be hard labor. But the building is beautiful and majestic because God is beautiful and majestic. And the views from its upper stories are breathtaking. Making the climb is one of the most worthwhile things that a Christian can ever do.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
