

“The Trinity is the foundational doctrine of the Christian faith, but often Christians are not equipped to speak accurately about this doctrine or to articulate why it matters for discipleship. In this book, Brandon Smith provides a reliable and accessible pathway into the meaning and spiritual implications of trinitarian theology. He skillfully combines scriptural exegesis and broader theological reflection to show Bible readers where to go and what to watch out for when contemplating God as Father, Son, and Spirit. This is a welcome resource for everyone seeking to grow in the love and knowledge of our triune God.”

—Steven J. Duby,
associate professor of theology, Phoenix Seminary

“If Jesus Christ is the treasure hidden in the field of the Scriptures, then *The Biblical Trinity* is a treasure map produced by the hand of a master cartographer. Brandon Smith’s book shows readers how to find Jesus Christ in the Scriptures and, in finding him, how to treasure him as the Father’s Spirit-anointed Son, our Maker, Redeemer, and Reward. I am delighted to see *The Biblical Trinity* in print and fully expect that it will make many readers rich.”

—Scott R. Swain,
president, Reformed Theological Seminary, Orlando, FL

“For many Christians, it is hard to relate the technical terms and concepts involved in the doctrine of the Trinity to the more concrete language of Scripture. We often worry about making an artificial connection or feel intimidated at using the wrong language. By working through a series of key biblical passages through a Trinitarian lens, Brandon Smith helps us understand how the Trinity is ultimately not an obstacle, but an aid, in understanding Scripture. More than that, he offers a model of doing theology in a way that is doctrinally careful, historically informed, and devotionally edifying. I highly recommend this helpful, accessible book, which will help Christians discern in fresh ways the outline of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the pages of the Bible.”

—Gavin Ortlund,
senior pastor, First Baptist Church, Ojai, CA

“A refreshingly simple and yet profound book, Brandon Smith has invited readers who trust Scripture to trust the deep logic of its divine triune author. *The Biblical Trinity* is grounded in careful readings of biblical passages and then flowers in the major doctrines of the orthodox church. Anyone who desires to attend to the identity of God as revealed in Scripture will benefit from this book.”

—Amy Peeler,
associate professor of New Testament,
Wheaton College

“It takes a trained ear to hear the Trinitarian rhythm of Scripture. Brandon Smith shares this gift, acquired at the feet of the Church Fathers, with those willing to learn how to listen for the one voice of the Father, Son, and Spirit. This is an eminently usable guide and introduction to the biblical foundations for the doctrine of the Trinity.”

—Adonis Vidu,
Andrew Mutch Distinguished Professor of Theology,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

“Brandon Smith offers readers a terrific overview of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. If you were to read just one chapter every day, perhaps after your daily Bible reading, within two weeks you will have encountered an overview of major Trinitarian passages in the Bible along with guidance on how to read the rest of the Bible in a Trinitarian manner. This worshipful and biblical explanation of the Trinity is a real gift to the church.”

—Trevin Wax,
vice president of research and resource development,
North American Mission Board

“Christians are baptized in the name of the Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The confession of the Trinitarian faith is the deepest bond that all Christians share. Brandon Smith, in this short work, has given us a precise and compelling depiction of the unity of the Trinitarian faith and the practice of the Christian life of prayer. He depicts confessional truth claims and Christian devotion in unity with one another in a way that is compelling and can be of benefit to many. A very helpful book for Christian formation!”

—Thomas Joseph White,
OP, rector, Angelicum

The Biblical Trinity

ENCOUNTERING THE FATHER,
SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT
IN SCRIPTURE

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BRANDON D. SMITH



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The Biblical Trinity: Encountering the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in Scripture

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To Christa, Harper, Emma, and Amelia

*The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ
and the love of God
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you all.*

—2 Corinthians 13:14 (ESV)



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CHAPTER ONE

The Biblical Trinity

The Bible is a Trinitarian book. This statement may surprise you. After all, the word “Trinity” is found nowhere in the Bible. And if we are people of the Book, how can we describe the Bible this way if the doctrine is not even explicitly named in the pages of Scripture?

Doctrine is not a mere list or collection of the Bible’s words; rather, doctrine is a type of speech about God, which at times requires drawing together a set of themes and patterns across the scope of the biblical canon. So, seeing the doctrine of the Trinity will require more than mere proof texts or word studies—it will require following the logic and grammar of Scripture.¹

Jesus modeled this for us when he was tempted by Satan in the wilderness (Matt 4:1–11). They both used biblical citations in their arguments, but the difference was their usage of the texts. The way Satan used Scripture bent it to his interpretation, whereas Jesus’s application held true to the context of Scripture. Satan quoted God’s words—as he did in the garden of Eden—but misused them. Jesus, on the other hand, quoted Scripture correctly. For example, when Satan quoted Psalm 91 to tempt Jesus to jump off the temple, Jesus responded with Deuteronomy 6:16: “Do not test the Lord your God.” Jesus pointed out clearly that Satan was misusing Psalm 91 because Satan wasn’t quoting it in light of passages like Deuteronomy 6:16. Martin Luther summarizes this idea well: Satan and his demons “even while they speak truly according to grammar, that is, with respect to the words, they speak lies according to theology, that is, with respect to the sense.”²

The goal of this book is to briefly show you how to see the Trinity in the Bible by introducing basic reading strategies and then modeling them in a select group of passages. Before we get to the biblical passages, we should ask two questions: (1) what is the Trinity?, and (2) how do we see the Trinity in the Bible?

WHAT IS THE TRINITY?

The doctrine of the Trinity seeks to explain the biblical data about who God is. As the biblical story unfolds, we see that God is *one being* (Deut 6:4). That said, the Bible also affirms that God is somehow *three persons*—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As we will see throughout this book, to speak of the one God of the Bible is to speak of the Father, Son, and Spirit—they are each God, but they are not each other.³ Four basic theological principles can help us think about Scripture’s revelation of our triune God.⁴

1. *Nature.* The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. They are equal in nature because each is fully God. There is no hierarchy within the divine nature, such that the Son might be less divine than the Father, and so on. God cannot be something other than God, so the three persons have the same exact eternal existence, perfection, self-sufficiency, power, authority, knowledge, wisdom, and will because each person is fully God.

2. *Relations.* Again, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each God, but they are not each other. They are each fully God, not three parts of God’s one nature divided among them. But while there is no distinction in their nature as the one God, the primary distinction in the life of the triune God is the distinction between these three persons and their relations to one another. We see this

clearly in the way the Bible describes them. The Son is the “only begotten Son” of the Father (John 3:16). The Father, however, is unbegotten—the Bible never describes him as the Son of some other Father. The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and Son (John 14:26; 15:26), not the other way around. Each person, then, has a distinct relation to the others even as we rigorously affirm that they are the one God.

3. *Inseparable operations.* This principle of unity and distinction is most clearly shown in the undivided external acts of the triune God in creation and salvation. When one person of the Trinity acts, it is an indivisible act between all three. Because the Son and Holy Spirit are sent from the Father in salvation—primarily the Son becoming incarnate and the Holy Spirit being poured out at Pentecost—the personal distinctions are still maintained. For example, the Father doesn’t put on flesh and dwell among us; the Son does. The doctrine of inseparable operations offers a category to talk about how Father, Son, and Holy Spirit always act with one divine power, authority, and will. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons but not divided persons. Salvation, for instance, is the work of the one God, and that one God acts distinctly and yet inseparably as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. And even when a biblical passage might only emphasize one or two persons acting, this doesn’t mean that the unnamed person of the

Trinity is off taking a heavenly nap. Instead, we understand the biblical affirmation that God is never divided or separated, and thus the persons always act indivisibly.

4. *The hypostatic union.* When doing Trinitarian theology, we also have to deal with the mystery of the incarnation of the Son. The Son has existed eternally as God, yet he “became flesh and dwelt among us” in time and space (John 1:14). He never ceased to be God, and yet became a man. As such, we affirm the hypostatic union: Christ is one divine person with two natures, fully God and fully man. He forgives sins with divine authority and yet bled and died for our sins as a perfect sacrifice; he created all things and sustains the universe with divine power, yet he also napped and ate; he existed before time began, and yet he walked the streets of Israel in the first century. The eternal Son—*that same person*—assumed a true human nature to live the perfectly obedient, sinless life that no mere human could. This mystery cannot be resolved or comprehended—it can only be affirmed based on the biblical witness.

These Trinitarian principles are derived from Scripture’s depiction of our triune God. They serve as a grammar that shapes our speech and helps us speak rightly about God. Ultimately, we must confess that the Trinity is a revealed mystery. It is *revealed* in that the triune God has revealed himself in three persons clearly in the

Bible; it is not fully comprehensible in that we only “know in part” the mysteries of God (1 Cor 13:12). So, we should take confidence in the fact that God has revealed himself in a meaningful way, but the mystery should humble us before our mighty God. The question before us is how to see our triune God as he is revealed in Scripture.

HOW DO WE SEE THE TRINITY IN THE BIBLE?

The Bible teaches the doctrine of the Trinity in terms of language and logic, not merely proof texts or word studies. So, how do we read the Bible in order to see the truth and beauty of our triune God? In the following chapters, we will encounter a wonderful adventure of knowing and worshiping our triune God as he is revealed in the pages of Scripture. To do that, we will operate from two basic assumptions.

1. *The doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in the biblical story line.* The reason we even address a “Trinitarian” description of God is because Christ and the Spirit were sent to us. This is not to say that God has changed or that the Trinity is absent from the pages of the Old Testament. On the contrary, we see God’s Word and Spirit at work in the Old Testament (for example, Gen 1:1–3; Ps 110; see also John 1:1; Heb 1:13). Jesus himself says that the Old Testament speaks of him (Luke 24:44; John 5:46). Joel 2:28 was fulfilled in the Spirit’s outpouring in Acts

2. Nonetheless, from a historical perspective, the Son's incarnation and the Spirit's outpouring in real time and space caused the earliest Christians to reconsider what it meant to believe in and worship the one God of Israel. Since titles, actions, and claims about Jesus and the Spirit were descriptions reserved for God himself, the earliest Christians were forced to examine what it meant to affirm, for example, Deuteronomy 6:4: "The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*."

We cannot rightly understand the New Testament without the Old Testament, for the New Testament authors' claims about Jesus and the Spirit are rooted in their confession of the Old Testament's authority. God's providential ordering of human history meant that the Old Testament was already a witness to Christ and the Spirit long before the New Testament was written because (1) the Old Testament was always pointing forward; and (2) Jesus's and the Spirit's self-identification with the identity and purposes of God himself became the biblical authors' interpretive grid for the fulfillment of such expectations.⁵ And since there is a strict distinction between the creator and his creatures/creation, the three persons of the Trinity sit alone in eternal divine blessedness on the creator's side of creation. In turn, we cannot fully understand Scripture without considering how its representation of God's nature and purposes

relate to the persons and works of Christ and the Spirit. Every New Testament passage covered in this book, then, is rightly understood in light of its own claims and its relationship to Old Testament texts and themes. When we read the whole Bible, we are pressured by its claims to confess a triune God.

2. *The doctrine of the Trinity was received by the Christian tradition as a faithful reading of Scripture's presentation of God.* This, too, is rooted in the providence of God. Just as the New Testament authors did not create some Trinitarian doctrine that was foreign to the Old Testament, the post-apostolic church was and is guided by the Spirit to understand and apply the biblical canon's witness to God in their own time and space. For the majority of church history, there has been a general agreement with the rule of faith, which taught that Scripture is an interconnected story that reveals a true picture of the Father, Son, and Spirit—the foundation of our faith.⁶ So, if we deny the Trinity, not only would we be overlooking Scripture's own depiction of God, but we would be abandoning two millennia of faithful Christian readers before us.

In sum, we read Scripture in a theological-canonical way with the triune God as our subject matter. We read *theologically* because Scripture is inspired by and

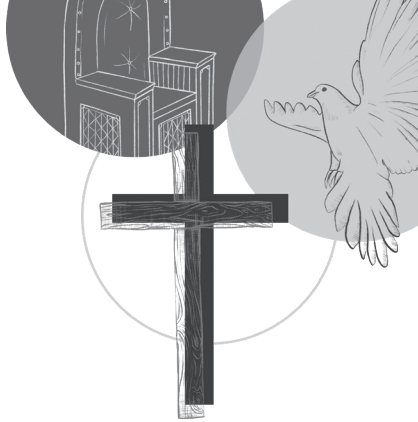
points to the triune God. We read *canonically* because we understand Scripture—Old Testament and New Testament—as a unified story or message about the triune God. These assumptions will guide us as we consider a handful of texts that help us see the Trinity in the Bible.

I have chosen passages that offer some of the clearest examples of the doctrine of the Trinity. Some texts are focused on the interactions of all three persons, and others may focus primarily on the Son or Spirit, but all help build a full-fledged biblical doctrine of the Trinity. These texts and many others are not in competition with one another. It's not as though some are more "Trinitarian" than others. Instead, what we find is a choir of voices across the biblical canon that sing a beautiful song about our triune God. It's my ultimate hope that this book sparks or renews your love for our triune God and his Scriptures, that you may hear his song as you read its pages. Though in many ways the Trinity is a mystery to us, nonetheless God has meaningfully revealed himself to us in Scripture in this way.

May we spend the rest of our days seeking to know and glorify this triune God. May we continue to seek his grace and mercy as we seek to offer our lives to him as living sacrifices.

A PRAYER

- O God the Father, Creator of heaven and earth,
Have mercy upon us.
- O God the Son, Redeemer of the world,
Have mercy upon us.
- O God the Holy Ghost, Sanctifier of the faithful,
Have mercy upon us.
- O holy, blessed, and glorious Trinity, one God,
Have mercy upon us.⁷



CHAPTER TWO

Forgiveness of Sins

MATTHEW 9:1-8

In our home, we have an informal catechism that we often use with our daughters. It goes like this:

I ask, “Can you forgive your own sins?”

My daughters reply, “No!”

“Can daddy forgive your sins?”

“No!”

“Can mommy forgive your sins?”

“No!”

“What about your baby sister? She’s cute and cuddly and sweet.”

“No!”

“Who alone can forgive your sins?”

“God!”

They know only God can forgive their sins—they have been taught this for as long as they can remember. God’s people were catechized the same way. Psalm 3:8 says plainly, “Salvation belongs to the LORD.” And biblically speaking, God’s salvation has physical and spiritual effects, because sin has both physical and spiritual effects.

We can think of the sacrificial system, in which God forgives his people’s sins through sacrifices. We can think of God leading the Israelites out of Egypt or providing manna and water in the wilderness. In Isaiah, God says both “I am the one, I sweep away your transgressions for my own sake and remember your sins no more” (Isa 43:25) and “I will create new heavens and a new earth” (Isa 65:17). In whatever way it happens, it’s God alone who saves and it’s his prerogative to save.

Now, imagine for a moment that you’re a devout Jewish person who hears Jesus claim that *he* can forgive sins. If someone walked up to you today and said, “I can forgive your sins,” you would be confused and perhaps even offended. In Matthew 9, Jesus claims to forgive sins and is called a blasphemer—one who speaks profanely about God. Why? Because the Jewish leaders knew that his claim to be able to forgive sins was something that the Hebrew Scriptures attributed to God alone.

SINS FORGIVEN AND CREATION RESTORED

Blasphemy! The religious leaders hurl this insult at Jesus numerous times in the New Testament. In fact, we will see this word come up a few times in subsequent chapters of this book. To call someone a blasphemer is to call him the worst of sinners. And the Jewish leaders accuse Jesus of blasphemy because they recognize that he is very clearly claiming to be God. If he isn't God, then they're right. But if he is, they've missed the offer of salvation that (literally) stands in front of them.

Matthew 9 opens as a group of men lead Jesus to a paralyzed man. This man has been hopeless, resigned to a life on his back. The stretcher he lies on is the stretcher he may die on. With the growing reputation of Jesus's miraculous deeds, Jesus seems to be the paralyzed man's last hope. And he was right. Jesus not only planned to deal with his physical ailment, but also his spiritual ailment. Jesus tells the man that his sins are forgiven.

This troubles Jewish leaders. "Blasphemy," they say to themselves. After all, who can forgive sins but God? And yet this man is claiming to do something only God can do. If this paralyzed man has sinned, then he should seek forgiveness from God alone. Perhaps he should go the temple like everyone else, rather than being laid out in someone's living room. But his sins are forgiven right then and there merely because Jesus, God in the flesh, spoke the words.

After the leaders inwardly utter “blasphemy,” the passage says that Jesus “perceives their thoughts,” which sounds similar to Jeremiah 17:10: “I, the LORD, examine the mind, I test the heart.” Not only does he have the authority to forgive sins, but he also exercises a deep, even divine, knowledge of their innermost thoughts. Jesus doesn’t back down after being accused of blasphemy; instead, he doubles down:

Which is easier: to say, “Your sins are forgiven,” or to say, “Get up and walk”? But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—then he told the paralytic, “Get up, take your stretcher, and go home.” So he got up and went home. When the crowds saw this, they were awestruck and gave glory to God, who had given such authority to men. (Matt 9:5–8)

Jesus challenges their suspicion. It might be easy for someone to merely say, “Your sins are forgiven.” You or I could say something like that, and there would be no real proof. So Jesus ups the ante and tells the man to get up and walk. Why? “So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins.” Jesus doesn’t back down here; no, he ensures that the charge of blasphemy is proven false. God has promised from the beginning not only to cleanse our spiritual death, but to redeem all

of creation. The total redemption of this man—body and soul—was the proof.

While some in the crowd may have seen Jesus as merely an amazing man, the religious leaders knew his claim was bigger. When Jesus forgives the man's sins *and* tells him to get up and walk, he is claiming and demonstrating that he is God himself, with the power and prerogative to “sweep away their sins” (Isa 43:19) as well as “make all things new” (Isa 44:22). A mere man could not do this. Prophets, priests, judges, and kings were held in esteem among God's people. They were messengers and witnesses to the promises of God. Their offices were appointed by God and used by God in innumerable ways. But as Jesus said, these righteous people longed for his coming (Matt 13:17; John 8:56). They were all imperfect. People at the center of biblical covenants—like Noah, Abraham, and David—were all sinners with obvious flaws. But nobody assumed that these people were God, nor did these people ever claim to be. They were mere signposts on the way to the Messiah's arrival.

After four hundred years, John the Baptist's voice cried out in the wilderness—a voice promised in Isaiah 40—saying, “Repent, because the kingdom of heaven has come near! ... Prepare the way for the LORD” (Matt 3:1, 3; see also Mark 1:2–5; Luke 3:2–6; John 1:23). This Lord—Jesus Christ, God in the flesh—was coming to save his people

from their sins and bear their punishment on his own shoulders. During his earthly ministry, people began to see his reconciling work with their own eyes. Jesus shows the religious leaders that God himself has finally come; the only one who can forgive sins stepped into creation to redeem it from the inside out.

TOWARD A RENEWAL OF ALL THINGS

This passage focuses primarily on Jesus's divinity, as the person of the Trinity who became man for our sake. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each fully God, but only the person of the Son put on flesh and dwelt among us as the God-man, Jesus Christ. Nonetheless, it is the triune God who makes all things new, which is evident in the context of this passage. The Father and Holy Spirit's unified work in the ministry of Jesus is clear throughout the Gospel, so we should not assume that because the other persons of the Trinity are not listed in this particular passage, that they are absent or taking a break. Indeed, the New Testament consistently portrays Jesus's miraculous works as inseparable from the Holy Spirit's work (for example, Mark 3:28–30).

Jesus's work on earth is the interpretive grid through which the earliest Christians understood the inbreaking of God's kingdom and his plan to deliver them from sin and death. Some people accepted this claim. Others, like

the leaders in this passage, thought this claim was flat-out sinful. When Jesus claimed to forgive sins, his audience then, and now, are faced with C. S. Lewis's famous question: Is Jesus a liar, lunatic, or Lord?⁸

If he really is able to forgive sins, then God's promises really do find their "amen" and "yes" in him (2 Cor 1:20), because he is the God who made the promise and who keeps his promises. In fact, only *God* can keep God's promises. If he is not God in the flesh, then God's promise to deliver us and all of creation from the curse of sin is still a mystery. More than that, the religious leaders would be right: he is a blasphemer and a liar or lunatic of the vilest sort. A truly biblical understanding of the forgiveness of sins requires the doctrine of the Trinity—Jesus must be the eternal, divine Son of God in order to have the power and authority to forgive sins and redeem all things.

A PRAYER

Father, you sent your only begotten Son for us and for our salvation. By your Spirit grant that we would receive Jesus's words, "Your sins are forgiven." In Jesus's name, by the Spirit we pray. Amen.