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INTRODUCTION

God is one; . . . this one God is Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; . . . the Father is the Father of the Son; and the Son, the Son of the Father; and the Holy Ghost, the Spirit of the Father and the Son; and . . . in respect of this their mutual relations, they are distinct from each other. (John Owen)  

To know God is to know him as triune. There is one God in three Persons. Or to express the same truth in a different way, God is three Persons in one being—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This Trinitarian truth is foundational to the worship and the service of God. To know God as triune is to worship him as he is, rejoicing in his very being. We praise the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for having equal, divine majesty, while at the same time honoring each Person’s unique personality: the Father is the Father of the Son; the Son is the Son of the Father; the Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son. Out of this worship comes our service, as we show the Father’s mercy and proclaim the Son’s sacrifice in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Historically, the church has placed great importance on the doctrine of the Trinity, which has been held universally across the church and around the world. The early church father Irenaeus claimed that apart from the reality of the Trinity we cannot know God at all: “Without the Spirit it is not possible to behold the [Son] of God, nor without the Son can any draw near the Father: for the knowledge of the Father is the Son, and the knowledge of the Son of God is through the Holy Spirit; and, according to the

good pleasure of the Father, the Son ministers and dispenses the Spirit to whomsoever the Father wills and as He wills.”

The same Trinitarian doctrine is clearly confessed in the ancient creeds of the Christian church. In the Apostles’ Creed, for example, believers confess their faith in “God, the Father Almighty,” in “Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord,” and in “the Holy Ghost.” Similarly, the Nicene Creed states, “I believe in God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth . . . and in Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God . . . and in the Holy Ghost, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified.”

The Trinity was strongly reaffirmed by the Reformers, believing as they did that the doctrine was plainly taught in Scripture. Like many Christians, Martin Luther found it hard to understand how one God could exist in three Persons, yet had to affirm what he read in God’s Word. Luther said, “Since I see that it is so distinctly contained and grounded in Scripture, I believe God more than my own thoughts and reason and do not worry about how it can possibly be true that there is only one Essence and yet that there are three distinct Persons in this one Essence: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost.”

Similarly, John Calvin exhorted the readers of his famous Institutes to know God in the fullness of his triune majesty: “God . . . proclaims himself the sole God . . . to be contemplated clearly in Three Persons. Unless we grasp these, only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.”

Sad to say, although the church has long cherished this doctrine, a very different attitude has emerged in recent centuries. The eighteenth-century Enlightenment launched an era of height-
ened rationalism in the West. Human reason came to be viewed as the ultimate standard for determining truth. According to the spirit of the age, doctrines marked by a supernatural character tended to be pushed to the sidelines. The mysterious doctrine of the Trinity was an early casualty of modernist rationalism, for who can comprehend the idea of one indivisible being existing in three distinct Persons?

Friedrich Schleiermacher’s influential book *The Christian Faith*, first published in 1821, illustrates this new attitude toward Trinitarianism. In his summary of Christian doctrine, Schleiermacher left the subject of the Trinity to a few paragraphs at the very end of the book. The doctrine was more like an afterthought than a prominent focus of his thinking. This is a very different priority than that found in Calvin’s *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (1536), in which the Genevan Reformer placed an entire chapter on the Trinity in his first volume.

The difference between Calvin and Schleiermacher illustrates the unfortunate shift that has occurred. The contemporary church has largely forgotten the importance of knowing God as triune. Granted, most children who grow up in the church today are taught in Sunday school that God is three in one—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But Christians are rarely encouraged to think deeply about the Trinity or to make God’s triune being the focus of their worship and service to God. This detrimental trend needs to be corrected, and the present book is offered to address that need by helping Christians grow in their relationship to God in his triunity.

The approach we take is not only theological but also biblical, and therefore practical. Chapter 1 (“The Saving Trinity”) looks at the book of Ephesians, where the apostle Paul teaches us to think about our salvation in Trinitarian terms. Salvation is not the work of a flat, nondimensional deity; rather, salvation is the glorious work of the cooperative majesty of the triune God. To know and to praise God as our Savior is to love him as the Trinity.
Chapter 2 ("The Mysterious Trinity") considers some of the questions that make the Trinity hard to comprehend. People sometimes wonder whether it is even reasonable to believe in a God who is three in one. Moreover, they wonder how to relate the Old Testament emphasis on monotheism with New Testament teachings on God’s triune nature. Rather than confusing us, these points of intellectual challenge should be part of our thoughtful reverence—loving God with all our minds.

Chapter 3 ("The Practical Trinity") focuses on John 13–17, where Jesus teaches his disciples to relate to God as triune. Far from treating the subject as an intellectual discourse, Jesus shows the practicality of this doctrine for shaping our daily relationship with God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

The final chapter ("The Joyous Trinity") explores a series of passages in Luke where the cooperation of all three Persons is described. Luke’s reporting on the Trinity in these texts displays the power and joy that God has within himself and intends to share with us as we know him in his triune being and action.

The present volume is not a historical theology of Trinitarianism. It is designed instead to help Christians grow in their personal relationship with God as triune, and we pray that the Lord will bless it to that end.

There is an intentional focus throughout on the individual Christian and his or her personal relationship with God. Another volume would be needed to address the subject of the church’s relationship to the triune God corporately—in congregational worship, body life, and corporate acts of service. Nevertheless, the church’s communal service for God together is an outgrowth of knowing God as individual believers. So our personal relationship with the Trinity is an important starting point.

Something else this book does not include is a history of the church’s debates over the doctrine of the Trinity, as valuable as such a history would be. The church’s delight in the Trinity has many exciting chapters, worthy of study and attention. Beginning
with the apostles, early Christian missionaries went throughout the world planting new churches in the name of the triune God, as Jesus had commanded: “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). While expanding into new lands over many centuries, the church has continued to treasure the doctrine of the Trinity. Many false teachings emerged over time as well, including heresies that persist today (for example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses hold views of Christ similar to those condemned when the third-century church confronted the teachings of Arius). Other books will prove worthwhile for readers who are interested in learning more about the history of this doctrine and the heresies that arose against it. We particularly recommend Robert Letham’s book, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*.

The main chapters in this volume began as talks delivered to the 2007 Conference of the Reformation Society of Indiana, which was hosted by the Second Reformed Presbyterian Church of Indianapolis. Carlisle “Bud” Wilson was the enthusiastic visionary not only for that conference but also for many other initiatives over the years aimed at promoting Reformation theology, including the formation of the Society itself.

Unbeknownst to us at the time, the Autumn 2007 conference was to be the last that Bud would organize. On March 19, 2008, after many years of faithful service to his beloved Savior Jesus Christ, leaning on the power of the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God the Father, Bud entered the presence of his triune God. With thanksgiving to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit for his ministry, this volume is dedicated to the memory of Bud Wilson (1932–2008), with appreciation for his wife, Marty.
For many of us, the idea of the Trinity feels nebulous and abstract—or even worse, irrelevant. While we may believe this doctrine, we remain strangely disconnected from the reality that God is indeed tri-personal. Yet, Philip Ryken and Michael LeFebvre argue that a deeper knowledge of the Trinity is of the utmost importance for everyday life.

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