

# An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity

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We confess the one true and living God, Creator of everything and Ruler over the entire creation. He has uniquely revealed himself in the living Word, Jesus Christ, and in the written Word, the Bible, as One Triune God—three coeternal and coequal Persons. Each Person is distinct, yet there is only one essence or Being who is God, not three separate Gods. Each Person of the One Triune God shares equally in honor, glory, worship, power, authority, and rank. The Bible never suggests that any one Person of the Trinity has eternal superiority or authority over the others, or that one is in eternal subordination to another. The Son's submission and obedience to the Father were voluntary and related specifically to the time during which he humbled himself, took on human nature, and dwelled among us as a servant.

## The biblical<sup>1</sup> testimony

Isaiah prophesied, and it was fulfilled through Mary, that a virgin would conceive and give birth to a son whose name would be Immanuel, which means "God with us." This son was also given the name Jesus, meaning "the LORD saves" (Isa 7:14; Matt 1:20–23).

Jesus, the eternal Word, already existed in the beginning. "The Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning." This same Word "became flesh" in the person of Jesus and "made his dwelling among us." In the incarnate Word, humankind saw the "glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father" (John 1:1–14).

Christ Jesus, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. . . . He humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Phil 2:5–11)."

The Son did not divest himself of his deity, but the text does say that he had equality with God that he gave up by taking the very nature of a servant during the time of his Incarnation. He voluntarily humbled himself, becoming obedient to the point of death on the cross. A servant is one who does the bidding of another, and the very fact that the Son took on the very nature of a servant suggests that, before the Son came in human likeness, he was not a servant or one who subjected himself to another's will. After the Son's earthly ministry as the obedient servant, the Father exalted him to the highest place so that all creation bows before him and acknowledges him as God. Similarly, "During the days of Jesus' life on earth," the Son was reverently submissive, and, "Son though he was, he learned obedience," again suggesting that obedience was something unusual or unexpected from God's Son (Heb 5:7–8). Peter and Paul also affirm that the risen Son is now at the right hand of God (Acts 2:33; Col 3:1), and Jesus told his disciples that "all authority in heaven and on earth" had been given to him (Matt 28:18). The evidence seems clear—the Son's subordination to the Father was temporary, not eternal, and related only to the time of his earthly ministry.

Some actions of God are more frequently attributed to one Person of the Trinity in particular. Nevertheless, many times within Scripture, actions that are attributed to one member of the Trinity are also attributed to another member of the Trinity.<sup>2</sup> These too are evidence that there is full and eternal equality among the Persons of the Trinity and no eternal subordination or rigid hierarchy of roles.

- Creation. Both the Father and the Son are the agents in the Creation (Gen 1 and 2; John 1:2–3, 10; Col 1:16; Heb 1:10).
- Choosing. Both the Father and the Son are involved in predestination or choosing (Rom 8:29; 1 Pet 1:2; John 6:70; 13:18; Acts 1:2, 24; 9:15; Matt 11:27).
- Sending the Spirit. Both the Father and the Son are associated with the sending of the Holy Spirit (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7).

- Access to the Father. The believer's access to the Father is associated with both the Son and the Spirit (John 14:6; Eph 2:16, 18).
- Indwelling. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all live within believers (John 14:16–20, 23; 15:5; Rom 8:9–11; 2 Cor 13:5; Col 1:27; Gal 2:20; 1 Cor 3:16; 6:19).
- Intercession. The Son intercedes on the believer's behalf with the Father (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:34), but so also does the Holy Spirit (Rom 8:26–27).
- Gift giving. The Father is the giver of good gifts to human kind (Matt 7:11; John 3:34; 6:32–33; Rom 4:17; 15:5; 1 Cor 15:57–58; 1 Thess 4:8; 1 Tim 6:13; Jas 1:5, 17; 1 Pet 5:5), but so also are the Son and the Spirit (John 5:21; 6:33, 63; 14:27; 1 Cor 12:11; 2 Cor. 3:6). In this selection of texts, it is especially noteworthy that each Person of the Trinity is said to give life.
- Preservation. In John 10:28–30, Jesus says that he and the Father preserve Jesus' sheep; not only are identical terms used to describe the action of Jesus and the Father, but Jesus concludes with this telling statement, "I and the Father are one."
- Love. God's love for his own is attributed to both the Father and the Son (John 3:16; 15:9–12; Rom 8:35–39).
- Judgment. At the consummation of this world, the Son exercises supreme authority as judge (Matt 25:31–46; 2 Cor 5:10), but the judgment seat is also the judgment seat of God the Father (Rom 14:10).
- Prayer. Most often in Scripture, prayer is offered to the Father, but not exclusively so. Believers also offer prayers to the Son (Acts 7:59–60; 2 Cor 12:9–10; Rev 22:20).

When we discuss the Trinity, we must acknowledge that our words are halting attempts to describe in finite human language the mystery of the Being of the infinite and eternal God. But one thing seems crystal clear—the written Word and the living Word bear witness that there is a unity of the Persons of the Trinity such that the actions and attributes of one Person of the Trinity are not the actions or attributes of that Person exclusively, but are by their very nature the actions and attributes of God himself, and therefore in some sense the actions and attributes of each Person of the Trinity. This is the most fitting way to give full weight to those texts that speak of the unity and equality of the Persons (John 5:17–19; 10:30; 14:7–11, 23; 17:20–23; compare Matt 28:20 with John 16:7). While affirming the unity of the Persons, we must also affirm the Trinity of the Persons testified to in the baptismal formula (Matt 28:19).

## The Athanasian Creed

Western Christians in the late fourth or early fifth centuries summarized their understanding of God in what later came to be known as the Athanasian Creed. In this creed, the Father, Son, and Spirit are described as one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, three "coeternal" and "coequal" Persons, each fully God but still one God, not three—so that they share equally in power and authority, and none is greater or less than another. Similarly, Augustine argues that what is said of one member of the Trinity can also be understood of the others.<sup>3</sup>

## Summary

In seeking to bear witness to their belief that the God revealed in Scripture and in Jesus Christ is one and three at the same time, the early church rejected the idea that the Father, Son, and Spirit related to one another hierarchically and that there was an eternal subordination within the Trinity. With regret, we must warn that any view of the Trinity that posits an eternal subordination among the Persons of the Trinity, in spite of its best intentions, cannot do full justice to the evidence of Scripture, diminishes the magnitude and significance of the Incarnation, undercuts the unity of the Trinity, and tends to diminish the full deity of the Son and the Spirit. With the Athanasian Creed, we believe that confessing One Triune God in three coeternal, coequal Persons, each sharing eternally, equally, and fully in the honor, glory, worship, power, authority, and rank that belong alone to God, best represents the One true God revealed in Jesus Christ and in the Bible. We call on our fellow evangelicals, whether they wish to be known as egalitarians or complementarians, or no such label at all, to join us in this reaffirmation of trinitarianism that is at the core of historic Christian orthodoxy.

## Notes

1. Biblical quotations are from the New International Version.

2. I wish to express my indebtedness to the work of Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2009), especially chapter 4, "The Biblical Evidence," 109–38.

3. Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 1.9.19.