

Essay #1

**The Trinity:  
Glory Be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!**

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WELS

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A Japanese woman once told me about her visit to the pyramids of Egypt: “When I saw them for the first time, I felt tiny. I was scared. I thought I could feel the presence of God.” For me this story illustrates two things: the first is that something grand, even if it is made by human hands, can humble us and make us afraid; the second is that human emotion and human reason are not reliable sources for knowing God.

My Nepalese friend and I drove up the winding roads of a mountain for hours. Finally, we reached the spot from which we could see the Himalayan mountains. The view was almost too wonderful to take in. Those mountains dwarfed us *and the mountain we were on*. Wow!

In many of the countries where CELC members worship and serve the Lord, there are locations from which a view of the nighttime sky will take your breath away. How vast the universe is! How puny we are!

“When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor” (Psalm 8:3-5 NIV84).

If God’s revelation in the “book of nature” instructs us about his majesty and our relative insignificance, how much more God’s revelation of himself in the Bible! Just as the created world instructs us about the invisible qualities of the Creator, so also the doctrine of the Trinity (drawn carefully from his Word) impresses on us the greatness of God.

You asked me to study the doctrine of the Trinity and to tell you what I learned. I learned what a vast doctrine it is! There is no larger, no more comprehensive, no more important, no more incomprehensible, no more glorious doctrine than the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

This doctrine dwarfs me more than the Himalayas do. It makes me feel tiny and inadequate. How could I ever study all that has been said about this doctrine? Who am I to write about the Trinity when the past 2000 years are filled with the scholarly writings of so many gifted theologians?

The doctrine humbles me. And then there is the Lord God who is the reality behind this doctrine! He is all glorious! The seraphim cover their faces and their feet even as they praise him: “Holy, Holy, Holy” (Isaiah 6:3).<sup>1</sup> The glorious God is beyond human comprehension!

But God doesn’t ask us to understand him. He wants us to know him by faith, to love him, to worship him, to seek him and serve him with all our hearts. In our fallenness we might be tempted to think that we will seek the face of God *in spite of* the doctrine of the Trinity. In reality we can seek the face of God *only because* he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For the triune God, loving us with an everlasting love, has lifted us up and seated us with himself in the heavenly realms. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). Using trinitarian language, the Father sent his Son, and the Father and the Son send the Spirit so we can believe and be saved.

Dear brothers and sisters in the Christian faith, I hope and pray that this study of the Trinity humbles you and lifts you up. I hope it encourages you in your faith. I hope it leads you to tremble at his Word, to seek the face of the Lord with all your heart, to glorify him with holy songs and holy living, and to proclaim his Name among the nations.

While this brief paper may seem like an aimless wandering through a vast wilderness, there is a general progression: from biblical theology, to systematic theology, to historical theology, to practical theology. Theology is, after all, the things of God. All theology resides in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The ultimate purpose of all theology is the glory of the triune God.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

## **A Wide-Angle View of God**

The Holy Scriptures give us a wide-angle view of God. God is from eternity, to eternity. God has interacted lovingly with the world—always! Consider the following statements:

1. Before God created the world, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit dwelled in and with each other as God.
2. This Father, Son, and Holy Spirit created all that exists.
3. After the first man and his wife fell into sin, God revealed himself to fallen mankind through direct revelation and later through his chosen instruments, the prophets of Israel. He revealed his name to them as the Lord.
4. When the time of fulfillment had come, the Lord sent his Son (incarnation) and his Spirit (Pentecost) into the world, revealing himself to be Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
5. Through the evangelists and apostles of Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit gave testimony about the glory of God in the face of Christ.
6. Throughout the New Testament era, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are accomplishing the mission of creating a bride for the Son, from every nation on earth.
7. At the eternal wedding feast, all believers of all time will live in praise of the glorious triune God who created, redeemed, and sanctified them.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all subsequent Bible quotations are from NIV11.

<sup>2</sup> In theology methods are arbitrary. This schema is my own. I hope it serves us well.

We note a few things about these statements. First of all, these seven statements have a chiasmic structure to them. At the center is the historical peak of the revelation of the Trinity: in glorious fashion, with miraculous signs and wonders, to save the human race from sin, death, and hell, the Father sent his Son and his Spirit into the world. The Old Testament and New Testament bracket these events. The creation of the world and God's saving activity in the world bracket his Holy Word. The outer frame is eternity. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

Secondly, we note that only God knows and can reveal things eternal. The realities of eternity are outside the realm of human experience. With our most powerful telescopes we humans can peer into far-flung galaxies and behold the light of distant stars, but we cannot penetrate heaven to see God who is eternal light.

The Holy Scriptures also teach us the content of points 2 through 6, but in addition to the Bible, we have other testimony as well: the book of nature, human history, tradition, the experiences of others, and our own personal experiences. God has not left himself without testimony!

As with all doctrines of the Bible, so also in this highest of doctrines, the weight we give to the Bible and the methods of interpretation we employ are vital to a proper doctrine of God—and praise of God—in our churches.

### **Progressive Revelation**

In the schema above, we can see that God reveals himself as the Lord and as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit *in connection with salvation*. Statements 2 through 6 can be restated this way:

- The Lord created the world.
- The Lord announced his intentions to save the world (Old Testament).
- By sending his Son and his Spirit, the Lord accomplished this salvation.
- The Lord gave testimony to what he had done (New Testament).
- The Lord continues to bring people into this salvation.

God does not change. His words and his actions bear clear witness to that. But God's revelation about himself has changed in this sense: throughout history God has revealed more and more about himself and his plan of salvation. These two are closely bound together: God's revelation of the gospel and his revelation of himself. The one who saves is three!

This connection is very helpful for our understanding of the Bible and for our defense of the doctrine of the Trinity. It helps us answer the question: "If God is truly triune, why didn't he say anything about that in the Old Testament? Why is there no explicit doctrine of the Trinity, no Athanasian-Creed-like chapter in the New Testament?"

It is a worthwhile exercise for us to ponder and review the *what* of this progressive revelation. At the same time, we must be cautious when inquiring into the *why* of it.

When the Lord God spoke to Adam and Eve in the garden and told them that he would send the seed of the woman to crush the head of the devil and rescue people from the devil's control, the

Lord knew that this seed of the woman would be his eternal Son born in human flesh thousands of years later. But God didn't include that information in his first gospel promise (Genesis 3:15).

When God told Abram that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3), God knew that his eternal Son would be born of the Jews and atone for the sins of both Jew and Gentile. But the Lord didn't unpack it that way for Abram or his descendants until that Son came and walked the road to the cross.

When God delivered his chosen people from Egypt, under Moses, without the Israelites contributing anything to that deliverance, the Lord had the single-handed work of his Son in mind. When the Israelites passed through the watery cloud of the Red Sea as a door from slavery (under a cruel master) to service (under a gracious God), the Lord had in mind our baptism in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 10:1-4). Through this baptism God drowns the devil for us and makes us his own sons. He makes slaves of unrighteousness into servants of righteousness, citizens of hell into citizens of heaven. But the Father didn't make this trinitarian gospel clear until the Son and the Spirit came 1500 years later. The Lord made it clear at the beginning and end of his Son's ministry: at Jesus' own baptism (Matthew 3:13-17) and in the risen Savior's command to baptize (Matthew 28:18-20). The Lord made it clear in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Son who was filled with the Spirit: conceived by the Spirit, guided by the Spirit all the way to the cross, raised to life in the Spirit and so declared with power to be the Son of God. The Lord made it clear on Pentecost when his saving activity in the age of fulfillment began with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the baptism of 3,000 people in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

When God brought his people to Mount Sinai and explained his eternal mission to them (Exodus 19:4-6), he called them his treasured possession and his kingdom of priests. At Mount Sinai when God made a covenant with the Israelites and gave instructions for building the tabernacle, God had in mind the realities later made clear by the apostle Peter: "As you come to him, the living Stone—rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to him—you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ" (1 Peter 2:4-5). But God didn't share all those details at Sinai. Instead he gave them shadows in anticipation of the coming reality.

When the Lord promised King David that a King from David's royal line would build a house for him (the Lord) and rule forever and ever (2 Samuel 7), the Lord knew that this Davidic king was his own Son, appointed from eternity. But God was waiting for the right time and place and audience and manner to say it: a thousand years later, in Nazareth, to the virgin Mary, through his angel Gabriel. "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end" (Luke 1:30-33).

God inspired David to write the words of the psalm we have already considered: "When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor" (Psalm 8:3-5 NIV84). These words indicate at least two different things:

- In God’s created order, mankind has a special place of glory and honor; we are the crown of his creation and caretakers of it.
- The Son of God will become the Son of Man, redeem the world, be exalted to the highest honor, and rule over all things for the benefit of his church. This was the plan of God’s secret and eternal counsel. Before the creation of the world, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit knew the meaning of Psalm 8. But its full meaning wasn’t revealed clearly to the world until Jesus died and rose and ascended into heaven. The Spirit did not unpack all of this through his sacred writer David. He waited to explain it in the New Testament, in places like Paul’s letter to the Ephesians and the letter to the Hebrews.<sup>3</sup>

In the same way, Psalm 110 prophesied about David’s son, calling him David’s Lord, explaining that he would be both a Davidic king and an eternal priest, in the order of Melchizedek. As the words of Psalm 110 resounded for a thousand years—in Solomon’s temple, among the exiles in Babylon, in Jewish synagogues throughout the world, and in the second temple—the worshipers could only ponder what these words meant. The meaning of this psalm was illuminated when the great High Priest came down out of heaven, was born as a descendant of David, spoke to the religious leaders in the temple courts, offered himself as the once-for-all sacrifice for sin on the cross, and ascended as the God-man into the tabernacle of heaven, where the blood of God’s own Son pleads for the sons of men in the presence of the Father.

In all these examples, the triune God revealed himself and his plan of salvation in advance, but only partially and progressively. The triune God didn’t fully reveal his three-ness fully until the Son and the Holy Spirit arrived in the world as heavenly gifts from the Father. The Son came in obedience to his Father, full of the Spirit. Then decades later, after the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit accomplished our salvation, the Spirit of God inspired sacred writers to record clear testimony about these “wonders of God” (Acts 2:11).

Throughout the Old Testament the triune God was acting and speaking. There were hints of God’s three-ness (Trinity) in the Old Testament, already in the creation account (Genesis 1), and throughout God’s interaction with the human race. But God did not fully reveal himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit until the coming of “the fulfillment of the ages” (1 Corinthians 10:11 NIV84).

We have looked briefly at the *what* of the revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity. It certainly happened, just as God intended. The New Testament has a name for it: “mystery.”

### **The Mystery (Two Senses) of the Trinity**

There is a humorous story about a Lutheran congregation in the United States. It was their custom to have an examination of the students who had studied the catechism in preparation for their confirmation vows to remain faithful to the Lord all their lives. All the students were sitting in rows in front of the congregation, and the pastor was asking catechetical questions of the students. The examination was an opportunity for the pastor to show that he had taught the

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<sup>3</sup> This has implications for the translator: “son of man” or “Son of Man”? It depends on whether a person is wearing OT or NT eyeglasses. One approach is to write “son of man” in the psalm itself and to sing the *Gloria Patri* after the psalm. The *Gloria Patri* does the capitalizing: Son of Man.

catechism well, for the students to show that they had learned it well, and for the congregation to review the truths of the Small Catechism. Each student would speak their answer into the microphone and then pass it to the next student. The pastor asked one girl, “What is the Holy Trinity?” She paused for a moment, then answered nervously, “It’s a mystery.” The pastor paused for a moment and then said, “Right.” Relieved, the student handed the microphone off to the next person. After that, other students used the same strategy. If they didn’t know how to answer their question, they would simply say, “It’s a mystery” and hand the microphone to the next student.

When we say that the doctrine of the Trinity is a mystery, we might be saying two different things, each of them useful in a different way. First, we might be saying that we cannot comprehend that God is one, and that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Human reason says God can’t be both one and three. By this use of the word “mystery” we mean to say that the deep things of God are too deep for our feeble minds. Surely they are.

When considering the doctrine of the Trinity, this use of the word mystery is very useful! It reminds us to be humble. It keeps our reason in check. As we will discuss later, it prevents us from using our human reason and the other tools in our theological toolbox in a magisterial and destructive way.

There is second use of the word “mystery,” and we might call it the biblical one. A mystery is something that has always been true, that God has always known to be true, that the world didn’t and couldn’t know, and that God waited to reveal until the time of his choosing.

God is in the business of revealing such mysteries to sinners. Consider the following:

- The gospel of salvation accomplished by the Lord Jesus Christ is a mystery, revealed by his sinless life, by his death as the Lamb of God, and by his resurrection to life on Easter morning.
- God’s intention to break down the wall of division between Jew and Gentile and to create one church through Christ is a mystery revealed in the church by the words and works of Christ, by his Spirit, through his apostles.
- The resurrection of the body on the Last Day is a mystery revealed to us by God (1 Corinthians 15:51).
- That marriage between one man and one woman has as its antetype the marriage of God’s Son and his bride is a profound mystery (Ephesians 5:32). God instituted marriage on earth so that every marriage would serve as a shadow of the relationship between his Son and his bride!
- The day and time of Jesus’ second coming will remain a mystery, until the trumpet sounds.

Notice that all of these mysteries are connected to the trinitarian gospel.

It was completely clear in Old Testament times that the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was one God, not many. “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

But the three-ness of God, that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—this God kept hidden, at least partially, for thousands of years.

The mystery of the Trinity was hidden. The mystery of the gospel was hidden. The Lord God decided to reveal them together, at the same time, through the Son and by his Spirit, and to testify to these mysteries through the ministry of the apostles who had seen the glory of Christ and on whom the Spirit had been poured.

The apostle John exulted in it: “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us” (1 John 1:1-2).

The apostle Peter proclaimed it as gospel comfort: “He was chosen before the creation of the world but was revealed in these last times for your sake” (1 Peter 1:20).

The apostle Paul marveled at God’s eternal wisdom: “We do, however, speak a message of wisdom among the mature, but not the wisdom of this age or of the rulers of this age, who are coming to nothing. No, we declare God’s wisdom, a mystery that has been hidden and that God destined for our glory before time began. None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Corinthians 2:6-8).

How is this understanding of mystery useful to us? In our CELC churches we are surrounded by many different religions, some of them polytheistic and some of them monotheistic. Polytheistic religions deny the oneness of God. False monotheistic religions deny the three-ness of God.

Within the visible “Christian” church there are church groups—we would call them sects—who deny or downplay the doctrine of the Trinity. Ironically, some Pentecostals, while claiming to have the Spirit in fuller measure, deny what the Spirit has revealed in the Scriptures and what he has guided Christians to believe and confess about God throughout the ages. All false religions have two basic characteristics in common: they deny the mystery of Trinity and they deny the mystery of the gospel. Those two go together, bound together from eternity to eternity. They go together in God’s economy of salvation, and he chose to reveal them together. They cannot be separated. If you deny the Trinity, you deny the gospel. If you want to proclaim the gospel, you must have a trinitarian mind.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

### **Two Analogies of the Mystery of the Gospel**

Personally, I am not in favor of using analogies to teach the mystery of the doctrine of the Trinity. I am referring to the word mystery in the first sense we discussed, in the sense of the incomprehensibility of the doctrine. Such analogies (H<sub>2</sub>O in three forms, the three parts of an

egg, the three parts of an apple, etc.<sup>4</sup>) divide the essence of God or confuse the persons of God. They either teach outright Modalism (one God who shows up in three different ways) or can easily be understood as Modalism. In an attempt to make the Trinity understandable—this sounds noble, but it is misguided from the start—we easily obscure the Bible’s clear and simple teachings that the Lord is one God and that he is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Every analogy limps. In a doctrine as important and comprehensive as the Trinity, such limping can cause great damage to the body of Christ.

There are, however, two analogies that I have found helpful for illustrating the mystery of the Trinity in the biblical sense of the word (the second sense we considered). One such analogy is that of a cherry blossom. In many Asian countries (especially Japan), there are many varieties of cherry blossoms. The most common variety is called Yoshino. There is also a variety called Yaezakura, which means “eight-fold cherry blossom.” In English we call them double cherry blossoms.

The revelation of the gospel can be compared to a cherry blossom. The tip of the bud first became visible when God promised a Savior in the hearing of the first sinners. Throughout the Old Testament, with each new revelation from God, the bud grew larger. The prophet will come! The priest will come! The king will come! The suffering servant will come! The Spirit will come! The Lord himself will come!

And then it happened: that gospel bud, packed so full, burst into bloom. And how beautiful and glorious it was! The Old Testament had set high expectations for the coming of the Messiah, but what happened far exceeded all earthly expectation. The cherry blossom that burst into bloom was eight-fold! Yaezakura! The flower was fuller and more glorious than anyone could have been imagined!

It was announced by an angel: “Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ, the Lord” (Luke 2:11 NIV84). Not Christ, a great man. Not Christ, an angel. Christ, the Lord! What burst into bloom when Christ came was a double revelation of mystery: of what God was doing (salvation) and of who God is (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)!

The second analogy is that of a light traveling from afar, even from eternity. The Bible tells us that “God is light” (1 John 1:5). Together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, the Son is light. He shines on us with the light of life. He is the source of life. He is “God from God, Light from light, true God from true God” (Nicene Creed). Many false theologies make the Son less than the Father, denying that he is co-eternal and co-equal with the Father. Because God is light, he shines from eternity. That light traveled over the people of the Old Testament, providing them with dim spiritual light.

The people of the Old Testament were like an audience at a theatre after the curtain rises but before the lights come on. They could make out that there were people on the stage, but they couldn’t see their faces. The believers of the Old Testament were like people sitting in their houses, looking out their window at the first sign of morning light (where I live, about 45 minutes before sunrise.) In the faintest of light God’s Old Testament people could make out

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<sup>4</sup> The analogy I feel most comfortable with is that of the church fathers: source, spring, and river. The weakness perhaps is that the distinctness of the three persons is hard to maintain. Every analogy limps.



God's plan of salvation and God himself. The light increased with time. Finally, at the appointed time, the light dawned, and everything changed. The sun of righteousness rose above the horizon. The shadows gave way to realities. The Lord made his face to shine on us; he turned his face toward us (see Numbers 6:24-26). The Son came. The Spirit came. The light of God's grace was more brilliant than anyone ever could have imagined! It was divine light, the light of God himself!

The gospels record the revelation of this mystery in the sending of the Son and the Spirit. The epistles and the Revelation of John assume this first epiphany (glory shining in connection with the ministry of Christ and his Spirit) and anticipate the second and greater epiphany of eternal life in God's presence. "Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure" (1 John 3:2-3).

My dear friends in Christ in the blessed fellowship of the CELC, this is what the Lord, in his eternal wisdom, has done. He has done it for us, and he has made it known to us! "Now to him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Ephesians 3:20-21).

## **Why?**

In our discussion of the Trinity, we have been talking about the relationship between the two testaments of God's Word. A proper understanding of that relationship is critical to a proper interpretation of the Scriptures.

St. Augustine is often quoted in this regard:

"In the Old Testament the New is concealed,  
in the New the Old is revealed."

This understanding of the Bible as a whole helps us to be clear and confident about the doctrine of the Trinity. The two testaments complement each other. The Old emphasized that the Lord is one. The New reveals clearly what was concealed in the Old, namely that the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Holy Spirit is Lord. Each is God in divine essence, in divine attributes, in divine honor, and in divine works. Both testaments give this testimony, the first testament dimly, the second testament brightly.

But we may ask, "Why did God do it this way?" When mixed with doubt, such an inquiry needs a review of the facts to quiet it. It needs this encouragement: "We don't know why, but that is what he did! His ways are above ours. All praise be to him!"

But when asking with simple trust and pure curiosity, let us do so with cautious care, for the ice may be thin. We might ponder and answer as follows:

1. God's approach reflects the character of each testament: the Old Testament is the age of preparation and the New Testament is the age of completion. "One God" is the preparation for the more complete revelation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. All the nations of the ancient Near East (and the world) were polytheistic and idolatrous. In such an environment, the people of Israel (and the nations around them) needed clear and strong teaching about the one true God.
3. God's approach of concealing the New in the Old would give Old Testament believers what they needed to believe and be saved, while at the same time providing evidence for New Testament believers that "prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Peter 1:21 NIV84). In other words, the Holy Spirit wrote the Old Testament also with New Testament believers in mind.
4. God's approach kept the devil guessing about the coming of the seed of the woman who would crush his head (see Genesis 3:15).

It could be said that these thoughts don't add much to the biblical evidence we have already considered. If that is true, the ice was not so thin. In any case, we move back to solid ground as we consider the traces of the Trinity in the Old Testament and what we might call a "dialogue approach" to the persons of the Trinity.

### **Old Testament Traces**

In our discussion of God's revelation, we watched the prophetic bud of the gospel grow larger and larger as the coming of the Savior and his work drew near. In our discussion of mystery (in the biblical sense) we noted that when God revealed his wisdom in the sending of the Son and the Spirit, he unveiled not only his gracious work of salvation, he unveiled himself as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

This means, if we continue to use our two analogies, that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were (and are) packed into that thick bud of Old Testament prophecy. It means that when the Old Testament believers saw God in the dim light of his first-covenant revelation—as he revealed his name the Lord to them—that the Father was there, the Son was there, and the Holy Spirit was there. And it means that New Testament believers, using the brilliant light of New Testament revelation, will recognize and understand Old Testament traces of the three more clearly than the original audience. Abraham rejoiced as he looked ahead to the day of Jesus Christ. He was content not to know all the details. He was saved by faith in the Savior, even without knowing all the details of the Savior. From our vantage point, we do our looking with possession of all the blessed details. We rejoice as we look back to see Jesus Christ, the glorious and eternal Son of God. As best we know, Abraham did not have a full understanding of trinitarian theology, but the God he believed in was the triune God. We believe in the same Lord as Abraham. Abraham is the father of all believers, both Old Testament and New Testament believers.

Can we say confidently that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in the Old Testament? Absolutely! But there is a difference between providing proofs of the Trinity in the Old Testament and identifying traces of the Trinity in the Old Testament. The phenomenon of

revelation would suggest that we need the events recorded in the Gospels and the testimony of all the New Testament to prove the doctrine of the Trinity.

Because the orthodox Lutheran theologians were battling the anti-trinitarian Socinians,<sup>5</sup> and because a favorite arrow in the Socinian quiver was the claim that the doctrine of the Trinity must be denied because the Old Testament did not teach it, our theological forefathers spent much of their theological effort on these Old Testament trinitarian traces. At times they crossed into the territory of trying to provide trinitarian proofs from the Old Testament. (While it is beyond the scope of this paper to examine their faithful efforts, they are to be commended for their theological approach to defend this biblical doctrine.)

As we briefly consider the trinitarian hints which the Holy Spirit embedded into the Old Testament, let us note, first of all, that these hints are everywhere: in Moses, in the historical narratives, in the wisdom literature (especially the Psalms), and in the early and later prophets. The Trinity is embedded not only in the words of the Old Testament, but also in God's gracious dealing with his people Israel and in his saving work among them.

These hints include, but are not limited to, the plural name of God (*Elohim*); God's use of the plural when he says, for example, "Let us make mankind in our image" (Genesis 1:26); the appearances of the angel of the Lord and the commander of the Lord's army (Christophanies); references to the person and work of the Holy Spirit; passages where God is speaking to God; places where there is a strongly-implied three-ness to God (e.g., the Aaronic blessing in Numbers 6 and the seraphim's praise of God in Isaiah 6); and passages in which Father, Son, and Spirit all seem to be present (e.g., Isaiah 11, 61).

Because we live in the age of fulfillment—after Son and Spirit have come, and with the clearer and brighter testimony of the New Testament—we are able to shine New Testament light on the Old Testament and clearly see what Old Testament believers saw only dimly.

One of the best and most fruitful places we do this is in the Psalms, that part of the Old Testament which Luther calls the "little Bible" inside the Bible.<sup>6</sup> With New Testament clarity we are able to see the divine person and work of the Son of God in the Psalms, and we are able to perceive that the Son of God was actually speaking through the Psalms of the Old Testament. The first David was the type. The second and greater David is antetype, the one to whom the type was pointing. Jesus is the real Anointed One, the eternal Son of God. The Psalter of David is really the Psalter of Christ, and David's story is really Christ's story. It is true that we sing the

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<sup>5</sup> The Socinians, who have Lelio Sozzini (1525-1562) as their father, battled both the Lutherans and the Calvinists with their unyielding anti-trinitarian theology. Their theology is reflected in the *Racovian Catechism* of the Polish Brethren, published first in 1605.

<sup>6</sup> In his preface to the Psalms in 1545, Luther writes: "The Psalter ought to be a precious and beloved book, if for no other reason than this: it promises Christ's death and resurrection so clearly—and pictures his kingdom and the condition and nature of all Christendom—that it might well be called a little Bible. In it is comprehended most beautifully and briefly everything that is in the entire Bible. It is really a fine enchiridion or handbook. In fact, I have a notion that the Holy Spirit wanted to take the trouble himself to compile a short Bible and book of examples of all Christendom or all saints, so that anyone who could not read the whole Bible would here have anyway almost an entire summary of it, comprised in one little book" (*Luther's Works*, 35:254).

Psalms with David, but there is a better way to say it: “The believers of both testaments (including King David) sing the Psalms with the greater David.” King David was a shepherd-king shadow. Jesus Christ is the Good Shepherd, King of kings reality. David’s bringing of the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (2 Samuel 6, 1 Chronicles 16, Psalm 96, 105, 106) was a shadow. The Son of God processing to the temple in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and his ascending to the right hand of his Father are the realities (see Colossians 2:17).<sup>7</sup>

Even before he was born as a descendant of David, the eternal Son of God was speaking through David. In the Psalms, the Holy Spirit, too, adds his voice and gives his testimony. Throughout the psalms we see the Holy Spirit and his active work among God’s people: proclaiming the wisdom of God, leading sinners to repentance, keeping their eyes on the coming Messiah, guiding them in God’s ways, enabling them to bear up under the sufferings of the cross, filling their mouths with Hallelujahs, and through Israel proclaiming God’s name among the nations.

It has not been the approach of New Testament believers to try to identify occasional sightings of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the Psalms. The New Testament church has long recognized that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are woven into the very fabric of the whole Psalter.

While we don’t know the exact origin of the *Gloria Patri*, we know it was in use in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, and it may have been in use even before the New Testament canon was complete, certainly before the church formally recognized it. How naturally it must have happened that believers baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit would sing praise to the same! From the 3<sup>rd</sup> century on, Christians have sung the *Gloria Patri* in connection with the Psalms, reflecting the fact that the persons and work of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are fully embedded in the Psalms. By singing the *Gloria Patri* in connection with each psalm, we shine New Testament light on the truths which the Spirit concealed there.

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

When the age of fulfillment dawned and the gospel bud burst into full bloom, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit took center stage. They came as three persons, communicating verbally about each other and to each other. Nowhere is this trinitarian dialogue recorded more clearly than in the Gospel of John. Written as the last of the gospels and written perhaps as a defense of the deity of the eternal Son in response to the heresies of Cerinthus and Gnosticism, the Gospel of John gives beautiful testimony to the three-ness of God. The Father speaks as sender. The Son speaks as one sent. The Spirit testifies about the Father and the Son and opens the eyes of human hearts to see their glory. The Father and the Son send the Spirit to dwell in the saints, teaching them all things and equipping them in every way. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit communicate with and about each other in the work of our salvation, revealing themselves to us. What grace! “The Spirit of truth ... will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you” (John 16:13-15).

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<sup>7</sup> While the term needs to be used with caution, some have called this approach a “re-reading” of the Old Testament. With our New Testament eyeglasses we are able to see clearly and point out the trinitarian gospel gems which the Holy Spirit concealed there. Luther does this in one of his most detailed treatments of the doctrine of the Trinity: his *Treatise on the Last Words of David*, recorded in 2 Samuel 23 (*Luther’s Works*, 15:265-352).

We end this section about Old Testament traces by noting that this divine dialogue, voiced in the New Testament and embedded in the Old, goes back even farther. Looking backwards from our vantage point, in the Gospel of John, for example, we hear the Father and Son speaking to each other. Jesus' prayer in the upper room (John 17) is one such example. Can there be a more striking example?! With the apostles we can only listen and marvel at such dialogue! Hints of this conversation—same speakers, same subject—are embedded in the Psalms (e.g., Psalm 2, 110) and in the prophet Isaiah (e.g., Isaiah 49). The Father and the Son are speaking about the Son's work in obedience to the will of the Father—all of it with the purpose of redeeming and saving a world of helpless and undeserving sinners. This conversation between the sender and the sent, between Father and Son, goes all the way back to before the creation of the world. What Father and Son discuss in time, they were discussing from eternity. The conversation the Spirit embeds in the Old Testament and records clearly in the New is really an eternal discussion. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1).

"It is not enough for you to be my servant raising up the tribes of Jacob and restoring the protected ones of Israel. I will also make you a light for the nations, to be my salvation to the ends of the earth" (Isaiah 49:6 CSB). In this Old Testament conversation, the "I" is the eternal Father, and the "you" is the eternal Son. This approach to divine dialogue, this prosoponic (from the Greek word *prosopa*, which means "persons") identification of speakers in the Old Testament, gives strong support to the idea that the Father and the Son did not begin their sacred dialogue in the New Testament era. What we hear them saying to each other in the Gospels they have been discussing forever.<sup>8</sup>

Prosoponic identification of divine speakers is a method, an approach to understanding the Holy Scriptures, a tool in the theologian's toolbox. The Creator has designed human beings with the capacity to think and analyze, to design and use tools. Believers use human reason and the tools they have developed in their service to him. We turn our attention now to the use of theological tools.

## **Theological Tools**

Earlier we mentioned the book of nature, by which the Creator gives testimony about himself. Mankind has the ability to develop and use tools in the study of this book. From 1963 until 2016, the Arecibo Telescope in Puerto Rico was the largest single-aperture telescope in the world. It was in use until 2020 but is currently being deconstructed. Scientists used this powerful tool to study the universe. It helped astronomers conclude that there are hundreds of billions of stars in every one of the hundreds of billions of galaxies. "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1).

But here is the amazing thing: among scientists the same powerful tool can be used to reach two contradicting conclusions. One scientist might say, "The universe is so vast that it must be millions and billions of years old. The idea of a creator is unthinkable." Another scientist using

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<sup>8</sup> We can take the same approach with the words of the prophet Joel: "And afterward, I will pour out my Spirit on all people" (2:28). The Spirit is clearly the Holy Spirit. Is the "I" referring to the Father? To the Son? To both? These are *filioque* questions, and we are getting ahead of ourselves.

the same telescope and looking at the same stars and the same data might say, “The use of this telescope has impressed on me the majesty, power, and wisdom of God. To him be all glory!”

In our study of the doctrine of the Trinity we are also investigating God’s revelation, but it is a different mode of revelation. Instead of God’s picture book we are studying God’s Word, his book with words. And just as scientists use tools to investigate the book of nature, so also theologians use tools to investigate the “Book of Books,” the Bible.

But theologians using the same tools in the same generation and in the same context might reach contradicting conclusions. Invariably they do.

In the history of the doctrine of God, many theologians, using the tools at their disposal, have come to the same conclusion as the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 325) and the Council of Constantinople (A.D. 381): that God is one in essence, but that the same God, one in essence, is three-fold in person.

Again, this agrees with the Biblical witness. On the surface, the Old Testament shows a monotheistic God interacting with his sinful people Israel. The Gospels show three persons, working together and in dialogue with each other and interacting also with the people of Israel. The main protagonist in the Old Testament is the Lord God (with hints of three-ness). The main protagonists in the New Testament are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (with clear indications of perfect unity). This shift in revelation is clear and abrupt; it is impressed on our minds with an unforgettable scene at the public inauguration of Jesus’ ministry. The Father speaks. The Son has been sent and begins his work willingly. The Holy Spirit, by whom this man was conceived, gives testimony to John the Baptist and to Israel and to the world that the Lord God of the Old Testament is in the mode of hyper-fulfillment and hyper-revelation. The Lord has come to save his people. “This is my Son, whom I love; with him and I am well pleased” (Matthew 3:17). The decisive battles of an eternal war are about to begin: the devil against Son and Father and Spirit.<sup>9</sup>

As we have noted many times, the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of salvation are inseparable, like the double helix of a DNA strand. Theology proper (the study about God) and soteriology go together. Soteriology is rooted in the triune God. Without the Trinity, there is no soteriology. When we confess the Trinity, we are confessing truths that the devil has attacked over and over again but has been unable to destroy. The Word remains! The trinitarian gospel remains!

But the battle also remains. In the midst of controversy, using the same theological tools, many heretical theologians have come to anti-trinitarian or unitarian conclusions. And, sadly, they have deceived many others.

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<sup>9</sup> The Eastern church celebrates the Holy Trinity on the first Sunday after the Epiphany. Let the preaching in all our CELC churches be robustly trinitarian as we preach on the baptism of Christ! The Western church celebrates the Holy Trinity on the Sunday after Pentecost. Let this custom not give excuse to a less-than-robust preaching of this doctrine throughout the year. As someone has said, “Thanksgiving is not a one-day-a-year thing. God’s people give him thanks every day.” Our ancient liturgies will provide much aid for having “Trinity Sunday” every Sunday.

Same object of study (the Bible). Same environment. Same tools. Opposite conclusions. What makes the difference? It is the heart and mind of the theologian and his posture towards the Word of God. Does the theologian use his tools in a magisterial (arrogant and ruling) manner or a ministerial (humble and serving) manner? Does he take all his thoughts captive to the Word of God? Or does he use his human reason to deny what God has said and done? Does he use his tools to understand the Word? Or does he use his tools to construct and promote his own understanding?

The scientist who studies the stars and praises the glory of the Creator is informed by the Word of God. The scientist who cannot fathom a creator even as he studies what God has made is being informed by corrupt human reason. He is blinded by the devil. In the same way, the trinitarian theologian is informed by the Word of God, while the unitarian, who cannot fathom a triune God even as he studies what God has said and done, is letting human reason be his master. He uses his theological tools to destroy the mystery of the Trinity (in the first sense) because “three in one” is incomprehensible to him. He uses his tools to destroy true theology, the mystery of the Trinity (in the second sense), because he doesn’t like the idea of progressive revelation and can’t accept that the Lord would do it that way.

The Trinity is beyond human reason. So is the gospel of full and free forgiveness purchased on the cross by the holy, precious blood of God’s one and only Son. It should not surprise us that the Socinians and their unitarian descendants teach a “salvation” by works. When the eyes of people are closed to the eternal Trinity, those eyes are closed to the eternal gospel as well. Unitarians preach the brotherhood of man; they focus on earthly matters. When the eyes of people are closed to the Son, who was with the Father in eternity and who returned to his glorious place at the right hand of the Father, those eyes will be closed also to the “adoption as sons” (Galatians 4:5 NIV84) and “heirs having the hope of eternal life” (Titus 3:7) petals of that beautiful flower we call the gospel. Without a proper doctrine of God you can’t have a proper doctrine of salvation. Without a proper doctrine of God and a proper doctrine of salvation, you can’t have a proper eschatology either. Such a person will imagine there is no heaven, no new order of things (see Revelation 21:5). He will be unable to sing the *Gloria Patri* in true faith.

When we have a proper doctrine of God (Trinity) and a proper doctrine of salvation (the gospel), we will have our hearts and minds set “on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God” (Colossians 3:1). And it will radically change our lives.

The implications for our beloved Lutheran fellowship are clear. As we consider our Lutheran heritage, we give humble thanks to God that our forefathers used their theological tools with a deep respect for the Word of God. As they used their theological tools, they prayed humbly that they would be taught by God (see John 6:45). They trembled and shuddered at the thought of dishonoring God’s name. With eyes wide open to the good news of salvation, the Lutheran reformers had eyes wide open to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit who accomplished and who freely offer this salvation.

When we read the Lutheran Confession, we can’t help but marvel and rejoice at what they say, at how they say it, and with what posture and precision the Lutheran theologians went about their work. Clearly, the Spirit of God was in them!

In our CELC churches we want to follow in a long line of godly and pious theologians (e.g., the church fathers, the Lutheran reformers, and the confessional Lutherans between them and us) whose careful and humble study of the Word, using all the tools at their disposal, led them to believe in, confess, defend, glorify, and proclaim the triune God. By God's grace, we as confessional Lutheran pastors and congregations around the world will continue to sing that ancient doxology:

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

### **The Need for Theology**

We might call the *Gloria Patri* a weaving together of the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19) and the declaration that “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever” (Hebrews 13:8). We praise one God, in three persons and in three tenses—past, present, and future. This song accommodates our time-boundedness and our inability to think in terms of eternity. Singing the *Gloria Patri* makes us feel tiny. If it weren't for his grace, we would sing in terror, or not at all. But “since we have justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand” (Romans 5:1-2).

If the devil and the world would leave us alone as we sing our *Glorias* today, tomorrow, every day, there would be no need for us to do so much theological work. But the devil cannot remain silent about the salvation accomplished by Father, Son, and Holy. He must raise doubts and speak his lies, everywhere and always.

That is why there is a need in every country and in every age for theologians to do their work. Just as worshipers gather at churches to praise the Trinity with their *Gloria Patris*, theologians sit at their desks to praise the Trinity with the tools of their trade. Theologians do their work so that the singing of the saints never stops.

Theologians use human reason and various other tools—schema, terminology, arguments, etc.—to examine God's Word. As we go about this work of theology ourselves and as we study the work of others, it is important for us to remember a few things. First, the theological method is arbitrary.<sup>10</sup> The Bible is perfect, clear, powerful, and inerrant. We have no freedom to change God's Word. But as we use tools to ponder, explain, and defend the Bible's teachings, there is no one right way to do it. As one example from the history of trinitarian theology, many different words have been used to answer the question, “Three *what* in one *what*?” Our preferred way, inherited through the ecumenical creeds, is this: “Three distinct persons in one divine essence.” With Luther we say, “This is the best we can do.” The ongoing theological task is to explain what is meant (and not meant) by the terms “distinct person” and “essence,” and to do this in a way that puts on “the belt of truth” and extinguishes “all the flaming arrows of the evil one” (Ephesians 6:14-16).

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<sup>10</sup> This is reflected in the fact that we use various dogmatics texts in the training of pastors in CELC churches. I have included some of these in the bibliography: Pieper, Lange, Deutschlander, etc. Wisconsin Seminary uses its *Dogmatics Notes* which are available at [wisluthsem.org](http://wisluthsem.org). These notes reflect especially the theological efforts of Adolf Hoenecke and John P. Meyer.



Second, we must remember that the schema, terminology, arguments, and the other tools of theology are shaped by our environment, by what is available, by the language of the day, and especially by the strategies and claims of those who are attacking God's Word. In every age, the work of theology is shaped by context. The church fathers used Neo-Platonic terms that came with metaphysical baggage—baggage they needed to remove. The Lutheran theologians employed the Aristotelian language of the scholastics, aware of the need to use these tools with caution and care. The church fathers were responding, among other things, to the claim of Arius that "there was a time when the Son was not." The Lutheran theologians were responding to the false claims of the Socinians that the Old Testament rules out any trinitarian theology. This explains why the Lutheran reformers are often drawing up their battle lines in the Old Testament.

Third, theologians and those who examine their work need to be humble. In his 1537 sermons on the Holy Trinity, Martin Luther uses the words "stutter and stammer" to describe what theologians do as they talk about the relationship of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (*Luther's Works* 78:3). Theologians use language and terminology of their choosing to clarify what the Spirit has said, and they are often working in the midst of controversy. There is good stammering and bad stammering, distinguished, as we have said earlier, by a ministerial or magisterial use of reason.

Even good theologians are stammering. With that humbling thought, we continue on to the topic of *filioque*.

### ***Filioque***

If the Father is unbegotten and if he has begotten the Son, can we call the Father the source of the Son? If so, can we say the Father is greater than the Son or that the Son is less divine or less eternal than the Father? When Jesus Christ says that the Father is greater than he (see John 14:28), is that in respect to his humanity only, or also in respect to his divinity?

The words "Father" and "Son" and "begets" are the Spirit's words for revealing these things of God to us, and we understand that this begetting was from eternity (see Psalm 2:7, John 1:14; Hebrews 1:5). Just as an earthly father begets children who are just as human as he is, so also the divine Father begets a Son in eternity who is just as divine as he is. The Father did not create the Son out of nothing, as he did the world. The Father begets the Son of himself, and this Son is the one and only (see John 1:18).

Did Jesus become the Son of God when he was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the virgin Mary? Is it possible that the Father-Son relationship which we see and hear in the Gospels is different from their relationship in the secret presence of God? Theologians will address these and other questions using a variety of terminologies and schemas:

- *Opera ad intra* (God's works inside of himself) in contrast to *opera ad extra* (God's works in relation to the world)
- Inner-Trinity in contrast to outer-Trinity
- Ontological Trinity in contrast to economic Trinity
- The processions of the Son (begotten as God) and Spirit (eternally proceeding) in contrast to the missions of the Son (begotten as man) and Spirit (breathed/sent into the world)

- The order of the persons of the Trinity<sup>11</sup>

Especially in connection with the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit, the visible church remains divided over the *filioque* question: Does the Holy Spirit proceed from the Father only, or from the Father *and the Son*. Because the CELC is blessed to have member churches around the world, in both East and West, and because CELC papers on the doctrine of the Trinity do not happen very often, we will address this issue briefly.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed stated that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. In A.D. 589, at a Western church council in Toledo, Spain, in response to the growing threat of Arian heresy, the Western church added *filioque*: “Who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*.”

In his 1537 sermons, Luther mentions several times that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*Luther’s Works* 78:4, 6, 16). Writing almost 1000 years after the Council of Toledo, Luther shows his agreement with Augustine and the theology of the Western church. In his treatise *On the Trinity*, Augustine affirmed that it is God the Father “from whom the Holy Spirit principally proceeds.” Augustine explained further:

“I have added the word *principally*, because we find that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son also. But the Father gave him this too, not as to one already existing, and not yet having it; but whatever he gave to the only-begotten Word, he gave by begetting him. Therefore, he so begat him as that the common Gift should proceed from him also, and the Holy Spirit should be the Spirit of both.”<sup>12</sup>

I must admit that I have studied this controversy in and from the perspective of my western context.<sup>13</sup> We will neither solve nor exhaust this centuries-old controversy between the Western and Eastern churches. My goal, rather, is to summarize the reasons why I think we can and should say that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son, though *principally* from the Father, and from and through the Son.<sup>14</sup>

A complicating factor in this discussion is the relationship between the word “proceeds” and the word “sends.” The Eastern church uses the word “proceeds” in reference to the inner-Trinity but the word “sends” in reference to the outer-Trinity. In other words, the Holy Spirit proceeds only from the Father, but he is sent by both the Father and the Son. The Western church on the other

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<sup>11</sup> It is beyond the scope of this paper to define these terms sufficiently. They are presented here and explained only as is necessary for a cursory treatment of *filioque*.

<sup>12</sup> Allison, *Historical Theology*, 241. He cites *On the Trinity*, 15.17.29, in *Nicene- and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1<sup>st</sup> series, 3:216.

<sup>13</sup> The resources in the bibliography give varied attention to the *filioque* controversy: Thompson (147-149), Lange (8-9, 123-124), Deutschlander (89), Schmeling (146-154), and Beckwith (218-243). The reasons stated in this section are drawn mostly from Thompson, Schmeling, and Beckwith.

<sup>14</sup> In Appendix #2 illustration B depicts the Eastern Orthodox conception of the Trinity, while illustration C depicts the Western church’s conception. Illustration A, sometimes called the “Shield of the Trinity,” is not meant to depict the structure of God, but to summarize the teachings of the first part of the Athanasian Creed. This “shield” can be misleading, as it might imply that there is an essence called God, and three persons besides.

hand, does not make this distinction so clearly. The Western church says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from both and is sent by both.

The only passage that uses the word “proceed” in reference to the Holy Spirit is in the Gospel of John: “When the Advocate comes, whom I will send to you from the Father—the Spirit of truth who goes out<sup>15</sup> from the Father—he will testify about me” (John 15:26).

So, what are the reasons why the Western church continues to stand by *filioque*? Generally, the Western church has made five arguments. The first argument is that the Spirit is called *the Spirit of Christ* in several New Testament passages (Romans 8:9, Galatians 4:6, Philippians 1:19, and 1 Peter 1:11). The Spirit is of the Son and of the Father. Especially in light of how closely the New Testament presents the Father and the Son—of the same eternal essence, will, glory, and purpose—the Spirit must be of the Son, just as he is of the Father.

The second argument is that Christ is the sender of the Holy Spirit in passages such as John 15:26, John 16:7, and John 20:22. Jesus has the power or right to send the Spirit just as the Father does. The inference is that Jesus’ breathing of the Holy Spirit on his disciples is an indication that the Spirit proceeds eternally from the Son.

The third argument is based on John 16:13-15 which says,

<sup>13</sup> But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come. <sup>14</sup> He will glorify me because it is from me that he will receive what he will make known to you. <sup>15</sup> All that belongs to the Father is mine. That is why I said the Spirit will receive from me what he will make known to you.

This passage implies an order to the Trinity. The Father begets the Son. The Spirit receives from both the Father and the Son. The Son is the center of the Trinity in the sense that God’s will (the salvation of sinners) is accomplished by him. The Spirit testifies to him. The Father is known and worshiped through the Son in the Spirit (Ephesians 2:18). Why would the Spirit proceed only from the Father and not from the Son, when the chief gift of the Spirit given to believers is the ability to confess the Son as Christ and Lord, through whom and in whom we have redemption and life?<sup>16</sup>

The fourth argument of the orthodox Lutheran theologians is that Revelation 22:1 uses a synonym of “proceed” to describe the waters of the Spirit flowing from the throne of God and from the Lamb in the new order of things.

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<sup>15</sup> The NIV does not translate *ekporeuetai* as “proceeds.” By way of comparison, the ESV: “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”

<sup>16</sup> Diagrams B and C in Appendix #2 are an attempt to illustrate the different conceptual views of the Western and Eastern churches.

Finally, a fifth argument from the Western church, based on history, is that before the controversy between East and West became politicized, the procession of the Holy Spirit from both Father and Son was confessed by the Third Ecumenical Council as well as Eastern church fathers such as Epiphanius of Salamis, Basil the Great, and Cyril of Alexandria.<sup>17</sup> The Athanasian Creed also states that the Holy Spirit is of the Father and the Son, neither made nor created nor begotten, but proceeding.

It should be noted that the Western church does not teach a double procession of the Spirit from the Father and the Son separately, but an eternal procession of the Spirit *principally* from the Father, but also through and from the Son.<sup>18</sup>

Beckwith provides a summary of the significance of this biblical teaching:

We end our unit on the scriptural identity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with a discussion of the *filioque*. There is something fitting in that. At the very least, the *filioque* shows us that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are never parted from one another; they not only mutually indwell one another but also make themselves known to us in such a way that our thoughts always move from one person to the other in a never-ending figure eight.<sup>19</sup>

When the Holy Spirit makes our bodies his holy temple (1 Corinthians 6:19), the Father and the Son, from whom the Spirit proceeds, also make their home with us (John 14:23). This is the confidence of all who have been baptized into Christ (Romans 6:3, Galatians 3:27). For “baptism into Christ” is baptism in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19).

### **What Does This Mean?**

So what does this mean? Is it possible that some CELC churches would include *filioque* in their confession of the Nicene Creed while others do not? What if one of our churches, for historical or contextual reasons, felt uncomfortable including it? In my view, that would not be disruptive to our unity, as long as the decision not to include it was not rooted in false teaching, for example, in sympathy with the Arian teachings which led the Western church to add it in the first place.

In our CELC churches it is not imperative that we all use the same language, terminology, schema, tools, etc., to teach the doctrine of God. Nor is it imperative that we all borrow the language, terminology, schema, tools, etc., of a certain generation of trinitarian theologians.

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<sup>17</sup> Thompson, *The Ancient and Medieval Church*, 149.

<sup>18</sup> In this regard, Beckwith quotes Quenstedt: “The Son, as he is not from himself, but has his essence from the Father through eternal generation, so also he has not the power of working from himself nor does he act from himself, but from the Father. In the same sense, as the Holy Spirit proceeds also from the Son, he speaks not from himself but speaks whatever he receives from Christ, as it is said in John 16:13-14.” See *The Holy Trinity*, 333.

<sup>19</sup> Beckwith, *The Holy Trinity*, 263.

While there is great benefit in studying the theologies of others (especially good stammerers), those theologies are not divinely inspired or mandated.

In our theological efforts in the doctrine of God, what is imperative, however, is that we believe, teach, and confess what the Holy Scriptures reveal about the eternal Father, the eternal Son, and the eternal Spirit, who are not three eternal, but one eternal. And it is imperative that, in our engagement with people in our corner of the world, we study the local doubts about God and attacks against God, so we can use our theological tools in a ministerial way and a contextually appropriate way, contending for “the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints” (Jude 3 NIV84).

In other words, every member church of the CELC has as their God-given mission the holy privilege of proclaiming the trinitarian gospel in their own context. Not only has God set the times and the places for us to live, but he has also given us to each other in this blessed fellowship of faith, to teach, encourage, exhort (after careful listening), and spur one another on in praise of God and in mission zeal. In the work of the harvest, our song is this:

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

### **Practically Speaking**

In our discussion about the Trinity, we have wandered from biblical theology to systematic theology and historical theology. What about practical theology? What does the doctrine of the Trinity mean for our CELC practically? How shall we conclude?

In our blessed Lutheran fellowship, we have holy things—by the Holy Spirit’s grace—in common. We have the same trinitarian theology, the same soteriology, and the same eschatology. Our trinitarian theology informs everything we hold dear and everything we do: our doctrine, our worship, our preaching of the Word, our administration of Holy Baptism and the Lord’s Supper,<sup>20</sup> our gospel ministry, our love for one another, our witness to the world, and our eternal hope.

Our fellowship is with and to the Father, with and through his eternal Son, with and in the Holy Spirit (see 1 John 1:1-4, Romans 11:33-36). Our joy is complete! Because of this fellowship with God, we have fellowship with each other. There is no doctrine more important, more comprehensive, or more glorious than the doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

If it is true that our fellowship is rooted in the gracious activity of the triune God, and it is, then it is also true that our unity in doctrine and our expression of fraternal love to each other can only be enhanced as we continue to grow in this blessed doctrine of God. A proper doctrine of God and proper faith in God are vital to our lives of worship, witness, and love.

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<sup>20</sup> Let it be emphasized: the evangelical Lutheran church’s doctrine and practice of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion are evangelical and trinitarian. This administration of the sacraments is evidence of the trinitarian gospel among us.

Ideally, this fellowship is enjoyed among us at every level: among individual brothers and sisters in Christ, among local gatherings of believers around the world, among our church bodies globally and regionally, and in our partnerships in theological training, humanitarian aid, and outreach. As confessional Lutherans we express the unity of our faith and our familial love in personal interactions, in worship, at the Lord's Table, in prayer, in conferences like this, and in all our work together.

What brought us together into such a blessed fellowship with God and each other? Three answers come to mind:

1. The Lord of the church, the Holy Spirit himself has brought us together!
2. The Word of God—both testaments—which the Spirit has written and preserved for our learning has brought us together!
3. The Lutheran Confessions, which display a proper hermeneutic, which are guided by the Word of God, and which provide a correct and reliable exposition of God's Word have brought us together!

All three of these are rooted in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All three of these are evidence of their gracious activity among us.

This paper was supposed to be presented in Seoul in 2020. It wasn't. It was rescheduled to be presented in Seoul in 2021. It won't be. COVID-19 has affected many things, including our ability to enjoy and celebrate our sweet fellowship face-to-face.

The events of the past year have made people aware of the need for overall health and for various vitamins and minerals in their diet and in their blood. I have heard many people talking recently about vitamin D deficiency (a common problem in places where there is little sunshine). Let's not be "vitamin T" deficient! As confessional, evangelical Lutherans, we don't do "Trinity-lite"! May Father, Son, and Holy Spirit continue to shine on us brightly with eternal grace and favor!

Let's celebrate our fellowship under God in the CELC with a robust trinitarian-gospel running through our veins, in all we do: in our learning (in church, home and seminary), in our liturgies (in every aspect of worship), and in lives of faith (holy lives of humble repentance and abundant fruit, in step with the Spirit, through the merits of the Son, offered daily to the glory of our Father in heaven).

Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit!  
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be. Amen.

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## Appendix #1

Illustrations of God's Progressive Revelation (with thanks to my son Benjamin)

A. The buds of Old Testament progressive prophecy:



B. The gospel in full bloom:



C. The gospel and the Trinity in full bloom:

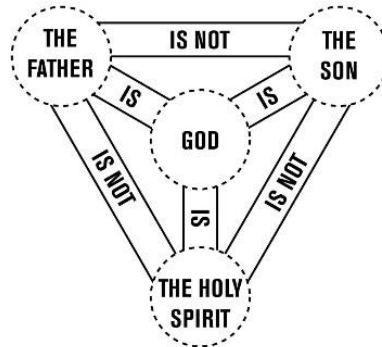




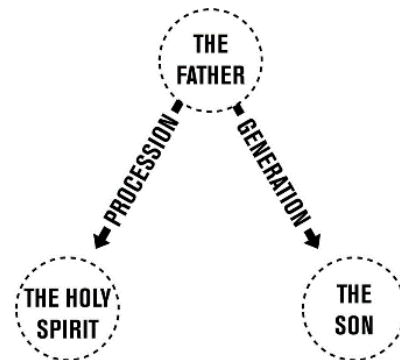
## Appendix #2

Trinity Diagrams (with thanks again to the “son of my right hand”)

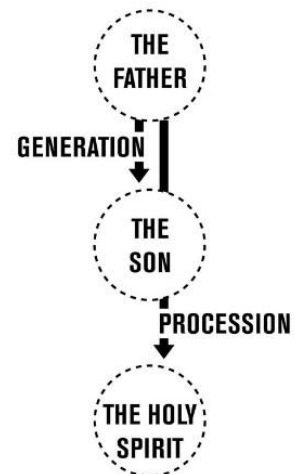
A. The Shield of the Trinity:



B. The Eastern Orthodox conception of procession:



C. The Western church's conception of procession:



### Appendix #3

This 1511 Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) woodcut entitled “The Holy Trinity” is considered by many to be the pinnacle of his artistry. God the Father receives God the Son as the sacrifice for the sins of the world, while the Holy Spirit, in the form of a dove, hovers over them. The angels look on in wonder, holding in their hands the instruments of his sufferings and death.



