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Published by InterVarsity Press, Downers Grove, IL.

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# What Was God Doing Before Creation?

## The Dark Path and the Bright Lane

There are two very different ways or approaches to thinking about God. The first way is like a slippery, sloping cliff-top goat path. On a stormy, moonless night. During an earthquake. It is the path of trying to work God out by our own brainpower. I look around at the world and sense it must have all come from somewhere. Someone or something caused it to be, and that someone I will call God. God, then, is the one who brings everything else into existence, but who is not himself brought into being by anything. He is the uncaused cause. That is *who he is*. God is, essentially, The Creator, The One in Charge.

It all sounds very reasonable and unobjectionable, but if I do start there, with that as my basic view of God, I will find every inch of my Christianity covered and wasted by the nastiest toxic fallout. First of all, if God's very identity is to be The Creator, The Ruler, then he needs a creation to rule *in order to be who he is*. For all his cosmic power, then, this God turns out to be pitifully weak: he *needs* us. And yet you'd struggle to find the pity in you, given what he's like. In the aftermath of World War II, the twentieth-century Swiss theologian Karl Barth put it starkly:

Perhaps you recall how, when Hitler used to speak about God, he called Him "the Almighty". But it is not "the Almighty" who is God; we cannot understand from the standpoint of a

supreme concept of power, who God is. And the man who calls “the Almighty” God misses God in the most terrible way. For “the Almighty” is bad, as “power in itself” is bad. The “Almighty” means Chaos, Evil, the Devil. We could not better describe and define the Devil than by trying to think this idea of a self-based, free, sovereign ability.<sup>1</sup>

Now Barth was absolutely not denying that God is Almighty; but he wanted to make very clear that mere might is not who God is.

The problems don't stop there, though: if God's very identity is to be The Ruler, what kind of salvation can he offer me (if he's even prepared to offer such a thing)? If God is The Ruler and the problem is that I have broken the rules, the only salvation he can offer is to forgive me and treat me as if I had kept the rules.

But if that is how God is, my relationship with him can be little better than my relationship with any traffic cop (meaning no offense to any readers in the police force). Let me put it like this: if, as never happens, some fine cop were to catch me speeding and so breaking the rules, I would be punished; if, as never happens, he failed to spot me or I managed to shake him off after an exciting car chase, I would be relieved. But in neither case would I love him. And even if, like God, he chose to let me off the hook for my law-breaking, I still would not love him. I might feel grateful, and that gratitude might be deep, but that is not at all the same thing as love. And so it is with the divine policeman: if salvation simply means him letting me off and counting me as a law-abiding citizen, then gratitude (not love) is all I have. In other words, I can never really love the God who is essentially just The Ruler. And that, ironically, means I can never keep the greatest command: to love the Lord my God. Such is the cold and gloomy place to which the dark goat path takes us.

The other way to think about God is lamp-lit and evenly paved: it is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. It is, in fact, The Way. It is a lane

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<sup>1</sup>Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline*, trans. G. T. Thompson (London: SCM Press, 1949), p. 48.

that ends happily in a very different place, with a very different sort of God. How? Well, just the fact that Jesus is “the Son” really says it all. Being a Son means he has a Father. The God he reveals is, first and foremost, a Father. “I am the way and the truth and the life,” he says. “No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). That is who God has revealed himself to be: not first and foremost Creator or Ruler, but Father.

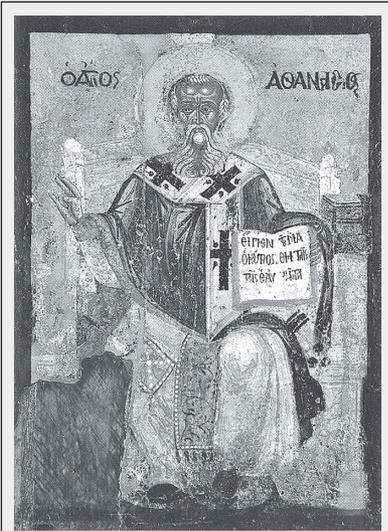
Perhaps the way to appreciate this best is to ask what God was doing before creation. Now to the followers of the goat path that is an absurd, impossible question to answer; their wittiest theologians reply with the put-down: “What was God doing before creation? Making hell for those cheeky enough to ask such questions!” But on the lane it is an easy question to answer. Jesus tells us explicitly in John 17:24. “Father,” he says, “you loved me before the creation of the world.” And that is the God revealed by Jesus Christ. Before he ever created, before he ever ruled the world, before anything else, this God was a Father loving his Son.

#### “HE STOOD FOR THE TRINITARIAN DOCTRINE”

At the beginning of the fourth century, in Alexandria in the north of Egypt, a theologian named Arius began teaching that the Son was a created being, and not truly God. He did so because he believed that God is the origin and cause of everything, but is not caused to exist by anything else. “Uncaused” or “Unoriginate,” he therefore held, was the best basic definition of what God is like. But since the Son, being a son, must have *received* his being from the Father, he could not, by Arius’s definition, be God.

The argument persuaded many; it did not persuade Arius’s brilliant young contemporary, Athanasius. Believing that Arius had started in the wrong place with his basic definition of God, Athanasius dedicated the rest of his life to proving how catastrophic Arius’s thinking was for healthy Christian living.

Actually, I’ve put it much too mildly: Athanasius simply boggled at



Icon of St. Athanasius  
(296?-373)

Arius's presumption. How could he possibly know what God is like other than as he has revealed himself? "It is," he said, "more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call Him Father, than to name Him from His works only and call Him Unoriginate."<sup>a</sup> That is to say, the right way to think about God is to start with Jesus Christ, the Son of God, not some abstract definition we have made up like "Uncaused" or "Unoriginate." In fact, we should not even set out

in our understanding of God by thinking of God primarily as Creator (naming him "from His works only")—that, as we have seen, would make him dependent on his creation. Our definition of God must be built on the Son who reveals him. And when we do that, starting with the Son, we find that the first thing to say about God is, as it says in the creed, "We believe in one God, *the Father*."

That different starting point and basic understanding of God would mean that the gospel Athanasius preached simply felt and tasted very different from the one preached by Arius. Arius would have to pray to "Unoriginate." But would "Unoriginate" listen? Athanasius could pray "Our Father." With "The Unoriginate" we are left scrambling for a dictionary in a philosophy lecture; with a Father things are familial. And if God is a Father, then he must be relational and life-giving, and *that* is the sort of God we could love.

<sup>a</sup>Athanasius, *Against the Arians* 1.34.

## The Loving Father

The most foundational thing in God is not some abstract quality, but the fact that he is Father. Again and again, the Scriptures equate the terms *God* and *Father*: in Exodus, the Lord calls Israel “my firstborn son” (Ex 4:22; see also Is 1:2; Jer 31:9; Hos 11:1); he carries his people “as a father carries his son” (Deut 1:31), disciplines them “as a man disciplines his son” (Deut 8:5); he calls to them, saying: “As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him” (Ps 103:13) and “‘How gladly would I treat you like sons and give you a desirable land, the most beautiful inheritance of any nation.’ I thought you would call me ‘Father’ and not turn away from following me” (Jer 3:19; see also Jer 3:4; Deut 32:6; Mal 1:6).

Isaiah thus prays, “You are our Father, . . . you, O LORD, are our Father” (Is 63:16; see also Is 64:8); and a popular Old Testament name was Abijah (“The Lord is my father”). Then Jesus repeatedly refers to God as “the Father” and directs prayer to “our Father”; he tells his disciples he will return to “my Father and your Father, to my God and your God” (Jn 20:17); Paul and Peter refer to “the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 15:6; 1 Pet 1:3); Paul writes of “one God, the Father” (1 Cor 8:6), of “God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:3); Hebrews counsels: “God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?” (Heb 12:7).

Since God is, before all things, a Father, and not primarily Creator or Ruler, all his ways are beautifully fatherly. It is not that this God “does” being Father as a day job, only to kick back in the evenings as plain old “God.” It is not that he has a nice blob of fatherly icing on top. He *is* Father. All the way down. Thus all that he does he does as Father. That is who he is. He creates as a Father and he rules as a Father; and that means the way he rules over creation is most unlike the way any other God would rule over creation. The French Reformer John Calvin, appreciating this deeply, once wrote:

We ought in the very order of things [in creation] diligently to contemplate God's fatherly love . . . [for as] a foreseeing and diligent father of the family he shows his wonderful goodness toward us. . . . To conclude once for all, whenever we call God the Creator of heaven and earth, let us at the same time bear in mind that . . . we are indeed his children, whom he has received into his faithful protection to nourish and educate. . . . So, invited by the great sweetness of his beneficence and goodness, let us study to love and serve him with all our heart.<sup>2</sup>

It was a profound observation, for it is only when we see that God rules his creation *as a kind and loving Father* that we will be moved to delight in his providence. We might acknowledge that the rule of some heavenly policeman was just, but we could never take delight in his regime as we can delight in the tender care of a father.

So what *does* it mean that God is a Father? Well, first of all, it does actually mean something. Not all names do. My dog is called Max, but that doesn't really tell you anything about him. The name doesn't tell you what he is or what he's like. But—if I can make the jump—the Father is called Father because he *is* a Father. And a father is a person who gives life, who begets children. Now that insight is like a stick of dynamite in all our thoughts about God. For if, before all things, God was eternally a Father, then this God is an inherently outgoing, life-giving God. He did not give life for the first time when he decided to create; from eternity he has been life-giving.

This gets unpacked for us in 1 John 4: “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love” (1 Jn 4:7-8).

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<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* 1.14.2, 22.

### WHEN “FATHER” IS A BAD THING

Not everyone instinctively warms to the idea that God is a Father. There are many for whom their own experiences of overbearing, indifferent or abusive fathers make their very guts squirm when they hear God spoken of as a Father. The twentieth-century French philosopher Michel Foucault had very much that sort of issue. The bulk of his life’s work was about the evils of authority, and it seems to have all started with the first figure of authority in his life: his father. Fearful of having some namby-pamby for a son, Foucault Senior—who was a surgeon—did what he could to “toughen up” the little mite. That meant, for example, ghoulishly forcing him to witness an amputation. “The image, certainly, has all the ingredients of a recurrent nightmare: the sadistic father, the impotent child, the knife slicing into flesh, the body cut to the bone, the demand to acknowledge the sovereign power of the patriarch, and the inexpressible humiliation of the son, having his manliness put to the test.”<sup>2a</sup>

For Foucault, paternal power had not been used to care, to nurture and to bless, and so for him the word *father* came to be associated with a host of dark images.

One’s heart goes out to the children of such fathers, and those of us who are fathers ourselves know that we too are far from perfect. But God the Father is not called Father because he copies earthly fathers. He is not some pumped-up version of your dad. To transfer the failings of earthly fathers to him is, quite simply, a misstep. Instead, things are the other way around: it is that all human fathers are *supposed* to reflect him—only where some do that well, others do a better job of reflecting the devil.

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<sup>2a</sup>James Miller, *The Passion of Michel Foucault* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), p. 366.

Have you ever known someone so magnetically kind and gracious, so warm and generous of spirit that just a little time spent with them affects how you think, feel and behave? Someone whose very presence makes you better—even if only for a while, when

you are with them? I know people like that, and they seem to be little pictures of how God is, according to John. This God, he says, is love in such a profound and potent way that you simply cannot know him without yourself becoming loving.

This is precisely what it means for God to be Father. For when John writes “God is love” at the end of verse 8, he is clearly referring to the Father. His very next words, in verse 9, state: “This is how God showed his love among us: *He sent his one and only Son.*” The God who is love is the Father who sends his Son. To be the Father, then, *means* to love, to give out life, to beget the Son. Before anything else, for all eternity, this God was loving, giving life to and delighting in his Son.

Seeing this, many theologians have liked to compare the Father to a fountain, ever bursting out with life and love (indeed, the Lord calls himself “the spring of living water” in Jeremiah 2:13, and the image crops up again and again in Scripture). And just as a fountain, to be a fountain, must pour forth water, so the Father, to be Father, must give out life. That is who he is. That is his most fundamental identity. Thus love is not something the Father *has*, merely one of his many moods. Rather, he *is* love. He could not not love. If he did not love, he would not be Father.

### “My Chosen One in Whom I Delight”

Now, God could not *be* love if there were nobody to love. He could not be a Father without a child. And yet it is not as if God created *so that* he could love someone. He *is* love, and does not need to create in order to be who he is. If he did, what a needy, lonely thing he would be! “Poor old God,” we’d say. If he created us in order to be who he is, *we* would be giving *him* life.

No, “Father,” says Jesus the Son in John 17:24, “you loved *me* before the creation of the world.” The eternal Son, who according to Colossians 1 is “before all things” (Col 1:17), the one through whom “all things were created” (Col 1:16), the one Hebrews 1 calls

“Lord” and “God,” who “laid the foundations of the earth” (Heb 1:10)—it is he who is loved by the Father before the creation of the world. The Father, then, is the Father of the eternal Son, and he finds his very identity, his Fatherhood, in loving and giving out his life and being to the Son.

That is why it is important to note that the Son is the *eternal* Son. There was never a time when he didn’t exist. If there were, then God is a completely different sort of being. If there were once a time when the Son didn’t exist, then there was once a time when the Father was not yet a Father. And if that is the case, then once upon a time God was not loving since all by himself he would have had nobody to love. Commenting on Hebrews 1:3, which says that the Son is “the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being,” the fourth-century theologian Gregory of Nyssa explained that:

As the light from the lamp is of the nature of that which sheds the brightness, and is united with it (for as soon as the lamp appears the light that comes from it shines out simultaneously), so in this place the Apostle would have us consider both that the Son is of the Father, and that the Father is never without the Son; for it is impossible that glory should be without radiance, as it is impossible that the lamp should be without brightness.<sup>3</sup>

The Father is never without the Son but, like a lamp, it is the very nature of the Father to shine out his Son. And likewise, it is the very nature of the Son to be the one who shines out from his Father. The Son has his very being from the Father. In fact, he *is* the going out—the radiance—of the Father’s own being. He is the Son.

In all this we have been seeing that the Father loves and delights in the Son. That is what you see over and over again in Scripture: “The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in

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<sup>3</sup>Gregory of Nyssa, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. R. Schaff et al. (Buffalo, N.Y.: Christian Literature, 1887-1894), 2/5:338.

his hands” (Jn 3:35); “the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does” (Jn 5:20), and so on (see also Is 42:1). But Jesus also says, “the world must learn that *I love the Father* and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me” (Jn 14:31). So it is not just that the Father loves the Son; the Son also loves the Father—and so much so that to do his Father’s pleasure is as food to him (Jn 4:34). It is his sheer joy and delight always to do as his Father says.

And yet, while the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, there is a very definite shape to their relationship. Overall, the Father is the lover, the Son is the beloved. The Bible is awash with talk of the Father’s love for the Son, but while the Son clearly does love the Father, hardly anything is said about it. The Father’s love is primary. The Father is the loving head. That then means that in his love he will send and direct the Son, whereas the Son never sends or directs the Father.

That turns out to be hugely significant, as the apostle Paul observes in 1 Corinthians 11:3: “Now I want you to realize that *the head* of every man is Christ, and *the head* of the woman is man, and *the head* of Christ is God.” In other words, the shape of the Father-Son relationship (the headship) begins a gracious cascade, like a waterfall of love: as the Father is the lover and the head of the Son, so the Son goes out to be the lover and the head of the church. “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you,” the Son says (Jn 15:9). And therein lies the very goodness of the gospel: as the Father is the lover and the Son the beloved, so Christ becomes the lover and the church the beloved. That means that Christ loves the church first and foremost: his love is *not* a response, given only when the church loves him; his love comes first, and we only love him because he first loved us (1 Jn 4:19).

That dynamic is also to be replicated in marriages, husbands being the heads of their wives, loving them as Christ the Head loves his bride, the church. He is the lover, she is the beloved. Like the church, then, wives are not left to earn the love of their hus-

bands; they can enjoy it as something lavished on them freely, unconditionally and maximally. For eternity, the Father so loves the Son that he excites the Son's eternal love in response; Christ so loves the church that he excites our love in response; the husband so loves his wife that he excites her to love him back. Such is the spreading goodness that rolls out of the very being of this God.

### The Spirit of Love

The Father loves his Son in a very particular way, something we can see if we look at the baptism of Jesus: "As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and lighting on him. And a voice from heaven said, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased'" (Mt 3:16-17).

Here, the Father declares his love for his Son, and his pleasure in him, and he does so *as the Spirit rests on Jesus*. For the way the Father makes known his love is precisely through giving his Spirit. In Romans 5:5, for instance, Paul writes of how God pours his

love into our hearts *by the Holy Spirit*. It is, then, through giving him the Spirit that the Father declares his love for the Son.

It is all deeply personal: the Spirit stirs up the delight of the Father in the Son and the delight of the Son in the Father, inflaming their love and so binding them together in "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:14). He makes the Father's love known



*The Baptism of Christ* by Master E. S. (1450)

to the Son, causing him to cry “Abba!”—something he will also do for us (Rom 8:15; Gal 4:6). And let’s be clear that “Abba!” is said with joy, for the Spirit so makes the Father known to the Son that the Son rejoices. “At that time Jesus, full of joy through the Holy Spirit, said, ‘I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth’” (Lk 10:21). For in making the loving Father of lights known, the Spirit is the bringer not only of love but of joy and is regularly associated with a joy next to which the merriness of wine is no substitute (Eph 5:18; see also Gal 5:22; Rom 14:17).

The way the Father, Son and Spirit related at Jesus’ baptism was not a one-time-only event; the whole scene is full of echoes of Genesis 1. There at creation, the Spirit also hovered, dovelike, over waters. And just as the Spirit, after Jesus’ baptism, would send him out into the lifeless wilderness, so in Genesis 1 the Spirit appears as the power by which God’s Word goes out into the lifeless void. In the very beginning, God creates by his Word (the Word that would later become flesh), and he does so by sending out his Word in the power of his Spirit or Breath.

In both the work of creation (in Genesis 1) and the work of salvation or re-creation (in the Gospels), God’s Word goes out from him by his Spirit. The Father speaks, and on his Breath his Word is heard. It all reveals what this God is truly like. The Spirit is the one through whom the Father loves, blesses and empowers his Son. The Son goes out from the Father by the Spirit. Hence Jesus is known as “the Anointed One” (“the Messiah” in Hebrew, “the Christ” in Greek), for he is the one supremely anointed with the Spirit. As kings and priests—even prophets—were anointed and consecrated to their tasks with oil in the Old Testament, Jesus is anointed with the Spirit. Indeed, the terms *Son* and *Anointed One* are sometimes almost synonymous (in, for example, Psalm 2).

The Father loves (and empowers) the Son by giving him his Spirit; that does not mean, though, that the Spirit is merely an impersonal divine force. Not at all. One could as well say the Son

## THE GOD WHO SHARES

Sometime in the 1150s, a young Scot named Richard entered the Abbey of St. Victor, just outside the walls of Paris on the bank of the Seine. There he dedicated himself to contemplating God and was soon known as one of the most influential authors of his day.

Richard argued that if God were just one person, he could not be intrinsically loving, since for all eternity (before creation) he would have had nobody to love. If there were two persons, he went on, God might be loving, but in an excluding, ungenerous way. After all, when two persons love each other, they can be so infatuated with each other that they simply ignore everyone else—and a God like that would be very far from good news. But when the love between two persons is happy, healthy and secure, they rejoice to share it. Just so it is with God, said Richard. Being perfectly loving, from all eternity the Father and the Son have delighted to share their love and joy with and through the Spirit.

It is not, then, that God *becomes* sharing; being triune, God *is* a sharing God, a God who loves to include. Indeed, that is why God will go on to create. His love is not for keeping but for spreading.



Richard of St. Victor  
(died 1173)

is an impersonal force because of how he is called God's Word. In fact, the Son has many other titles which could make him sound equally impersonal ("the arm of the Lord," for instance, Is 53:1); but the point of such titles is to explain his role in each situation (as the Word he reveals God's mind, as the arm of the Lord he

carries out his will); they do not suggest that the Son is in any way less than fully personal. And so it is with the Spirit: as a person he speaks and sends (Acts 13:2, 4); he chooses (Acts 20:28), teaches (Jn 14:26), gives (Is 63:14); he can be lied to and tested (Acts 5:3, 9); he can be resisted (Acts 7:51), grieved (Is 63:10; Eph 4:30) and blasphemed (Mt 12:31). In every way he is presented alongside the Father and the Son as a real person. When he is spoken of in the same breath as them (as when, for example, in Matthew 28:19, Jesus commands his disciples to go and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit), one has as much reason to think that the Father and the Son are impersonal as to think that the Spirit is.

### A Heavenly Hodgepodge?

We are seeing that with this God we are dealing with three real and distinct persons, the Father, the Son and the Spirit. And they must be real persons: there could be no true love between them if they were, say, just different aspects of one single divine personality. Yet keeping them distinct in our minds is clearly a struggle: think how many times you have heard (or prayed): “Dear Father . . . thank you for dying for us”; “Dear Jesus . . . thank you for sending your Son. We pray this in Jesus’ name,” and so on.

Throwing the Father, Son and Spirit into a blender like this is politely called *modalism* by theologians. I prefer to call it *moodalism*. Moodalists think that God is one person who has three different moods (or modes, if you must). One popular moodalist idea is that God used to feel Fatherly (in the Old Testament), tried adopting a more Sonny disposition for thirty-some years, and has since decided to become more Spiritual. You understand the attraction, of course: it keeps things from becoming too complicated.

The trouble is, once you purée the persons, it becomes impossible to taste their gospel. If the Son is just a mood God slips in and out of, then for us to be adopted as children in the Son is no

great thing: when God moves on to another mood, there will be no Son for us to be in. And even when God is in his Son mood, there will be no Father for us to be children of. And if the Spirit is just another of his states of mind, I can only wonder what will happen when God feels like moving on. “He fills me . . . he fills me not. . . .” The moodalist is left with no assurance and a deeply confused God. Somehow the Son must be his own Father, send himself, love himself, pray to himself, seat himself at his own right hand and so on. It all begins to look, dare I say, rather silly.

### A Gaggle of Gods?

How, then, are we to take seriously the fact that the Father, Son and Spirit are three real and distinct persons, and not just three divine moods? The worry, of course, is that the Trinity could sound like some pantheon or club which divine persons can choose to join. As cows get together in herds and sheep in flocks, so divine persons congregate in the Trinity. And if that is it, then the Trinity begins to look much as Mount Olympus would have to the ancient Greeks—as Zeus, Apollo and the rest chose to cohabit there, so the Father, Son and Spirit assemble in the Trinity.

Now, because the Father, Son and Spirit are persons who have real relationships with each other (the Father loving the Son and so on), Christian theologians have happily and unabashedly spoken of the fellowship of the Trinity. The eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards could write about “the society or family of the three,” even going so far as to say that the very “happiness of the Deity, as all other true happiness, consists in love and society.”<sup>4</sup> But (and this is a big but) that is not to say that the Trinity is like a club that the Father, Son and Spirit have decided

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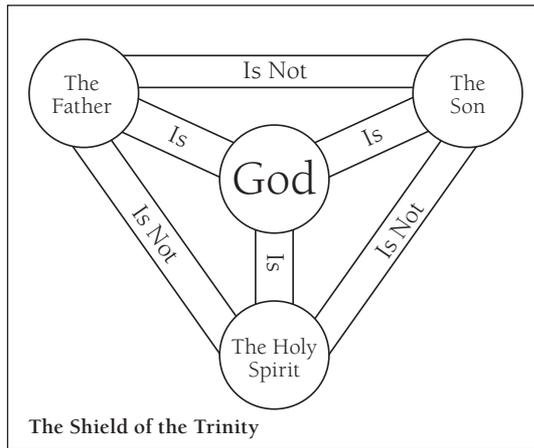
<sup>4</sup>Jonathan Edwards, “Writings on the Trinity, Grace, and Faith,” in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, ed. Sang Hyun Lee (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1957-2008), 21:135, 187.

to join. They are not three persons who simply manage to get along well—even very well—with each other.

What then? Well, let us go back to the beginning, and to the Father. Before creation, before all things, we saw, the Father was loving and begetting his Son. For eternity, that was what the Father was doing. He did not *become* Father at some point; rather, his very identity is to be the one who begets the Son. That is who he is. Thus it is not as if the Father and the Son bumped into each other at some point and found to their surprise how remarkably well they got on. The Father is who he is by virtue of his relationship with the Son. Think again of the image of the fountain: a fountain is not a fountain if it does not pour forth water. Just so, the Father would not be the Father without his Son (whom he loves through the Spirit). And the Son would not be the Son without his Father. He has his very being from the Father. And so we see that the Father, Son and Spirit, while distinct persons, are absolutely inseparable from each other. Not confused, but undividable. They are who they are *together*. They always *are* together, and thus they always *work* together.

That means that the Father is not “more” God than the Son or the Spirit, as if he had once existed or could exist without them. His very identity and being is about giving out his own fullness to the Son. He is inseparable from him. It also means there is no “God” behind and before Father, Son and Spirit. That, actually, can be the problem with talk about “God”: it can all too easily lead us to imagine that there is some stuff (or worse, some person) called “God” out of which the Father, Son and Spirit then emerge. As if one could pray to this “God.” As if anyone had ever met or had dealings with such a thing. Take even this traditional teaching aid, for example, sometimes called “The Shield of the Trinity”: completely unintentionally, it can leave the impression that there is in the middle some fourth thing called “God” beside the Father, Son and Spirit. If that were the case, of course, then not only would

there be four in the Trinity; but also, Father, Son and Spirit really would be different gods, each just consisting of the same “stuff.” But starting with the Father we avoid all such nastiness: behind everything, instead of some abstract “God,” we see the Father, whose nature it is to give himself and beget his Son.



### Eggs and Shamrocks Redux

Now come back to those “illustrations” of the Trinity: the three states of  $H_2O$  and all that. How do they seem? Is the triune God like  $H_2O$ , the Father all icy until you warm him up and he turns into the watery Son, who then vaporizes and becomes the steamy Spirit when you really crank up the heat? No, that’s just modalism. Is God like a shamrock leaf, the Father, Son and Spirit just three bits sticking out? One can hear the whine as old Hilarius starts to do a steady 90 rpm in his grave. Quite apart from anything else, such pictures make God out to be an impersonal *thing*. Not personal, not loving—not like the Father, Son and Spirit at all.

If the Bible ever comes out with an image, it is in Genesis 1 and 2.

Then God said, “Let *us* make man in *our* image, in *our* likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the

## ST. HILARIUS



St. Hilarius (300?-367?)

Cheerful by name, cheerful by theology: that was Hilarius. (Today he is ponderously styled “Hilary of Poitiers,” but that only shows what a sad state we are in.) With wits like a rapier and manners like a lamb, he gave his life and liberty to defend the Son’s eternal deity. He argued powerfully that the followers of Arius, who held that the Son had begun to exist at some point, were making a disastrous mistake: saying that there had not always been a Son meant that God had not always been a Father. Thus God is not fundamentally a Father, not essentially loving and life-giving, but something else.

But Hilarius refused absolutely to believe in “a certain imaginary substance” from which the Father and the Son might have come. Underneath everything there is not “God,” but the Father, eternally loving his Son. “God,” he said, “can never be anything but love, or anything but the Father: and He, Who loves, does not envy; He Who is Father, is wholly and entirely Father. This name admits of no compromise: no one can be partly father, and partly not.” In other words, there is no cold, abstract “God” or “God-stuff” behind Father, Son and Spirit. At bottom there is the Father, and that means a lively God of love, a God who is no envious, life-hoarding miser, but who delights to give out his life and being to his Son.

To stop people thinking that there might be any “God” behind the Father, Son and Spirit, Hilarius advised: “We must confess Father and Son before we can apprehend God as One and true.”<sup>a</sup> Trying to define God without starting with the Father and his Son, he saw, one would quite simply wind up with a different God.

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<sup>a</sup>Hilarius, *On the Trinity* 4.4; 9.61; 5.35.

birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; *male and female* he created them. (Gen 1:26-27)

There is something about the relationship and difference between the man and the woman, Adam and Eve, that images the being of God—something we saw the apostle Paul pick up on in 1 Corinthians 11:3. Eve is a person quite distinct from Adam, and yet she has all her life and being from Adam. She comes from his side, is bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh, and is one with him in the flesh (Gen 2:21-24). Far better than leaves, eggs and liquids, that reflects a personal God, a Son who is distinct from his Father, and yet who is of the very being of the Father, and who is eternally one with him in the Spirit.

### **Mere Trinitarianism**

John wrote his gospel, he tells us, so “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn 20:31). But even that most basic call to believe in the Son of God is an invitation to a Trinitarian faith. Jesus is described as the *Son* of God. God is his Father. And he is the Christ, the one anointed with the Spirit. When you start with the Jesus of the Bible, it is a triune God that you get. The Trinity, then, is not the product of abstract speculation: when you pro-

claim Jesus, the Spirit-anointed Son of the Father, you proclaim the triune God.

And what Arius demonstrated was the reverse: when you *don't* start with Jesus the Son, you end up with a different God who is not the Father. For the Son is the one Way to know God truly: only he reveals the Father. John Calvin once wrote that if we try to think about God without thinking about the Father, Son and Spirit, then “only the bare and empty name of God flits about in our brains, to the exclusion of the true God.”<sup>5</sup> He was quite right. For there is a vast world of difference between the triune God revealed by Jesus and all other gods.

This God simply will not fit into the mold of any other. For the Trinity is not some inessential add-on to God, some optional software that can be plugged into him. At bottom this God is different, for at bottom, he is not Creator, Ruler or even “God” in some abstract sense: he is the Father, loving and giving life to his Son in the fellowship of the Spirit. A God who is in himself love, who before all things could “never be anything but love.” Having such a God happily changes everything.

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<sup>5</sup>Calvin, *Institutes* 1.13.2.

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