

The Trinity: Revelation and Appropriation (Matthew 28:19)

God has revealed Himself through creation (Ps. 19:1), conscience (2 Cor. 1:12), and the Scriptures (Rom. 2:14-15; 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Apart from the Holy Scriptures, man cannot know that God is Trinity. God must disclose Himself as Trinity for man to know Who God is. This Trinity is revealed by the Trinity throughout history progressively through the Word of God and illumination of the Holy Spirit. God must reveal God.

1. The Revelation of the Trinity in the Old Testament

- While the name “Trinity” is not mentioned anywhere in Scripture, God has provided its language, and the creeds and confessions give the syntax and grammar.
- There is a progressive “unveiling” of Who God is ontologically through history.
- Trinitarian reading of the Old Testament hits a “brick wall” with a plain reading of the text. While the Trinity has always existed, God must make God known in whatever capacity (length, breadth, height, and width).

Progressive Revelation of God (from God) in the Old Testament:

- A. God and the Spirit of God (Gen. 1:1): God (Elohim) created the heavens and the earth. The Spirit of God hovered over the face of the waters.
- B. LORD (Gen. 3:1): The serpent (3:1) and Eve refer to “God” (3:2), while Adam and Noah call Him “LORD” (4:1; 9:26).
- C. LORD God (Gen. 15:2): Abram calls Him “LORD God.”
- D. God Almighty (Gen. 17:1-2): God reveals Himself as “El Shaddai” (God Almighty).
- E. I AM (Exodus 3:13-14): Moses is to inform the nation of Israel, while in bondage in Egypt, that “I AM” has sent him.
- F. The LORD the LORD (Ex. 34:4-9): God reveals His character to Moses in response to Israel’s sin (*Golden Calf*, Ex. 32).
- G. Father (Ex. 4:22; Deut. 1:31; 32:6 Isa. 1:2; 9:6; Jer. 3:4, 19; 31:9; Hos. 11:1-4; Mal. 1:6): While God is called “Father” in the Old Testament, He is not a father to the nation of Israel as He is a Father to His Son. He is a father to Israel generally and nationally through adoption by grace, not eternally before creation.

Through revelation comes redemption, and through redemption comes revelation. God’s revelation of Himself as Trinity is not appropriate in His timeline until He sends His Son into the world. No one has seen God (Father) but the Son (John 1:18; 6:46). The Holy Spirit’s mission to humanity reaches its fulness only after the ascension (John 16:7).

The Old Testament revelation is not corrected by the fuller revelation of the New Testament that follows it (from a creaturely perspective). Instead, it is perfected, extended, enlarged, described, and unpacked (*sensus plenior*). The Trinity is embedded in the soil of the Old Testament Scriptures and, at the proper time, shot up and blossomed in the light of the Son and subsequent literature of the New Testament.

Progressive Revelation of God (the Trinity) in the New Testament:

- A. The language of the Trinity is inferred (Matt. 3:16): God’s son proper is not Israel, but the Son incarnate (Jesus of Nazareth).
- B. Each person is identified as the one true and living God: The Father is the one Lord God (Matt. 11:25), the Son is the one Lord God (John 20:28; 1 Cor. 8:6), and the Spirit is the one Lord God (Acts 5:3-4; 2 Cor. 3:17-18). Each person is defined

as an agent of God’s uniquely divine acts of creation, providence, and redemption (Gen. 1:1-2; Ps. 33:6; John 1:1-3; Gal. 4:4-6).

- C. The New Testament writers rearrange the order of procession: the order of operation (ontological) is Father-Son-Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). New Testament authors may include all the persons, or some of them, based on the appropriation in His economy (history): Christ-Spirit-Father (Gal. 4:4; Eph. 2:18), Spirit-God-Christ (Jude 20-21), etc., etc.
- D. Each person revealed reflects a more “proper” name: (John 1:1-18; John 8:42, 58; 10:30; 17:26): The Word has become incarnate, only the Son knows the Father, and the Father and Son are one (Deut. 6:4). “I AM” refers to the eternity of the Godhead, while the “LORD” (YHWH) refers to the divine Godhead in His fulness. The LORD (YHWH) is not the sole possessor and indicator of any one person. The name describes His transcendence and covenant faithfulness. The LORD is the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in their coequal sharing of the divine essence. God’s proper Trinitarian name is “the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.”

2. The Appropriation of the Trinity

- Appropriation: Latin for “set aside for a purpose.” It describes how the persons of the Trinity act in a particular manner in history without excluding one another.
- While every act of God is a single act (God is one), certain actions may terminate on specific persons or be appropriated by one person in a particular manner. It is always one undivided will and always *appropriate* to their eternal relations of origin: unbegotten (paternity), begotten (filiation), and spiration (spiration). Every single act by the indivisible Trinity towards His creation corresponds (not constitutes) to each distinct incommunicable eternal relation of origin.
- Each person is undivided in their operation, for God is one essence, nature, will, power, and authority.
 - Son: It is natural, though not mandatory ontologically, that the Son is “sent” because He is “from” the Father (begotten, not made). The Son did not become beloved because He became incarnate. As the beloved, He became incarnate. The Son is beloved to the Father (Matt. 3:16).
 - Father: Whatever the Father does, the Son does (John 5:22-23). The Father has “sent” the Son (John 20:21).
 - Holy Spirit: The Spirit will take what is Christ’s and give it to those who believe in Him (John 16:14). The Spirit is closely conjoined with and inseparable from the Father and the Son in every operation.

When a New Testament author mentions the Trinity or any person of the Trinity, they highlight that person’s economic appropriation in history. The economic activity (mission) does not constitute the immanency (ontological) but reflects it. While the behavior of the Trinity in history reveals and reflects the Trinity, those actions do not constitute (determine) the essence, for each member is identical in essence, power, nature, and will, distinct only in their historical and redemptive operation.

New Testament authors can choose to highlight a particular Trinitarian, missional truth revealed in history. As Trinity, God’s final and complete revelation to mankind occurred only through the incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension of the incarnate Son and subsequent giving of the Spirit. The New Testament authors “unpack” this under the inspiration of God.