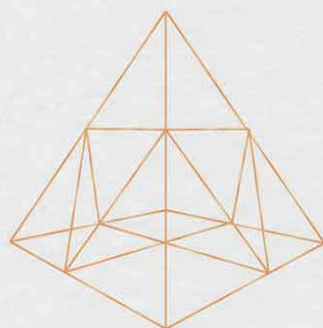# KNOWING
AND THE
TRINITY

*How Perspectives in Human
Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*

VERN S.
POYTHRESS

"This book begins simply enough, but soon we discover that it opens our eyes to refreshing new ways of viewing God, the Bible, ourselves, and the world from multiple perspectives, all grounded ultimately in the mysterious triune nature of God. Poythress has given us in this book the valuable fruit of a lifetime of reflection on the teachings of the whole of Scripture."
> —**Wayne Grudem**, Research Professor of Theology and Biblical Studies, Phoenix Seminary

"In this fascinating and highly accessible book, Dr. Poythress puts his perspectival method to work in a wide-ranging exploration of Trinitarian theology. Underlying his discussion is the conviction that while this is a mystery surpassing our capacities, God has revealed himself in creation and grace, his triune fingerprints evident wherever we turn. Any discussion of the doctrine of God should take Poythress's important contribution into serious consideration. I know of nothing else quite like it."
> —**Robert Letham**, Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Union School of Theology (formerly Wales Evangelical School of Theology)

"In recent decades, many evangelical scholars, students, and laypeople have found triperspectivalism extraordinarily helpful, but they have also found it confusing. Vern Poythress has given us what amounts to a primer on this subject. His explanations are brief and clear. He securely anchors his outlooks in the Scriptures and in orthodox Trinitarian theology. The illustrations and glossary make Poythress's discussions accessible to a wide range of readers. Study questions encourage both theoretical and practical reflection. This book is a window into ways of thinking about and living the Christian faith that will greatly benefit us all."
> —**Richard L. Pratt Jr.**, President, Third Millennium Ministries

"Poythress has done it again. *Knowing and the Trinity: How Perspectives in Human Knowledge Imitate the Trinity* is a fresh discussion on how a robust understanding of God's triune being deepens, challenges, and expands our notions of human knowledge and theological method.

Poythress dispels myths of perspectivalism (especially the all-too-common objection of relativism) and persuasively argues for the deeply related and organic nature of God's revelation. My hope is that Poythress's example will produce much biblically faithful theological creativity."

—**Joseph E. Torres**, Editor, John M. Frame's *Apologetics:*
   A Justification of Christian Belief

"For many years now, we have seen the fruitful use of multiperspectivalism or triperspectivalism in the Reformed theology of John Frame and Vern Poythress. Poythress now opens up for us a window onto the rich tapestry of the triad of perspectives in *Knowing and the Trinity*. He grounds the use of perspectives in the being of the triune God of Scripture and demonstrates their theoretical and practical value. These perspectives do not undermine the absolute truth of God and his Word but expose us to the ever-increasing depth that we discover in God's Word and world. Poythress shows us that triadic perspectives are analogues of God's triune being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, are revealed in the flow of salvation history, are experienced in our space and time, and culminate in the glory of the new heaven and the new earth. Here we have unpacked for us the rationale behind triperspectivalism, and the author demonstrates its theological wealth. I heartily recommend this new book."

—**Jeffrey C. Waddington**, Stated Supply, Knox Orthodox
   Presbyterian Church, Lansdowne, Pennsylvania

KNOWING

AND THE

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*How Perspectives in Human
Knowledge Imitate the Trinity*

VERN S.
POYTHRESS

To John Frame,
who taught me about perspectives

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Foreword

AUGUSTINE WAS WISE when he wrote in his landmark work *De Trinitate*: "In no other subject is error more dangerous, or inquiry more laborious, or the discovery of truth more profitable."[1] To write a book that contributes to our understanding of and love for God the Trinity is surely a crowning achievement for any theologian. It is therefore a privilege to serve as the doorman to welcome readers into the remarkable world of reflections that Dr. Vern Poythress provides for us in this substantial work.

I suspect that if we were to ask, "How long did it take you to write *Knowing and the Trinity*?," it would be appropriate for Professor Poythress to answer (with his engaging and modest smile), "My whole life." Yet while the exposition he gives here of the Trinity may be the capstone of his work thus far, there is also a sense in which it has been the foundation stone of everything else he has written. For just as the beginning of the Christian life is marked by baptism into the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit and then the whole of the Christian life is lived in the light of this reality, the same may be said of Vern Poythress's many contributions to our understanding of the gospel.

Every book, no matter what the subject, is in some sense an expression of the author's autobiography. Even a work such as Alexander Cruden's *Concordance* finds its place in the story of its compiler's life. Similarly, readers familiar with Dr. Poythress will be able to detect various streams of preparation in his life as they converge in *Knowing and the Trinity*. Appropriately, perhaps, three of them stand out.

Here we meet the mind of a mathematician. Valedictorian of the class of 1966 at California Institute of Technology, Vern Poythress soon earned a Ph.D. in mathematics from Harvard. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that he has long been fascinated by the mystery of the

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1. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, 1.3.5.

Three-in-One God, or that the young professor of mathematics soon transitioned to theological studies and a lifetime in theological education in which he has both explored and taught the principle that the Trinity is the mystery in which all other mysteries ultimately make sense.

I once teased another mathematician friend who was professor of number theory in one of the ancient British universities: "Are you paid to sit in a darkened room all day to do nothing but think about numbers?" He gave the adept riposte, "Not at all. I am doing the same thing you do— studying theology—only without words!" In this, of course, he was simply echoing Johannes Kepler's *bon mot* about "thinking God's thoughts after him."[2] Vern Poythress stands in this great tradition. *Knowing and the Trinity* expresses a mind trained to move with careful logic in the process of reaching its conclusions and with admirable patience in taking the reader step by step through his reasoning processes.

Here we also meet the mind of the theologian and professor of New Testament interpretation at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia who has also devoted himself, among much else, to the study of linguistics, epistemology, and hermeneutics. All of this—involving some fifty years of preparation—comes to expression in these fascinating chapters and contributes to their distinctiveness.

At the same time, readers will notice a third stream running into and through these pages. The great Dutch theologian Herman Bavinck once noted: "It is absolutely necessary that the person who cultivates any branch of knowledge first of all, and most of all, study to be modest and humble. This applies especially to the theologian. He should not think of himself more highly than he ought to think."[3] In that same spirit, *Knowing and the Trinity* is suffused with a humble desire to submit all the preformed and inherited thoughts we bring to the study of theology to the scrutiny of the revelation that God himself gives of himself. No theologian's mind is a *tabula rasa*. But all our preconceptions must be laid in tribute before God's own self-revelation, to be cleansed, expanded, and, when necessary, corrected. Deeply embedded in these pages is the principle that the study of theology is always an exercise in cognitive repentance. Here, too, the

2. "Johannes Kepler," *New World Encyclopedia*, http://www.newworldencyclopedia.org /entry/Johannes_Kepler (accessed February 13, 2018).

3. Danny Wyatt, "Reformed Meditations," http://reformedmeditations.blogspot.com/2010 /?m=0 (accessed February 13, 2018).

first of Martin Luther's Ninety-five Theses applies: "When our Lord Jesus Christ said 'repent' he meant that the whole of the Christian life should be repentance."[4] In keeping with this, the student of theology who brings thoroughly orthodox concepts and language to the exploration of the Trinity discovers that progress in understanding always involves a renewal of the mind in the light of divine revelation.

It is in this spirit that Dr. Poythress undertakes the task of helping us to see the sheer wonder of God as we reflect on his self-testimony. Recognizing that we do this "with all the saints" (Eph. 3:18), he shows appropriate reverence for the great theological tradition, its concepts, and its vocabulary. In addition, he shares the love for God's person that was present in the work of the early fathers. (Students who lack patience with them surely think too little of how deeply offended they themselves would be if someone they knew and loved were carelessly described!)

Knowing and the Trinity makes no attempt to *solve* the mystery of the Trinity (as though God's triune being were a problem to himself!), nor to *dissolve* that mystery (which so endangers the pride of man's desire for autonomous reasoning, making himself the measure of all things). Rather, as has been true of every theologian who passes Bavinck's test, Vern Poythress allows the mystery to shine in all its glory so that in its light we see light, believing with John Robinson (the Pilgrim fathers' pastor) that "the Lord hath more truth and light to break forth from his holy Word."[5] He thus takes his place in a long line of theologians going back through John Owen (with his great experiential-theological contribution *On Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost*) to John Calvin (with his insistence on the autotheistic nature of the Son), and behind them to Anselm (who wrote on the procession of the Holy Spirit), to the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine and then to Tertullian (to whom we owe the very term *trinitas*).

We ourselves are always pilgrim theologians. Our theology is a *theologia viatorum* until the knowledge of faith is consummated in the *visio Dei*. Perhaps even then it may continue to deepen, just as holy seraphim ever enunciate their *Trisagion* without coming to an end of either their comprehension or their adoration. Until that day, the theologian's task

4. "Ninety-five Theses," *Wikipedia*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ninety-five_Theses (accessed February 13, 2018).

5. David H. Bauslin, "Freedom of Teaching," *The Lutheran Quarterly* 39 (April 1909): 200.

is to lead us to the limits of divine revelation, recognize the presence of the perimeter fence, and then, as Dr. Poythress does from time to time in these pages, invite us to bow in adoring wonder before the greatness of the incomprehensible triune God, who has made himself so fully known to us.

Who can speak of God? We must. Yet, Job-like, we then place our hands over our mouths and bow down in worship. At the same time, in this, the greatest of all pursuits, we recognize with Thomas à Kempis, "What profit will it be to you if you can argue profoundly about the Trinity if you are empty of humility and thus have become displeasing to the Trinity?"[6] But we also want to be able to say with Jeremiah, "Let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD" (Jer. 9:24).

In *Knowing and the Trinity*, Vern Poythress helps us to do precisely this. So now, having completed my doorman's task, I bid you to explore and enjoy!

<div style="text-align: right">

Sinclair B. Ferguson
Chancellor's Professor of Systematic Theology
Reformed Theological Seminary

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6. Thomas à Kempis, trans. and ed. William C. Creasy, *The Imitation of Christ by Thomas a Kempis: A New Reading of the 1441 Latin Autograph Manuscript*, 2nd ed. (Mercer University Press, 2015), 3.

Introduction:
Reflections of the Trinity

MY FRIEND JOHN FRAME and I have been using and discussing perspectives for over forty years.[1] I would now like to write about where they come from.[2] They are a gift from God. But in what way? They reflect God's Trinitarian nature.

What is the Trinity? The Bible teaches that God is one God in three persons—God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. (We will review the biblical teaching on the Trinity in chapter 6.) God the Creator is distinct from everything that he created. No created thing has exactly the same kind of unity, the unity of being three in one.

So it might seem strange to say that there are reflections of the Trinity in the created world. But God did *make* the world. So his character is reflected in it (Ps. 19:1; Rom. 1:19–20). In fact, his Trinitarian nature is reflected in God's actions toward us and his relation to us, as we will see.[3]

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1. Short introductions include John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," 2008, http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/, republished in *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 1–18; Vern S. Poythress, "Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 173–200, http://frame-poythress.org/multiperspectivalism-and-the-reformed-faith/. More elaborately, Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001); John M. Frame, *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017). For more historical information, see John M. Frame, "Backgrounds to My Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 9–30. See also Timothy E. Miller, *The Triune God of Unity in Diversity: An Analysis of Perspectivalism, the Trinitarian Theological Method of John Frame and Vern Poythress* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017).

2. I am grateful to Timothy E. Miller for helping me to see the value of writing on this subject (Miller, *The Triune God*).

3. See Fred Sanders, *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything* (Wheaton,

A Reflection of the Trinity in Salvation

Let us begin with an example, by considering how God saves us. God the Father has planned our salvation from all eternity: "He [God the Father] chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world" (Eph. 1:4). "He predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (v. 5). God's planning took place "in him," that is, in Christ. Then in the fullness of time, Christ came to earth and accomplished our salvation in his death and resurrection (Rom. 4:25; Gal. 4:4). The Father and the Son then sent the Holy Spirit in order to apply Christ's accomplishment to the church and to each individual in it (John 15:26; Acts 2:33; Eph. 1:13–14). All three persons of the Trinity are involved. The entire program of God is one unified program, in which each person of the Trinity participates in a distinct way, but each person of the Trinity is present with the others in every work.

God is always the Trinitarian God—even before he created the world. In addition, within the world he reflects who he is in the way in which he accomplishes salvation. Everyone who is saved by God relies on what each person of the Trinity has done and is doing.

A Reflection of the Trinity in Adoption

One aspect of salvation is that God undertakes to adopt us as his sons through Jesus Christ. When he adopts us, we become part of his family of children, with whom he establishes a fatherly relation of intimacy. This intimacy is a precious aspect of being saved.

God's act of adoption involves the work of all three persons of the Trinity. God the Father is the one who adopts us, so that we become his sons. God the Son became incarnate and identified with us, so that we might be forgiven and receive the status of sons through his unique sonship: "God sent forth his *Son* . . . to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive *adoption as sons*" (Gal. 4:4–5). Then God the Holy Spirit comes to dwell in us and testify that we are God's sons by crying with us, "Abba! Father!" (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6).

In sum, God's Trinitarian character is reflected in the way he works to adopt us as sons. When we who are Christian believers relate to God

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IL: Crossway, 2010). Sanders's book stimulated this introductory chapter.

as our Father, we are relying on God's Trinitarian character, which is at work in our adoption.

A Reflection of the Trinity in God's Speech

Let us consider another example: the example of God's speech. Long ago, God spoke orally to Abraham, Isaac, and prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah. He also commissioned some of his servants to write his words down for subsequent generations, and we have his word in permanent form in the Bible. The climactic communication from God comes in his Son: "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by *his Son*" (Heb. 1:1–2). This climactic communication is also reflected in a subordinate way in all of God's speech to us, because Christ is the Mediator for God's speech. God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are present with God the Father when he speaks.

We can see how this speech took place in a focused way when Jesus was on earth. He says, "I have given them [the disciples] the words that you [the Father] gave me" (John 17:8). He also promises that the Holy Spirit will speak what he hears from the Father and the Son:

> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he *hears* he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will take *what is mine* and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

The word of God comes from the Father to the Son, and through the Holy Spirit it comes to be received and believed by the disciples. What took place while Jesus was on earth illustrates in climactic form a broader pattern. The second person of the Trinity is "the Word," according to John 1:1. Particular words from God offer us an expression of this eternal Word. All of God's speech takes place in the words of the Son. And the Holy Spirit is always present to bring those words to their destination. Thus, God's Trinitarian character is reflected when he speaks. When we listen to God speaking, as we read the Bible or hear a sermon based on it, we rely on the Trinitarian character of God,

according to which all three persons are present and at work when God speaks.[4]

A Reflection of the Trinity in God's Presence

God's Trinitarian character is also expressed in the way in which he makes himself present to us. One of the names given to Jesus is *Immanuel*, which means "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). The name implies not only that Jesus has come to be with us, but that in him God the Father is with us. This presence finds its fulfillment when Jesus sends the Holy Spirit:

> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be *with you* forever, even the Spirit of truth. (John 14:16–17a)

> If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead *dwells in you*, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who *dwells in you*. (Rom. 8:11)

Thus, when we are saved and we experience the intimate presence of God with us, we rely on the Trinitarian character of God.

A Reflection of the Trinity in Prayer

Christians who are praying to God rely on God's Trinitarian character. We pray to God the Father (Matt. 6:9), and Jesus the Son intercedes for us (Heb. 7:25). The Holy Spirit who dwells within us "intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). God's Trinitarian character is reflected in the way in which God meets with us as we pray.

Reflections of God in Perspectives

In sum, God's Trinitarian character is displayed in the ways in which he establishes a personal relation to us—in salvation, in adoption, in verbal communication to us, in his presence with us, and in our prayers. So it is fitting to ask whether God's character is reflected in still other ways. One of these ways might be in giving us *perspectives*.

As we think about perspectives, we can grow in appreciating wonder

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4. Ibid., chap. 6.

of who God is. We can grow in praising him and standing in awe of him. That is the goal. Such praise is exemplified in many passages of the Bible:

> Praise the Lord!
> Praise God in his sanctuary;
>   praise him in his mighty heavens!
> Praise him for his mighty deeds;
>   praise him according to his excellent greatness! (Ps. 150:1–2)

> Worthy are you, our Lord and God,
>   to receive glory and honor and power,
> for you created all things,
>   and by your will they existed and were created. (Rev. 4:11)

God has given us many works in creation, providence, and redemption for which we can lift our voices in praise. The gift of perspectives can be included in the list.

Key Terms

adoption[5]
application of redemption
God's speech (God's word)
perspective
prayer
presence (of God)
salvation
Trinity

Study Questions

1. In what ways do we see God's Trinitarian character reflected in his works? Consider aspects of redemption in particular.
2. Why is the Trinity important?
3. How can the biblical teaching about the Trinity be briefly summarized?

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5. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

4. How should we respond to the revelation of God in his Trinitarian character?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. "Backgrounds to My Thought." In *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes, 9–30. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009. A survey of the backgrounds that influenced the thought of John Frame, including the backgrounds for his use of perspectives.

———. "A Primer on Perspectivalism." 2008. http://www.frame -poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/. Republished in *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014. A brief summary of the meaning and use of perspectives, such as those that occur in the works of John M. Frame and Vern S. Poythress.

———. *Theology in Three Dimensions: A Guide to Triperspectivalism and Its Significance*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017. An expanded explanation of triperspectivalism, with a discussion of its implications.

Poythress, Vern S. "Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith." In *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes, 173–200. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009. http://frame-poythress.org/multiperspectivalism-and-the -reformed-faith/. A brief summary of the use of perspectives and the history of their development, together with a discussion of how their use is related to the Reformed faith, which is held by John Frame and Vern Poythress.

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Sanders, Fred. *The Deep Things of God: How the Trinity Changes Everything*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010. An exploration of how the Trinity is discussed and presupposed in the piety and practice as well as the theology of evangelicals.

PART 1

WHAT ARE PERSPECTIVES?

WE EXPLAIN PERSPECTIVES and then consider three kinds: spatial perspectives, personal perspectives, and thematic perspectives. A spatial perspective is a view of a visible scene from a particular vantage point in space. A personal perspective is the view that an individual person has concerning the world or some subject. A thematic perspective is a temporary thematic starting point for exploring a subject matter, with the hope of discovering more and growing in truth.

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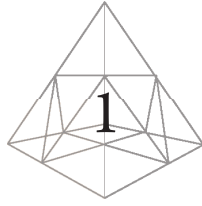
The Mystery of Perspectives

WHAT IS A *PERSPECTIVE*? We will address that question in the next few chapters. In one sense, the idea of using a perspective is fairly simple. You observe a physical object from a new angle. If you do, you may notice something that you did not notice before. The same principle applies to studying a particular subject matter, such as politics or music or the family. You can sometimes learn things by asking new kinds of questions about a subject, or looking at it using a new theme.

The Mystery of God

It would be simple if we could just leave it at that. But mysteries open up if we ask why human beings can use multiple perspectives, and why they are useful. Ultimately, the chain of *why* questions goes back to God. He created us. He made us with these capabilities. This pathway leads to still wider questions: who is God, and why did he create us the way he did?

According to the Bible, God is *Trinitarian*. He is one God in three persons. What significance might the Trinity have for understanding *perspectives*? Over the years, John Frame and I have employed groups of three perspectives. Is the number *three* significant? Is it related to the Trinity?

A Triad of Perspectives

Let us take an example. John Frame explains God's lordship by using three perspectives or ways of looking at lordship: *authority*, *control*, and *presence*.[1] Let us consider these three, one at a time. First, God exercises

1. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and

authority over us, and we are responsible to him to live in accordance with his instruction and his righteousness. Second, as Lord over all, God *controls* the world and all human agents within it. Third, God is *present* all over the world, and every human being lives in his presence. All three of these truths about God are practical. As human beings, we should respond to God by acknowledging his authority, by experiencing and submitting to his control, and by enjoying his presence.

So we have three terms: *authority*, *control*, and *presence*. Why three rather than two or four? We may note that these three all function together to expound one coherent body of truth about God's lordship. There is only *one* Lord; at the same time, there are these three perspectives for appreciating his lordship. It is one in three. Is that just an accident?

John Frame and I have from time to time pointed out relationships between a triad of perspectives and the three persons in God. Frame observes that God the Father claims *authority* over all. God through his Son *controls* the world. Through Jesus the Son we experience the power of God, saving us from our sins. And God is *present* everywhere especially through the Holy Spirit, who comes to dwell in those who believe in Christ the Savior.[2]

So what is the relationship between the Trinitarian character of God and the triad of perspectives on lordship? Does the triad somehow *derive* from the Trinity? If so, how? And would the same be true for other triads? How could more than one triad derive in the same way from the same source?[3]

The Importance of the Trinity

People who have interacted with John Frame and me over the years have sometimes wondered about these questions. I propose, then, to

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Reformed, 1987), 15–18; John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002).

2. Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 727; John M. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism," 2008, http://www.frame-poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/, republished in John Frame's *Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014), 1–18.

3. It is interesting that Saint Augustine explores analogies in creation that he finds dimly reflecting the Trinitarian character of God (Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 1st ser., ed. Philip Schaff [London: T&T Clark, 1980], 17–228). At the same time, Augustine indicates that none of these analogies or illustrations fully captures the nature of God; all of them have limitations. The same holds for the analogies that we explore.

tackle the questions head-on. Let us look at perspectives and explore their relation to the Trinity.[4] This process is potentially valuable, because we can grow in knowing God. We can grow in knowing the Trinity. God made us with the purpose that we would know him. So knowing him is of vital importance for us as creatures. It is also of vital importance for our salvation. We need God to rescue us from sin and rebellion. One aspect of that rescue process is that we come to know him (John 17:3). We come to know him as the Trinitarian God.

The Challenge of the Trinity

But before we plunge into our task, we need a few explanations. To reflect directly on the nature of perspectives is a deep challenge. Why? We find ourselves asking about God. God is the central mystery of the Christian faith. We adore him without completely understanding him.

To be sure, God does give us understanding. God reveals himself in the world that he has made, according to Romans 1:18–23:

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in *the things that have been made*. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

God's revelation through the creation is called *general revelation*. It leaves human beings "without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). But it does not lead human beings to spiritual health, because they "suppress the truth" (v. 18). Sin has corrupted human beings in every aspect of their lives. The corruption extends to the mind as well. Our reason is not normal,

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4. Timothy E. Miller's book has already undertaken a similar exploration (Miller, *The Triune God of Unity in Diversity: An Analysis of Perspectivalism, the Trinitarian Theological Method of John Frame and Vern Poythress* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017]).

but fallen and corrupted by sin. One effect is that we suppress the truth. We need the *special revelation* of the Bible to enlighten us. We also need Christ's work of salvation, accomplished in his crucifixion and resurrection from the dead, in order to reconcile us to God. And we need the Holy Spirit to come and apply the work of Christ to our hearts and lives. We need God in the work of all three persons of the Trinity.

We should acknowledge that there are two kinds of people in the world today. There are those who remain in their fallen and sinful condition, with corrupted minds. And then there are those who have been saved by Christ and reconciled to God. They have been renewed in the mind through the work of the Spirit of Christ in them. Yet as long as they are in this life, their renewal is partial: they fall into sins, including sins due to corruption in the mind. This book is imperfect and fallible, partly because of the remaining effects of sin.

When God gives us new spiritual birth through the Holy Spirit, we are changed people. We begin to know God in the way that we should, through Christ, who shows us who God is (John 3:3, 5; 14:9; 17:3). We know God, I say. We know him truly and genuinely and personally. But we do not *become* God. God is infinite. God's knowledge is infinite. And his knowledge of *himself* is infinite. God in his Trinitarian character is infinite. God is unique, so that nothing that God made is completely like him.

God is not mysterious to himself, but he is mysterious to us, because our knowledge is always less than his and always derivative from his. Therefore, the Trinity is mysterious to us. We can talk about and appreciate what God tells us about the Trinity through the Bible, but we never *master* God or *master* what he says.

So we cannot do what some people might like to do, that is, to explain the Trinity. No human being can "explain" God so as to sweep away the mystery. For the same reason, we cannot "explain" the relationship of the Trinity to one of the triads of perspectives.

So what might we do? Not much, in comparison with the infinity of God. Nothing at all, unless Christ empowers us: "apart from me [Christ] you can do *nothing*" (John 15:5). As God helps us, we are going to try to look at perspectives and their relation to the Trinity. But we must remember that all our discussion is taking only a few steps in pointing to God in his unfathomable infinity. We must recognize the limitations

in human knowledge—limitations made worse by the corruptions from sin.

Throughout our discussion, I will be incorporating John Frame's ideas. John Frame and I have influenced each other over the course of years, so that sometimes it is not feasible to sort out every distinct influence.[5] Both of us are comfortable using some of the same perspectives, and we use them in similar ways.[6] John Frame's works further illustrate the topic of perspectives. In this book, I am attempting to venture at times beyond what the two of us have already said, and to make explicit some ways in which perspectives have their foundation in the Trinity.

Starting Points

This book attempts to be self-contained, so that people can read this book without having to read everything that John Frame and I have written over the years. Obviously, people can learn more about perspectives by observing how John Frame and I have used them in practice. That helps to fill in a lot of detailed texture concerning what we mean and how someone else could do the same thing. But here I am going to try to include fresh explanations, to avoid the problem of constantly referring to other sources.

At the same time, it is not feasible in this book to cover again the whole scope of biblical teaching—the whole of systematic theology. If you are not a follower of Christ, you need to start with finding out who God is, and who Christ is, by reading the Bible—particularly the four Gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. There are many additional resources to help you.[7] If you are a follower of Christ, I assume

5. John M. Frame, "Backgrounds to My Thought," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 23; Vern S. Poythress, "Multiperspectivalism and the Reformed Faith," in *Speaking the Truth in Love: The Theology of John M. Frame*, ed. John J. Hughes (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 182.

6. Timothy E. Miller found a source in which I said (in 1988), "I am in complete agreement with Frame" on perspectivalism (Miller, *The Triune God*, 30, quoting Vern S. Poythress, "God's Lordship in Interpretation," *Westminster Theological Journal* 50, 1 [Spring 1988]: 29n4). In his analysis of perspectivalism, Miller then announces that "we will freely quote from Poythress as well as Frame in defining perspectivalism." I think that his strategy is basically warranted, because Frame and I are indeed very close. But Miller also illumines some subtle "methodological differences" between Frame and me, at least with respect to emphasis and manner of speaking (Miller, *The Triune God*, 30).

7. Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (New York: Dutton,

that you know about the way of salvation through Christ. I will also assume that you know that the Bible is the Word of God and has a central role in instructing us in knowing God. You know also that God is the Trinitarian God, one God in three persons. We will start from there.

Knowing Truth

Given the possibilities for misunderstanding, it is important also to say something about truth. Some strands of postmodernist thought use the word *perspective* with a skeptical twist. They may say that everyone has his "perspective"; everyone has what he regards as "truth for him." But, according to these postmodernists, no one really knows. Allegedly, each of us is trapped within the limits of his context.

By contrast, when John Frame and I use the word *perspective*, it does not have this postmodernist twist. We radically disagree with postmodern skepticism and the way that it relativizes truth. We believe in absolute truth—the truth of God. As Frame says, perspectivalism "presupposes absolutism."[8]

God is the absolute standard for all truth. And he makes truth known to human beings through general and special revelation. Christ says that he is "the truth" (John 14:6). In our discussion of perspectives, we assume this framework of understanding. Rightly understood and rightly used, perspectives give us access to truth rather than keeping us away from truth.

Let us consider a simple comparison. A perspective is like a window in my living room, looking out on a garden. The garden represents the truth. In using a perspective, I actually encounter, see, and appreciate truth. I look *through the perspective* at the truth. I really do see the truth—I see the garden. For postmodernist skepticism, on the other hand, a "perspective" is like a rectangular screen that has a picture of a garden on it. The skeptic thinks there is no way to tell what he is really looking at. Is the picture a picture of the garden behind the screen, seen through a more or less transparent screen? Or is the garden seen through a distorting medium, which has altered its colors and shapes? Or is the picture projected onto the screen by a hidden light source? Or is the

2008); J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993).
    8. Frame, "A Primer on Perspectivalism."

picture produced by the screen itself, like a flat-panel TV screen? Or is the picture projected by the mind of the viewer, as in a dream?

The fundamental difference between the skeptic and me is that I believe in and know the God described in Scripture. I understand that God has produced the garden and me and the window and their relations to one another, in such a way that all aspects work together to give me the blessing of his presence and the presence of truth that originated from him. I can go to another window and see the same garden. Through a window, I can access truths about the garden and know things about the garden.

Dependent Ideas

We need also to be aware that some of our knowledge is solid, but other ideas are tentative. Our knowledge of God through Christ is solid: "This is eternal life, that they [disciples] know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (John 17:3). We know that God is who he is, and that he is Trinitarian, because he has clearly taught us in the Bible.

But not everything that we try to derive from the Bible is equally clear or equally solid. The Bible does not *explicitly* talk about perspectives. We can try to make inferences from what the Bible says or implies indirectly. But when we do it, the results remain dependent on the clearer teachings of the Bible.

Key Terms

authority[9]
control
general revelation
knowledge of God
lordship
new birth
perspective
postmodern skepticism
presence
special revelation

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9. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What relation does John Frame think exists between the persons of the Trinity and the triad for lordship, consisting in authority, control, and presence?
2. What are the limitations in our knowledge of God? How does our knowledge of God relate to God's knowledge of himself?
3. In what sense do non-Christians know God?
4. How do we differentiate between what we know with confidence and what is less certain? Why is this distinction significant for the church and for a Christian believer's relations to other people?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987. Pp. 15–18. An explanation of the triad of perspectives on lordship: authority, control, and presence.

———. "A Primer on Perspectivalism." 2008. http://www.frame -poythress.org/a-primer-on-perspectivalism/. Republished in *John Frame's Selected Shorter Writings, Volume 1*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2014. Here is contained a brief explanation of the triad of perspectives on lordship: authority, control, and presence.

2

Spatial Perspectives

EVENTUALLY, WE ARE going to relate perspectives to the nature of the Trinity. But we will not start with a discussion about the Trinity itself. We will get there gradually. It is easier if we start with ordinary observations. Rather than moving directly to a discussion of perspectives in theology, let us start more simply with the question, "What is a *perspective*?" Simply put, a *perspective* is *a view from somewhere*. But the word *perspective* applies to more than one *kind* of "view" and more than one kind of "somewhere." So in this and the following two chapters, we consider three kinds of perspectives. We will mostly illustrate these kinds of perspectives from ordinary life. We will apply our insights to theology later on, beginning in part 3 of this book.

Understanding a Perspective

As the first of three kinds of perspectives, we consider *spatial perspectives*. A spatial perspective is a view of a visible scene from a particular position.

Let us consider an example. Let us suppose that Carol has a chair in front of her. She can move around and look at the chair from several locations. Each time she relocates, she obtains a new spatial *perspective* on the chair. She can look at it from directly above it. She can look at it from directly in front of it. She can look at it from either side. She can look at it from a position that is both above it and in front of it, or from above and behind it, or halfway between being in front and being to the left side of it. Small changes in her position tend to produce only small changes in what she sees. But the major shifts, such as a shift from being above to being in front, may result in major changes in what parts of the chair she sees, and what exact shapes the parts present to her eyes.

Principles about Spatial Perspectives

We experience these kinds of changes all the time, and we get so used to them that we stop paying attention. But when we pay attention once more, we can see several notable features about our experience.

1. It is the same chair. Of course, we can focus on our changes in experience as we move around the chair. We could talk about "chair experiences" or "chair views" that are distinguishable in their sensory input. But often we are more focally aware of the sameness of the chair as we change positions.

2. Each perspective gives us a distinct chair-experience in the visible details. When we reflect, we easily become aware of several perspectives. We can distinguish them by both the location of the viewer and the detailed texture of what the viewer sees from his location.

3. What stands out about the chair, and what is most easily noticeable, depends on our spatial perspective. Moreover, some details are easier to notice from some perspectives than others. Perhaps we notice a place on one side where there is a scratch. Or we notice a crack in one of the legs of the chair, or a knot in the wood on one side of the back of the chair.

4. What we see depends on the environment as well as the chair. What we see in detail depends on the light that is falling on the chair. We understand that it is the same chair no matter what lighting it currently enjoys.

5. Given time, we can integrate information obtained from a variety of perspectives. Our total knowledge of the chair is then present in our minds or our memories even though we are currently looking at the chair from only one location.

6. We can infer or remember what the chair looked like from perspectives other than the current one. We can picture from the current perspective the effects of the other perspectives.

7. Much about the chair may be tentatively inferred by using only one perspective. Perhaps one of the legs is hidden from us by the seat of the chair. But we instinctively infer that it probably looks like the legs that are visible to us. Those legs are visible only on the side that is closest to us. But we infer that each leg has a back side as well. Suppose that the chair Carol is looking at has round legs, more or less the shape of a cylinder. From the rounded character of the visible part of the legs, she infers that the back side of each leg is round as well.

Perspectives on a Diamond

Consider next the spatial perspectives on a well-cut diamond. We can see through a diamond. By looking carefully, we can see the facet of the diamond at which we are looking, and see *through* the facet into the whole of the diamond and its other facets. We may be able to see every facet of the diamond refracted or reflected in some way through one facet.

If we could see everything in the diamond through one facet, in theory we would not need any other spatial perspective in order to know everything about how the diamond looks from every other perspective. But of course, it would take a lot of work to infer the other perspectives. Points 3 and 7 above, which we developed using the chair, would have to be modified for a diamond because the backward-facing facets of the diamond that would be concealed in an opaque object are indirectly accessible through one forward-facing facet. But much about the use of perspectives is similar, whether applied to a chair or to a diamond. The relative accessibility or prominence of some feature changes as we change our spatial perspective.

In addition, some perspectives are not so useful. If we are too far away from the chair, or are in a different room, or have our backs turned toward the chair, we cannot learn much about the chair with that spatial perspective. Sometimes it may take a search to find a perspective that is more revealing.

Praising God for Perspectives

Even when we consider perspectives in ordinary ways, we are examining God's world and the way in which he has created us. When we look at how God made us, we find that we have capabilities to understand and use perspectives. God in his marvelous wisdom has given us our capabilities and the ways in which we interact with the world. God has made a marvelous world. We are marvelous creatures. And these marvels reflect the final marvel of God himself, who is supremely marvelous. All the marvels within this world should stimulate our praise for God, who made the world and us and who governs it according to his marvelous wisdom.

Key Terms

inference
seeing through
spatial perspective[1]
total knowledge
view

Study Questions

1. What is a spatial perspective?
2. How might spatial perspectives differ from perspectives of other kinds?
3. How do distinct spatial perspectives differ from and also cohere with one another?
4. What do we learn about knowledge by considering spatial perspectives?
5. How does memory enter into the appreciation of multiple perspectives?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. "An Information-Based Semiotic Analysis of Theories concerning Theories." *Semiotica* 2013, 193 (February 2013): 83–99, esp. § 4. http://frame-poythress.org/an-information -based-semiotic-analysis-of-theories-concerning-theories/. This may be challenging reading, but section 4 contains a perspectival examination of how we treat space.

———. "Semiotic Analysis of the Observer in Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, and a Possible Theory of Everything." *Semiotica* 2015, 205 (2015): 149–67, esp. §§ 4–5. http://frame-poythress .org/semiotic-analysis-of-the-observer/. More advanced reading about space.

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1. The key term in **bold** is defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

3

Personal Perspectives

NEXT, LET US consider *personal perspectives*. A personal perspective[1] is the viewpoint that a particular person has concerning the world or whatever topic is being discussed. Here is where differences among persons become visible.

Differences among Persons

Differences may be major or minor. Sue's favorite color is red, while Carol's favorite color is green. So Sue and Carol have different personal perspectives on color preference. Differences may include differences in knowledge. Sue thinks that the chair she is sitting on is a perfectly good chair. Carol, from her angle, can see that one of the legs looks like it might break. Sue and Carol have differing personal perspectives about the structural perfection of the chair.

Sue has an engineering background, so that if she knew about the weak leg, she might still be able to infer that the chair is held up pretty well by reinforcing cross-links. Carol does not have such a background, and is not accustomed to thinking about the details of what goes into making chairs sturdy or unstable. So Sue and Carol have differing personal perspectives on how to analyze the sturdiness of the chair.

Differences in personal perspective may include differences in moral and religious views. Consider a moral issue. Sue thinks that sexual union outside marriage (fornication) is wrong, while Carol thinks that it is morally neutral, as long as there is mutual consent. It is up to each person to do whatever he or she is most comfortable with. So they have

1. Timothy E. Miller uses the same terminology (*The Triune God of Unity in Diversity: An Analysis of Perspectivalism, the Trinitarian Theological Method of John Frame and Vern Poythress* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017], 33–34).

differing personal perspectives about the morality of fornication. They also differ in their religious views. Sue thinks that God exists, while Carol thinks that nature is all that there is.

We can see that the idea of a personal perspective is in some ways analogous to the idea of a spatial perspective. Sue and Carol differ in their spatial locations, so that Carol notices the weak leg on Sue's chair, but Sue does not. The difference in spatial location is analogous in some ways to other kinds of differences between Sue and Carol. In our own thinking, we can travel from being aware of a difference in spatial perspective to being aware of a difference in *knowledge*. For instance, we see that Carol's spatial perspective also affects her knowledge. Her location gives her a key bit of knowledge about the chair that Sue does not have.

By analogy, we can also travel from thinking about spatial perspectives to thinking about other sources of differences in knowledge and commitments. Sue and Carol differ in knowledge about engineering, not because of a mere temporary difference in spatial location, but because Sue spent time in a location where an engineering program was being offered. But it was not merely a matter of time and spatial location. Sue picked up some extra knowledge while she was at a particular location. What makes Sue differ is not space in itself, but "environment" in a broader sense, an environment of learning and growth in knowledge. And in the end, the environment includes Sue's own mind and memory, which supply her with a kind of "mental location" differing from Carol's.

Answering Postmodern Skepticism

The differences between Sue's and Carol's personal perspectives offer one main starting point for postmodern skeptics. An extreme skeptic might claim that Sue's and Carol's personal perspectives are equally valid. Both people have an equal personal "right" to their views, and all we can do is to try to respect each person's viewpoint as "valid." But most postmodern skeptics would not go quite that far when it comes to the weak leg in Sue's chair. Sue does not think it is weak. But she is capable of finding out. All Carol has to do is to point it out. Sue can position herself roughly where Carol was and look in the direction that Carol was looking. There is a lesson from this. Personal perspectives are not airtight prisons, allowing no interaction between persons. Sue can learn from Carol.

We can also observe that there actually is a truth about the chair. The chair leg is in fact weak. Carol is right and Sue is wrong. Whether or not either of them knows the situation adequately, God knows. His knowledge is the ultimate standard for truth.

What about Sue's preference for red? That case, too, is one in which Sue and Carol can learn from each other. But the learning takes a different form. Carol can find out what Sue's preference is. And Carol can learn to take it into account if she is about to buy a present for Sue. Such differences in preference do not bother most of us, because we understand the differences for what they are. They are part of the fascination of how God created each of us to be a distinct person, different from everyone else.

The more painful difficulties come with differences in moral and religious views. Postmodernist skeptics may "give up" on these differences, and consider them to be only differences in preference, like the difference between preferring red or green. These skeptics give up partly because it does not seem to them that there is any way of settling moral and religious differences. On this subject they themselves have a viewpoint, a personal perspective, namely, that moral differences are merely subjective personal preferences.

But their personal perspective has left God out of the account. God does exist; he is who he is, regardless of what various religions may say. And moral standards do exist, based on God's character and on his instruction to human beings in the Bible. The standards exist, regardless of what people may prefer in their own minds and regardless of what they may *say* about moral standards. Moreover, God has made human beings so that they have a moral sensitivity and a sense of right and wrong, though this sense gets twisted because of sin. Everyone does know right from wrong, but also twists and conceals the truth in order to get a selfish advantage (see Rom. 1:32).

Learning from One Another

The example with the weak chair leg gives us a hint about the possibility for learning. Each of us is finite. Each of us has finite experience in the past. Each of us has finite learning in the past. For example, Sue learned engineering. Perhaps Carol learned French literature. No one human person knows the full extent of human knowledge. So we have

books and educational institutions and Internet resources, and situations in which Sue can learn from Carol, and Carol from Sue.

God has to be brought into the picture as well. God is personal. Human beings can have personal relations with God as well as with other human beings. God speaks to us through his Word, in the Bible.[2] We can learn from him. And because of our propensity to sin, we had *better* learn from him, or we will make *ourselves* the final object of our allegiance. Each of us makes himself into a little god. It takes God to unravel all the tangles that sin has made in our notions of morality and our notions of religion.

At a fundamental level, there are two kinds of human beings—those whom God has saved and reconciled to himself through Christ, and those who are not saved. The two kinds of people have two different orientations in their hearts. Those who are saved have had their hearts renewed, and this renewal gives them a new perspective on God and on the whole world (2 Cor. 5:16–17). But within this life, the renewal is not yet complete.

It is difficult to straighten out our knowledge not only because of individual sin, but because of the sins of other people. We cannot thoroughly trust another human being to tell us the truth all the time, because human beings are sinful. Sometimes they deliberately lie. Sometimes they tell us lies or half-truths that they themselves believe.

To put it in another way, sin has corporate effects. Whole cultures can go astray and encourage one another in some particular sin. Ancient Greek culture had some admirable aspects, but it also had human slavery. And this slavery was an accepted fact of life even among "enlightened" philosophers of the Greeks. They could not see beyond the propaganda of their culture. The same, of course, holds for us. Christian believers have the Bible to enable them to criticize surrounding cultural assumptions, but sometimes—too often—they fall victim nevertheless.

Much more could be said about the value of personal interaction

2. I do not wish to ignore the difficulty that human beings face because of the conflicting claims of multiple religions. It would take us far afield to thoroughly defend the truth of the Bible and the counterfeit character of claims from other religions. The presuppositional apologetics of Cornelius Van Til is relevant (Cornelius Van Til, *The Defense of the Faith*, ed. K. Scott Oliphint, 4th ed. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008]; see also John M. Frame, *Apologetics: A Justification of Christian Belief*, 2nd ed. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2015]).

and distinct personal perspectives in learning. But we should pass on. Our purpose is not so much to understand every aspect of learning, but to reflect on the nature of the perspectives that contribute to learning.

Principles about Personal Perspectives

The principles that we might draw up for personal perspectives are similar to what we observed in the previous chapter for spatial perspectives. If we are dealing with Sue's and Carol's personal perspectives on a chair, one of the main differences may be generated by the difference in spatial location between Sue and Carol. That kind of difference involves two distinct people, rather than two successive spatial locations for a single individual. But in many ways, the differences between Sue's and Carol's spatial perspectives are akin to the differences between Sue's spatial perspective now and her perspective two minutes later when she positions herself where Carol once was. This kind of difference is comparatively easy to understand.

A more complex difference arises from the fact that Sue has learned engineering and Carol has not. The two persons bring to bear a different stock of knowledge and different skills in observation. In mainstream modern cultures heavily influenced by science, many people assume that science is a neutral common possession of educated people, so that it can enable us to decide confidently about the actual state of the chair. Morality and religion, on the other hand, are left to subjective preferences. But this common perception is itself influenced by corporate personal perspectives belonging to culture.

We cannot get into a full discussion here of all the cultural influences and the role of science. But science is done by people, and people have various biases, so that it may not always be simple to decide what is true in matters of science. Conversely, morality and religion have a final standard in God, so that issues that arise receive a definitive answer from God, rather than being merely matters of subjective preference. In science, morality, and religion alike, personal perspectives make a difference. Sometimes the differences are subtle, but sometimes they are monumental.

For the sake of simplicity, let us take a case in which there clearly is a dispute—namely, over the moral assessment of fornication. What do we say about Sue's and Carol's personal perspectives on fornication?

We can observe the same principles at work as we noticed concerning spatial perspectives. To illustrate the similarity, I will carry over much of the same wording used in the principles listed for spatial perspectives. But we need to introduce some modifications because of the problems with half-truths and sinful distortions of the truth that get entangled with personal perspectives.

1. It is the same fornication. That is, fornication is the same reality no matter who is looking at it. Relativists may, of course, deny that sameness. But when we bring God into the picture, we have good reasons for disputing the relativist version of fornication. The relativist version, which claims that the moral evaluation of fornication is *merely* a matter of personal preference, is itself part of a personal perspective. It is a personal perspective that contains a false view of fornication, and behind that a false view of God.

2. Each personal perspective gives us a distinct viewpoint on fornication. When we talk with Sue or Carol about fornication, we may become aware of two perspectives. We can distinguish them both by the moral and religious background of the person and by the detailed texture of how the person evaluates fornication.

3. In interpreting fornication, what stands out, and what is most easily noticeable, depends on one's personal perspective. Some details are easier to notice from some perspectives than others. Sue, who is against fornication, may find herself becoming impatient as she listens to arguments that she has already heard before, arguments appealing to each person's right to self-fulfillment in whatever sexual experience suits the person. Carol, who thinks fornication is OK in principle, may not want to think about whether human sexuality has deeper significance beyond the moments of pleasure-seeking. What is its meaning if it has been designed by God?

4. What we see depends on the "environment" as well as the issue. We are influenced by heart attitudes and by culture. Sue sees the issue of fornication in terms of God's purposes for human sexuality, and in particular his prohibition of fornication. Carol thinks of fornication in terms of human freedom—the freedom of the individual to do what most pleases him or her.

5. Given time, we can integrate information obtained from a variety of perspectives. Our total knowledge of fornication is then present in

our minds or our memories even though we are currently looking at fornication from only one perspective. But with personal perspectives, we deal with cases having two incompatible perspectives. Sue and Carol cannot both be right.

Can their disagreement be harmonized by bringing in a *third* personal perspective from Barbara? Influenced by postmodern relativism, Barbara from her personal perspective says that what is "true" for Sue need not be "true" for Carol. Though superficially this relativistic perspective may sound friendly and "tolerant," it is actually intolerant of any contrary claim. Both Sue and Carol disagree with Barbara, because Sue thinks that fornication is wrong for *everyone* (and therefore that Carol is mistaken), while Carol thinks that in principle fornication is OK for everyone (and therefore that Sue is mistaken).

In addition, Barbara is in danger of disagreeing even with herself. Would she admit that her personal perspective about relativizing truth is "true" for her but not for Sue? If so, she has no leverage to use to change Sue's mind. She has admitted that Sue's position is just as valid as her own. If not, she is intolerantly privileging her own personal perspective, contrary to her alleged love of tolerance.

Moreover, God provides the ultimate standard for moral judgments. This means that moral truth is real, just as real as the law of gravity. We can illustrate with an extreme example. Suppose that Carol and Sue are standing on the observation deck of a tall building. Carol thinks that the law of gravity is subjective, and that each person is free to keep it or not. Sue thinks that the law of gravity is universally true. The truth in this case makes a difference. It would be disastrous for Carol to throw herself off the observation deck to show that gravity is merely subjective. Likewise, it would be disastrous for Barbara to advise Carol and Sue that each person's view of gravity is true for her. In a similar way, it is disastrous in the presence of God to ignore moral truth.

This situation with several distinct and mutually exclusive moral positions is different from what we can casually observe about spatial perspectives. Persons can be mistaken, and their mistakes and biases can at times be deep. The mistakes are not always obvious or innocent. Some mistakes arise from moral corruption, moral darkness in the heart, by which we flee from God. There is no easy or obvious remedy to these corruptions. The good news about salvation through Jesus Christ is the

only remedy. He said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

But there is one sense in which we can "integrate" incompatible personal viewpoints, namely, by understanding each viewpoint and noting the incompatibilities (as well as any points of partial agreement). We can still learn from others. We can understand someone else's point of view, and yet still not agree with it. But the degree to which we can learn is limited by human corruption.

6. We can infer or remember what fornication looked like from perspectives other than the one that we hold.

7. Much about fornication may be tentatively inferred by using only one personal perspective. But the inferences can radically go astray if our heart is corrupt.

Key Terms

human corruption
learning
morality
moral standards
personal perspective[3]
personal preferences
postmodern relativism
religion
science
sin
tolerance

Study Questions

1. What is a personal perspective?
2. What is the difference between a personal perspective and a spatial perspective? How are the two similar?
3. In general, how may two people's views about the same subject differ and yet have some overlap?
4. What can we learn about human communication from being aware of personal perspectives?

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3. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

5. When two people differ in their views and contradict each other, can they both be right?

6. How would you respond to someone who claims that what you say is "true for you" but not for him?

7. Discuss in what sense it is "tolerant" or "intolerant" to affirm that everyone's point of view is true for him. Does lack of agreement imply "hate"?

For Further Reading

Carson, D. A. *The Intolerance of Tolerance.* Reprint, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013. A critical exploration of the dangerous confusion in appeals to "tolerance."

Poythress, Vern S. *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987. Reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001. Pp. 9–11. Illustrations of personal perspectives.

4

Thematic Perspectives

THE THIRD KIND of perspective to consider is a *thematic perspective*.[1] A thematic perspective is a temporary thematic starting point for exploring some subject matter, with the hope of discovering more and growing in the truth. For example, we can examine the subject matter of the family from the perspective of economics or the perspective of love or the perspective of movements of the family members. Each of these perspectives has a key theme: economics or love or movement, respectively.

Prophet, King, and Priest

It is easiest to understand the idea of a thematic perspective by considering a particular biblical example. We consider a triad of perspectives: prophet, king, and priest.[2] But how do these function as *perspectives*?

Prophets, kings, and priests are people who hold three prominent kinds of offices in the Old Testament. We will start with offices, not perspectives. (See fig. 4.1.) The offices are significant, not only because of what prophets, kings, and priests do within the bounds of the Old Testament, but because the three offices all point forward to Christ. Hebrews 1:1–3 sets forth in a single passage how Christ fulfills all three offices:

> Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the *prophets*, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact

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1. Timothy E. Miller calls this "a *focal perspective*" (*The Triune God of Unity in Diversity: An Analysis of Perspectivalism, the Trinitarian Theological Method of John Frame and Vern Poythress* [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017], 34–36 [italics original]).
2. We will comment on the order of the list in chapter 15 and Appendix I.
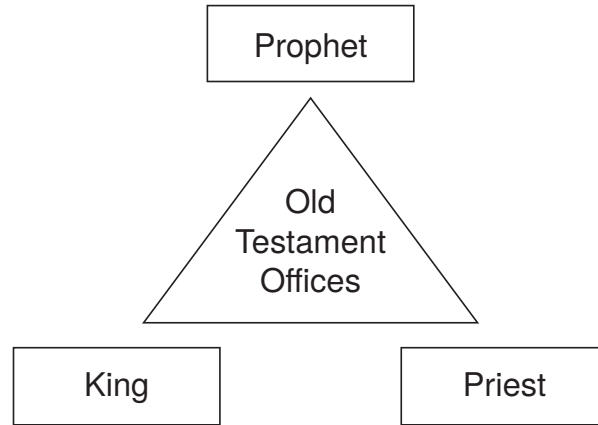
Fig. 4.1. Old Testament Offices: Prophet, King, and Priest

imprint of his nature, and he *upholds* the universe by the word of his power. After making *purification* for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

Hebrews 1:1 speaks explicitly about the Old Testament prophets. Verse 2 compares them to "his Son," through whom God "has spoken to us" climactically and finally. That is, Christ is the final Prophet. Verse 3 indicates his kingly authority, by saying that he "upholds the universe by the word of his power," and by using the expression "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high," which indicates his position of kingly authority. Verse 3 also speaks about his priestly work, by talking about "making purification for sins." Thus, Christ fulfills all three Old Testament offices. (See fig. 4.2.) These principles are confirmed elsewhere in the New Testament. For example, in Acts 3:22–26, Peter claims that Jesus is the final Prophet prophesied by Moses. Matthew 1:1–17 and 2:2 indicate that Jesus is the messianic King in the line of David. Hebrews 7–10 indicates that Jesus is the final Priest, superior to the priests in the line of Aaron found in the Old Testament.

Jesus' fulfillment of Old Testament offices has been noted in confessional statements, such as the Heidelberg Catechism:

Question 31. Why is he called *Christ*, that is, *Anointed*?

Answer. Because he is ordained of God the Father, and anointed with the Holy Ghost, to be our chief Prophet and Teacher, who fully reveals
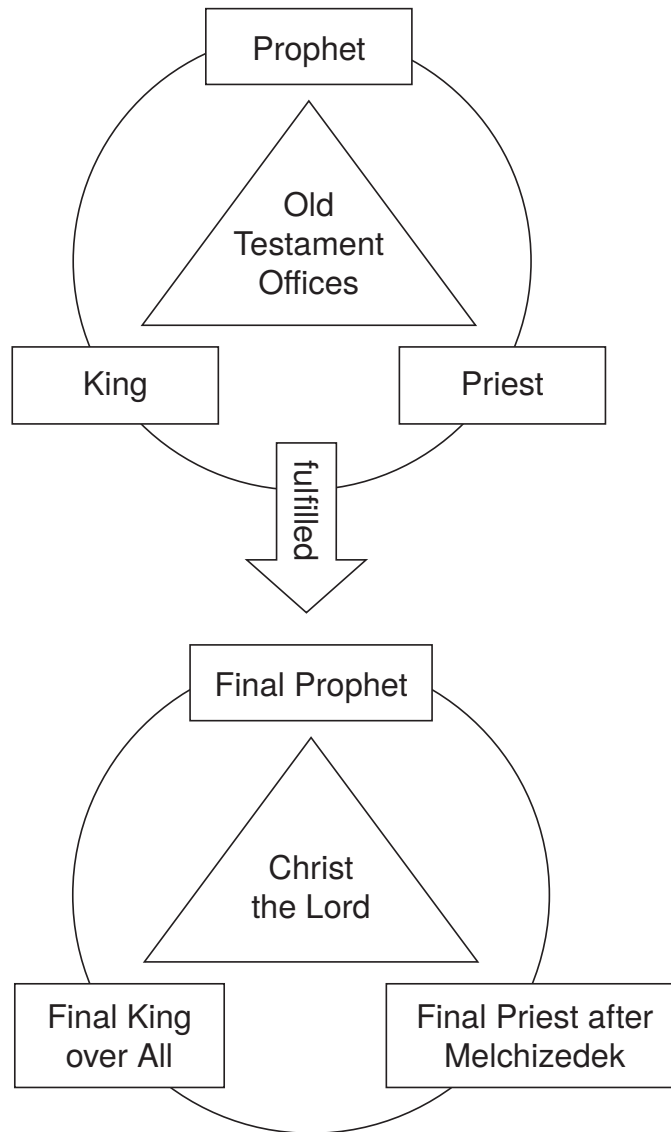
Fig. 4.2. Christ's Fulfilling the Three Old Testament Offices

to us the secret counsel and will of God concerning our redemption; and our only High Priest, who by the one sacrifice of his body has redeemed us, and ever liveth to make intercession for us with the Father; and our eternal King, who governs us by his Word and Spirit, and defends and preserves us in the redemption obtained for us.[3]

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3. *Heidelberg Catechism*, English translation from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes* (repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966), 3:317–18 (italics original). It is available online at http://reformed.org/documents/index.html?mainframe=http://reformed .org/documents/heidelberg.html. See also Westminster Confession of Faith 8.1; Westminster Larger Catechism questions 42–45.

In the Old Testament, the three offices were for the most part held by distinct persons. In the New Testament, the offices come together in one person, the person of Christ. But it is still possible to distinguish different *functions* that Christ performs. As a Prophet, he *speaks* on behalf of God. As a King, he *rules* with the righteousness of God. As a Priest, he *offers sacrifice, makes atonement* to God, and *intercedes* for his people.

So Christ works in three distinct ways, namely, in the offices of prophet, king, and priest. At the same time, he is one person. The New Testament and later confessions recognize a unity in all his redemptive work and proclaim that he is the one *Mediator* between God and man:

> For there is one God, and there is one *mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. (1 Tim. 2:5–6)

> Therefore he is the *mediator* of a new covenant. (Heb. 9:15)

The three offices come together in a complementary way, as Hebrews 1:1–3 recognizes when it puts them together in the person of Christ. We have three distinct offices, but one person exercising all three offices.

At this point, we are close to the idea of perspectives. The perspectives would be three perspectives on one Christ and on one work of Christ. But we are not quite there. We have to see that a broader principle is represented by each of the three Old Testament offices and by each of the three aspects of Christ's work, in which he fulfills the offices.

First of all, we can think again about the work of Christ. During his earthly life, he was a teacher. This teaching is an exercise of his *prophetic* office. He also worked miracles, which displayed his *kingly power*. In his crucifixion and death, he was both the *priest* and the sacrifice atoning for sins. So on an elementary level, we can distinguish the three offices.

Transition to Three Interlocking Themes

But Jesus' life shows deeper meaning. For example, he often accomplished his miracles by *speaking*. So these miracles also illustrate his prophetic speech. Conversely, his prophetic speech taught about the kingdom of God, and his speech was filled with authority and kingly power. So his prophetic speech turns out to display his kingship.

He pronounced forgiveness of sins to the paralytic (Matt. 9:1–7). Forgiveness from God comes through sacrifice, so this prophetic pronouncement also displays his work as Priest. His pronouncement of forgiveness anticipates his work of sacrifice on the cross. His work on the cross includes verbal communication that he gave on the cross. But more broadly, the cross itself *communicates* the nature of salvation, especially as it is later expounded by the apostles. So the cross serves prophetic as well as priestly purposes. And through the cross, Jesus triumphs over the satanic powers:

> This [the legal accusation] he set aside, nailing it to the cross. He disarmed the *rulers and authorities* and put them to open shame, by triumphing over them in him. (Col. 2:14–15)

By triumphing over evil powers, Jesus shows his *kingly* or ruling authority in the very context of his death.

We conclude, then, that we can expand our conception of the offices of prophet, king, and priest. We can distinguish these offices when we confine ourselves to the most obvious observations. But when we probe more deeply, we can also see that all of Jesus' actions belong together: he is the *one Mediator*. In an extended sense, a metaphorical sense, all of Jesus' life *speaks* about his work of reconciliation. All of it is *prophetic*. All his life shows an exercise of kingly power because he *is* the King, both as God and as Messiah. All his life exhibits his work in forgiveness and reconciliation to God—all of it is priestly, in an extended sense.

Themes as Perspectives

When we view all of Jesus' life as prophetic, we are using the theme of prophet as a *perspective* on all of Jesus' life. In doing so, we have temporarily expanded the scope of what we consider *prophetic*. But we still have a distinct *theme*, namely, the theme of prophetic speech, broadly understood. If we are careful, we are not introducing any confusion here. We can still tell that there is a difference in texture between a narrow focus and a broad one. We use a narrow focus when we consider the Old Testament office of prophet. We broaden the focus when we use the idea of prophet as a window or lens for looking at everything in Jesus' life. (See fig. 4.3.)

Prophet

as theme in the
Old Testament

perspectival
expansion

Prophetic Perspective

on all of Christ's work
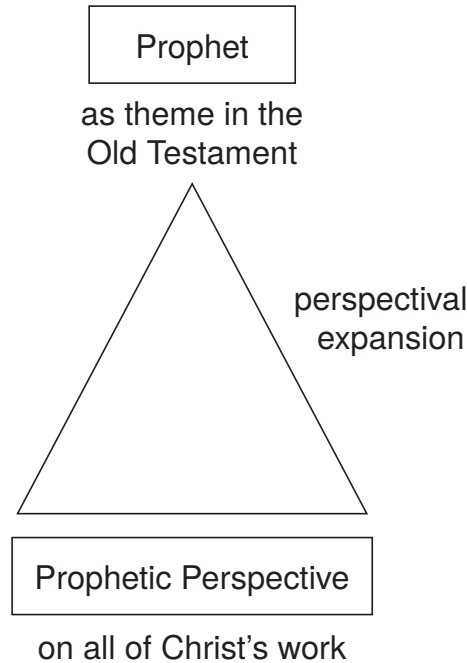
Fig. 4.3. From the Theme of Prophet to the Prophetic Perspective

The Old Testament prophets remain what they always were. And yet we also understand more deeply why God raised up prophets. He wanted us—those of us who live in the "last days" mentioned in Hebrews 1:2—to appreciate a relationship of analogy between the narrow office and the broader principle of God's *speaking* through everything in the life of Christ.

We can make similar observations about king and priest. On the one hand, we have the Old Testament office of king. On the other hand, we have everything that comes into view when we expand the idea of kingship to include every exercise of divine power among human beings through Christ. (See fig. 4.4.) And so it is also with priest. (See fig. 4.5.)

Let us now return to the *prophetic perspective*. We can further expand this perspective by using it not only to look at the whole of Christ's work on earth, but also to look at the preparation for that work in the Old Testament. For the office of prophet, the broader principle for both the Old Testament and the New is that of speaking. God speaks to himself in the communication among the persons of the Trinity. When he created man, he undertook to speak to human beings, from Genesis 1:28–30 onward. The Bible shows that he spoke in verbal communication to individuals such as Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses.

King

as theme in the
Old Testament

perspectival
expansion

Kingly Perspective

on all of Christ's work
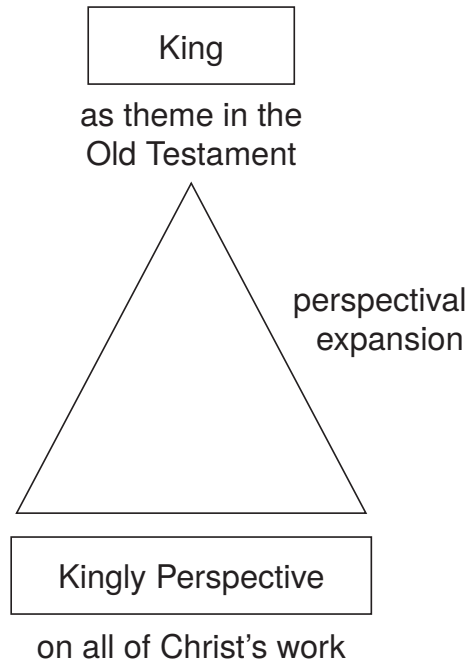
Fig. 4.4. From the Theme of Kingship to the Kingly Perspective

Priest

as theme in the
Old Testament

perspectival
expansion

Priestly Perspective

on all of Christ's work
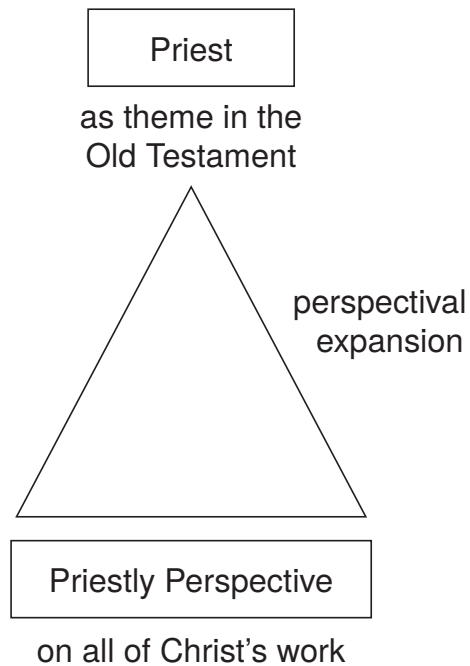
Fig. 4.5. From the Theme of Priest to the Priestly Perspective

But in a broader sense, his miracles and his providential works "speak" about who he is:

> The heavens *declare* the glory of God,
>   and the sky above *proclaims* his handiwork.
> Day to day pours out *speech*,
>   and night to night *reveals knowledge*. (Ps. 19:1–2)

So we can use a prophetic perspective on all the works of God, and see all his works as "speaking" about him.

From the fall onward, human beings are guilty sinners. They would be destroyed by the holiness of God's speech to them if it were not for the intervention of a mediator. Therefore, all the way through the Old Testament the mediation of Christ is being presupposed, even though Christ has not yet come to earth and accomplished his work. Mysteriously, God reckons the benefits of Christ's work backward into the Old Testament. Animal sacrifices and prophetic promises minister these benefits to the people. Otherwise, no one could be saved! So God's *speech* to sinful people presupposes priestly sacrifice and mediation to overcome guilt and death. It also presupposes kingly power at work, because God's word has power to bring about what he says. So now, having started with the prophetic perspective, focusing on speech, we see that God is exerting kingly power and giving priestly forgiveness for sin.

Next, let us employ the *kingly* perspective. Consider God's kingly rule throughout history. God rules all things:

> The Lord has established his *throne* in the heavens,
>   and his kingdom *rules* over *all*. (Ps. 103:19)

So the kingly perspective is a perspective on all of God's work. It is all a work in which he is *ruling*.

But starting with the kingly perspective, we can also note the presence of a prophetic perspective. God rules by *speaking,* as Hebrews 1:3 reminds us: "he upholds the universe by the *word* of his power." His rule includes gifts graciously given to people who do not deserve them. So his rule presupposes grace, obtained through priestly mediation. In

fact, Christ the Son of the Father is present in speaking and ruling all through the Old Testament, even before his incarnation. The incarnation is a wonderful and unique event, once in history. But its benefits, together with the benefits of the life and death and resurrection of Christ, must already be mysteriously in operation through the course of Old Testament history, in order that people may not be immediately destroyed because of their sins.

In fact, then, the speaking and ruling and priestly mediation from God take place together throughout the Old Testament. Priestly mediation is mediation of the *presence* of God; it provides *communion* with God. God's presence comes in both blessing and curse. The curse is the inevitable outcome of the fall of man into sin. Blessing comes, in spite of human guilt, because Christ bore guilt and sin on the cross.

Speaking and ruling and the presence of God go together. Each implies the other two. Each one—speaking, ruling, and being present—characterizes all of God's interaction with human beings, and indeed with creation as a whole. Each is a *perspective* on a whole. Each is also a *perspective* on the other two. But we can still distinguish the three themes, namely, prophetic speech, kingly rule, and priestly presence in communion. They are like three "windows" on God's actions toward us.

Each perspective functions like a window through which we not only see the whole of God's interaction with creation, but also see the other two perspectives with deepened understanding. For example, it helps to understand that all of God's speech displays kingly authority and priestly presence. All of God's rule over us displays the wisdom of his speech and the blessing (and sometimes curse) of his presence. (See fig. 4.6.)

Thematic Perspectives in General

The triad of prophet, king, and priest is a triad of Old Testament offices. And from there, when we expand our conception, we obtain three thematic *perspectives*, namely, the prophetic, kingly, and priestly perspectives. They are *thematic* perspectives because they start from a specific theme—say the theme of prophet. They are *perspectives* because they function like a window to look out on the whole landscape—in this case, the "landscape" of God's work throughout history. They are useful because we can grow in understanding things about prophecy and kingship and priesthood as we appreciate how these specific offices fit

Prophet

Old
Testament
Offices

King

Priest

fulfillment

Final Prophet

Christ
the Lord

Final King
over All

Final Priest

as windows

Prophetic Perspective: Speaking

Perspectives

Kingly Perspective:
Ruling

Priestly Perspective:
Presenting; Communion;
Blessing and Cursing
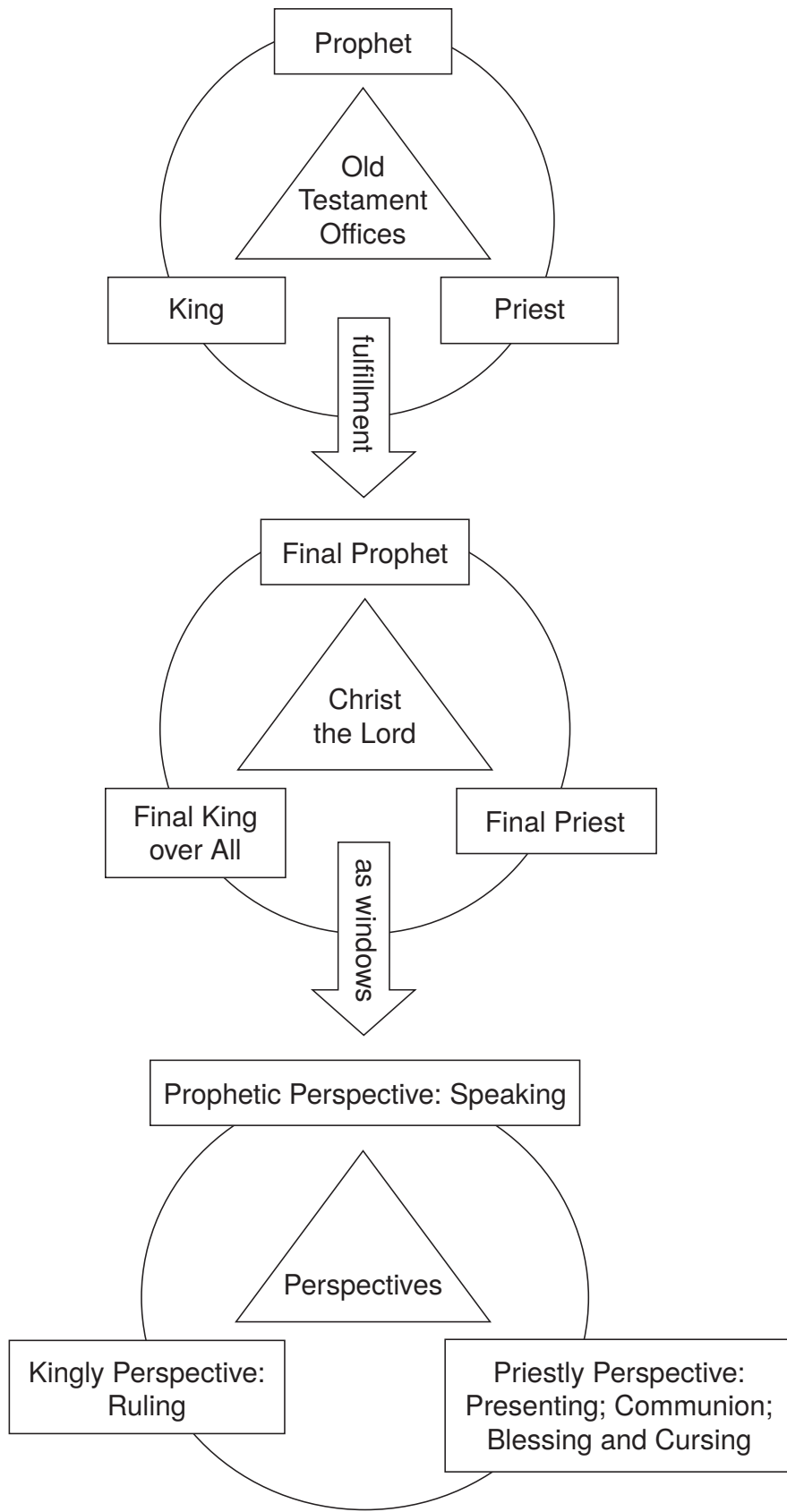
Fig. 4.6. Offices Expanded to Perspectives on Christ's Work

into God's overall plan. And we see more about the significance of each one when we use the other two perspectivally in our process of growth.

The same is true with respect to other themes. We can pick a theme in the Bible, whether large or small. It could be the theme of God's goodness (a large, extended theme) or the theme of olive oil (a small theme). And then we can ask ourselves how that theme can be expanded into a perspective, a window through which we attempt to notice relationships within the unified plan of God.[4] Of course, our own understanding is always fallible. But as we keep returning to Scripture and asking more questions, we can grow in understanding.

What happens when we start with the theme of God's goodness? God's goodness is displayed directly or indirectly on every page of Scripture. And human goodness and kindness should reflect God's goodness. So God's goodness becomes a perspective on all the Bible.

Olive oil is a small theme, and therefore less promising. But we may observe that in connection with the ceremony of anointing, oil is sometimes used as a symbol for the Holy Spirit (Isa. 61:1). The Holy Spirit is given to Jesus in his ministry, empowering him (Luke 4:18). We can use the power of the Holy Spirit as a perspective on all of God's work. So oil *as a symbol* can become a perspective on the whole of God's work.

The same is true in principle even when we take a theme that we pick up from general revelation rather than special revelation. We must recognize that general revelation needs special revelation—not to mention the inward work of the Holy Spirit—to be properly understood. But God rules the whole world. So his purposes are everywhere expressed, even though there is always mystery in our human understanding.

We should be admiring God for his wisdom and praising him for the many ways in which he has revealed himself in the world and the ways that he gives us to grow in knowing him.

Principles for Thematic Perspectives

We can summarize what we have found about thematic perspectives using the list we have drawn up in the preceding two chapters, but modifying the wording to describe thematic perspectives. For simplicity,

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4. Vern S. Poythress, *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987; repr., Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001).

we consider what happens when we use the prophetic, kingly, and priestly perspectives to analyze the healing of the paralytic, described in Matthew 9:1–7.

1. It is the same healing. That is, Jesus' healing of the paralytic is the same reality no matter who is looking at it.

2. Each thematic perspective gives us a distinct viewpoint on the healing of the paralytic. A prophetic perspective may focus on Jesus' words, while a kingly perspective focuses on the power he exhibited in the miracle of healing.

3. What stands out about the healing, and what is most easily noticeable, depends on one's thematic perspective. Some details are easier to notice from some perspectives than others. From the priestly perspective, it is easier to notice the key significance of Jesus' forgiving sins, because forgiving sins is one of the functions of the priestly office.[5]

4. What we see depends on the environment as well as the story. In this case, the key environment is the larger theme—prophet or king or priest.

5. Given time, we can integrate information obtained from a variety of perspectives. Our total knowledge of the incident of healing the paralytic is then present in our minds or our memories even though we are currently looking at the incident from only one perspective.

6. We can infer or remember what the healing incident looked like from perspectives other than the one that we are currently using. We can picture other perspectives through the one that we are using.

7. Much about the healing incident may be tentatively inferred by using only one thematic perspective. But the inferences can radically go astray if our heart is corrupt. Every insight must ultimately be tested by comparing it with the whole of the Bible.

Key Terms

expansion of a theme
king[6]
kingly office
kingly perspective

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5. Technically, during the Old Testament period, forgiveness came not directly from the priest but from God. But priests through their actions mediated forgiveness to the people.

6. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

office
priest
priestly office
priestly perspective
prophet
prophetic office
prophetic perspective
thematic perspective

Study Questions

1. What is a thematic perspective?
2. How does a thematic perspective differ from a spatial perspective or a personal perspective? How are they similar?
3. What are the three key Old Testament offices to which God appoints people in order to express his covenantal relation to them? What is distinctive about each of the three offices?
4. What is the difference between an office and using the office as a perspective?
5. What is the value of expanding a theme into a perspective?
6. How may we grow in honoring and praising God by using perspectives?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Reading the Word of God in the Presence of God: A Handbook for Biblical Interpretation.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2016. Chapter 23 on "Typology" discusses prophet, king, and priest.

———. *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses.* Reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1995. The first part has discussion of how prophets, kings, and priests point forward to Christ.

———. *Symphonic Theology: The Validity of Multiple Perspectives in Theology.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987. Reprint, Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001. Chapter 3 discusses theological themes and how they can be used as perspectives.

5

Commonalities in Perspectives

WE HAVE NOW completed our brief tour through three kinds of perspectives: spatial perspectives, personal perspectives, and thematic perspectives. Certain patterns seem to recur.

Shared Patterns

What patterns are similar with all three kinds of perspectives?

1. Stable, shared knowledge. When we use several perspectives to look at the same subject matter, the subject matter remains the same. There is unity in the thing that we are examining.

2. Distinctions of perspectives. The multiple perspectives that we may consider are indeed distinguishable. The distinction in our experience does not disappear even if we have the same overall knowledge of the subject using the distinct perspectives.

3. Distinctions in what is prominent. What is most obvious or most in focus or most easily noticeable varies with our perspective.

4. Presence of other perspectives. Each perspective gives us a view not only of the subject but indirectly of other perspectives.

5. Reinforcement. Two or more perspectives can reinforce one another, and we may grow in knowledge by using more than one. Each perspective may grow to "include" everything that is seen in other perspectives.

Possible Relations to the Trinity

These shared features of perspectives have certain tantalizing similarities to features that we find in our human knowledge of the Trinity. We can highlight the similarities by describing our knowledge of the Trinity in analogous ways.

1. There is only one God whom we have come to know.

2. We can distinguish the persons of the Trinity.

3. What stands out about God varies subtly, depending on which person of the Trinity serves as our starting point for thought. Moreover, we can discern an order among the persons of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are usually presented in that order.

4. Knowledge about one person of the Trinity cannot be separated from knowledge of the other two. For example, in knowing Christ, we know the Father, whom he reveals (Matt. 11:27; John 14:9). We also know the Spirit, whom Christ promises to send as "another Helper" (John 14:16). It is through the Holy Spirit's work in our hearts that we come to have saving knowledge about Christ (1 Cor. 2:10–16).

5. Knowledge gained about one person of the Trinity enhances and deepens our knowledge of the other two persons.

These features concerning our human *knowledge* of the Trinity seem to reflect features that belong to God himself, as the Trinitarian God. We can list five features about God:

1. There is only one God.

2. The persons of the Trinity are distinct.

3. Each person of the Trinity knows the other two persons. Each person is a starting point in his own knowledge. There

is, moreover, an order among the persons of the Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

4. Each person of the Trinity is fully present to the other persons.

5. Each person of the Trinity indwells the other persons.

What is the significance of these similarities? Does the Trinity have anything to do with perspectives, or are these similarities merely accidental? Before trying to answer these questions, we should first review the doctrine of the Trinity, as taught in Scripture and summarized in the classic creeds.[1]

Key Terms

deepening knowledge
human knowledge of God
personal perspective[2]
person of the Trinity
spatial perspective
thematic perspective

Study Questions

1. What are the three kinds of perspectives?
2. What features are common to all three kinds of perspectives?
3. What analogies exist between perspectives and our knowledge of the Trinity and the Trinity itself?

For Further Reading

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Accessed November 19, 2014. http://www.antiochian.org/674. A classical creedal summary of Trinitarian doctrine.

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1. See esp. the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom with a History and Critical Notes* [repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1966], 2:57–59), online at http://www.antiochian.org/674, and other places.

2. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

PART 2

THE TRINITY

WE CONSIDER THE basic aspects of biblical teaching about the Trinity.

6

Basic Biblical Teaching
about the Trinity

WE NOW REVIEW the basic biblical teaching about the Trinity. Whole books have been written on the subject.[1] There is much to be said. In the end, the doctrine of the Trinity is based on the teaching of the whole Bible. In addition, the doctrine of the Trinity is *presupposed* as a background framework when the Bible discusses how God saves us, how he adopts us, how he speaks to us, and how he makes his presence known among us and in us (see Introduction). Many texts speak directly or indirectly about it. And these texts fit into a larger context of biblical teaching. Here we include only a summary of a few key texts and their implications. After the summary, we want to spend our time thinking about *implications* based on the Trinitarian character of God, rather than focusing mainly on confirming the doctrine of the Trinity.

The Unity of God

Our first point is that there is one God. Both the Old Testament and the New Testament testify that there is only one true God.

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1. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 619–735; Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004); Peter Toon, *Our Triune God: A Biblical Portrayal of the Trinity* (Wheaton, IL: Victor, 1996). John Owen takes an approach similar to mine, but musters many more verses (John Owen, *A Brief Declaration and Vindication of the Doctrine of the Trinity* [1669], in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold [repr., Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965], 2:365–454). Owen also has another, longer work, in which he discusses the saints' communion with the persons of the Trinity: *Of Communion with God the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost* [1657], in *The Works of John Owen*, ed. William H. Goold (repr., Edinburgh/Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 2:1–274; the same work is available in modernized language: John Owen,

To you it was shown, that you might know that the LORD is God; there is *no other* besides him. (Deut. 4:35; see also v. 39)

Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is *one*. (Deut. 6:4; see Mark 12:29)

Therefore, as to the eating of food offered to idols, we know that "an idol has no real existence," and that "there is no God but *one*." For although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth—as indeed there are many "gods" and many "lords"—yet for us there is *one* God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:4–6)

You believe that God is *one*; you do well. Even the demons believe— and shudder! (James 2:19)

The Deity of God the Father

Our next point is that God the Father is the true God.

There is one *God, the Father*, from whom are all things and for whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

This truth is seldom challenged, because the word *God* regularly designates God the Father or refers preeminently to him. "God our Father" and "God the Father" are regular titles for the first person of the Trinity:

Grace to you and peace from *God our Father* and the Lord Jesus Christ. (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal. 1:3; Eph. 1:2)

Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to *God the Father* after destroying every rule and every authority and power. (1 Cor. 15:24)

The Father is also called "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:3) or simply "God":

> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of *God* and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all. (2 Cor. 13:14)

The Deity of Christ the Son

Next, Christ the Son, the Word of God, is God.

> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word *was God*. (John 1:1)

> Thomas answered him [Jesus], "My Lord and *my God*!" (John 20:28)

Christ was the Mediator in the creation of the world:

> All things were *made through him* [the Word], and without him was not any thing made that was made. (John 1:3)

> There is . . . one Lord, Jesus Christ, *through whom are all things* and through whom we exist. (1 Cor. 8:6)

> For *by him all things were created*, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Col. 1:16–17)

In addition, the New Testament applies to Christ some Old Testament verses that use the tetragrammaton (*Lord, YHWH*), the most sacred name for God in the Old Testament:

> And it shall come to pass that everyone who calls on the name of *the Lord* [YHWH] shall be saved. (Joel 2:32)

> For "everyone who calls on the name of *the Lord* will be saved." (Rom. 10:13; note that an earlier verse, Romans 10:9, has identified Jesus as "Lord")

Jesus also proclaims his deity in John 8:58:

> Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, before Abraham was, *I am*."

The expression "I am" implies that he existed before his incarnation—and "before Abraham was." The expression is still more striking because it is present tense instead of the past tense "I was" that might have been expected. His existence is eternal and transcends time. Furthermore, the expression "I am" echoes the special name that God gives himself in Exodus 3:13–14:

> Then Moses said to God, "If I come to the people of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." And he said, "Say this to the people of Israel, 'I am has sent me to you.'"

Jesus identifies himself as the same God who is "I am" in what he says to Israel.

The Deity of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is God. This truth is evident from the fact that lying to the Holy Spirit is the same as lying to God:

> But Peter said, "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie *to the Holy Spirit* and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but *to God*." (Acts 5:3–4)

The Old Testament is what *God* says and also what the *Holy Spirit* says:

> *He* [God] says, "Let all God's angels worship him." (Heb. 1:6)

> The *Holy Spirit* spoke beforehand by the mouth of David. (Acts 1:16)

Hebrews 1:6 quotes from Deuteronomy 32:43. The wording "he says" in Hebrews 1:6 implies that Deuteronomy, as part of the Old Testament, is what God says. Acts 1:16 indicates that the Old Testament is what the *Holy Spirit* says. The underlying assumption is that the Holy Spirit is God.

Similarly, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in parallel with God as the source of David's inspired words:

> The oracle of David, the son of Jesse[:]
>
> . . . .
>
> "The *Spirit* of the Lord speaks by me;
>   *his* word is on my tongue.
> The *God* of Israel has spoken;
>   the *Rock* of Israel has said to me . . . ." (2 Sam. 23:1–3)

The Distinct Person of the Son

Next, we consider Scripture verses that indicate that the three persons of the Trinity are distinct from one another.

The Son is a person distinct from the Father. We see the distinction from the statement in John 1:1 that "the Word was *with* God." We see it also from the fact that the Father *sent* the Son into the world: "God *sent forth* his Son" (Gal. 4:4). The one sending and the one sent are necessarily distinct. The conversation that Jesus has with God the Father in John 17 also reveals a distinction between the person of the Son and the person of the Father.

In this context, the word *person* needs special attention. What does it mean? God is God. He is the Creator, and no creature can compare with him ("O Lord, who is *like you*?," Ps. 35:10). So a human person is not a person in quite the same sense as a divine person. No analogy with created things can capture the uniqueness of who God is. Yet it is clear from Scripture that both the Father and the Son love and speak and hear and know, which are activities characteristic of persons. They love and speak and hear in relation to each other. Even here, there remains the distinction between the Creator and the creature. God's love is the love of the infinite Creator. It is analogous to human love; human love imitates divine love. God is the original pattern or archetype for love.

Human beings love *on the level of the creature*; they have love in a derivative form.

The Distinct Person of the Holy Spirit

The Holy Spirit is a person distinct from the Father and distinct from the Son. This distinctness is shown by the fact that he is *sent* by the Father and by the Son:

> But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will *send* in my name . . . . (John 14:26)

> But when the Helper comes, whom I [Jesus] will *send* to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who *proceeds from the Father*, he will bear witness about me. (John 15:26)

Jesus also distinguishes the Holy Spirit by calling him "another Helper":

> And I will ask the Father, and he will give you *another Helper*, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you. (John 14:16–17)

The Holy Spirit is a person, not merely a force, because he can be lied to:

> "Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to *lie to the Holy Spirit* . . . ?" (Acts 5:3)

Other passages indicate that the Holy Spirit hears, speaks, intercedes, and can be grieved (John 16:13; Rom. 8:26–27; Eph. 4:30). These descriptions all imply that the Holy Spirit is a person.

Moreover, by calling the Holy Spirit "another Helper" (John 14:16), Jesus indicates that the Spirit has characteristics like Jesus himself, who is the first Helper while he is on earth. This similarity between the Holy Spirit and Jesus implies that the Holy Spirit is a person in the same way that Jesus is a person.

The Distinction of All Three Persons

The distinction of all three persons comes to expression in the fact that Jesus sends the Holy Spirit "from the Father":

> But when the Helper comes, whom I [Jesus] will *send* to you *from the Father*, the Spirit of truth, who *proceeds from the Father*, he will bear witness about me. (John 15:26)

The distinction is also depicted vividly when Jesus is baptized by John the Baptist:

> And when *Jesus* was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the *Spirit of God* descending like a dove and coming to rest on him; and behold, a *voice* from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased." (Matt. 3:16–17)

Jesus is the Son of God. The voice from heaven is the voice of the Father, as is evident from the fact that it says, "This is *my* beloved Son." The Holy Spirit is present, "descending like a dove." All three persons are clearly in the scene, and each person can be distinguished from the other two.

The expression "another Helper" in John 14:16 distinguishes the Holy Spirit from Jesus. The description in Romans 8:26–27 of the Holy Spirit's interceding with God distinguishes the Holy Spirit from God the Father, before whom he intercedes.

Putting Together the Picture

In summary, we know from the Scripture that there is only one God. This God is three persons. Each of the persons is fully God—not a part of God, not merely a creature, not merely a subordinate, finite, god-like being. In addition, each person is distinct from the other two. (See fig. 6.1.)

These truths have an impact on salvation and on worship. Only God has the power and wisdom necessary to save us. If, on the contrary, salvation were being worked out by persons who were less than God, it would undermine the very nature of salvation. Or if several gods were
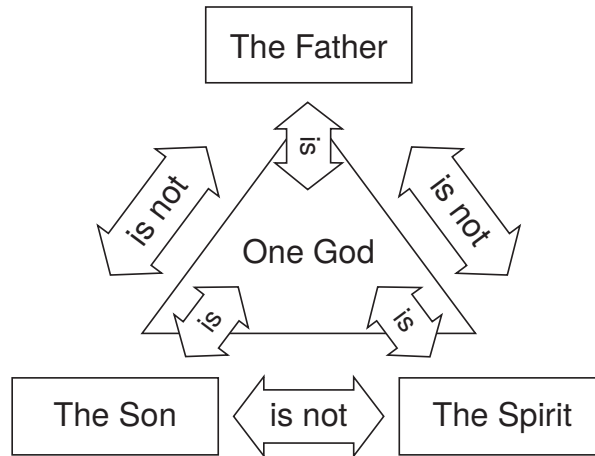
Fig. 6.1. Three Persons in One God[2]

working on it, it would undermine the full unity of salvation. Similarly, the doctrine of God has an impact on *worship*. God himself prohibits worshiping anything except God (Ex. 20:3–6). If the Son or the Spirit were not fully God, it would disallow our worship. Or if we were to worship three gods, we would no longer have unified worship. Thus, it is important not only that the doctrine of the Trinity be true, but that we *know* it to be true, for the sake of our confidence in salvation and the integrity of true worship.

But how can the doctrine of the Trinity be true? How can there be three distinct persons and only one God? It is a mystery. As we have already said, God is not like any creature. There is no perfect analogy within the created order that would enable us to unravel the mystery. This mystery and profundity about God should stimulate us to adore him.

When people have attempted to unravel the mystery, they have ended in heretical teachings. Some of them affirm the unity of God, but deny the distinction of persons. Or they affirm the distinction of persons, but make Jesus and the Spirit into subordinate, limited "gods." They try still other options. But none of the alternative, heretical theories does justice to the full testimony of Scripture.

2. A diagram similar to this one can be found in a number of places, such as J. Hampton Keathley III, "The Trinity (Triunity) of God," May 18, 2004, https://bible.org/article/trinity-triunity-god; Justin Taylor, "Trinity 101," Desiring God, October 12, 2007, http://www.desiringgod.org/articles/trinity-101. It appears in Cotton Faustina manuscript B. VII, fol. 42v,

Key Terms
deity[3]
heresy
person
Trinity

Study Questions
1. What is the biblical teaching on the Trinity?
2. What verses show the full deity of the Son? of the Spirit?
3. What verses show the reality of the distinctions between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit?
4. Why are people tempted to deny the doctrine of the Trinity?

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002. Pp. 619–35. An exposition of the biblical teaching on the Trinity.

Letham, Robert. *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004. An exposition of the Trinity, in relation to biblical teaching and church history. The first three chapters deal with the biblical foundations for the doctrine.

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from about A.D. 1210, British Library, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:PetrusPictaviensis_CottonFaustinaBVII-folio42v_ScutumFidei_early13thc.jpg.

3. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

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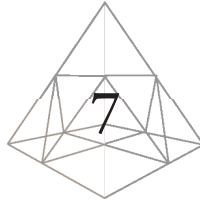
Coinherence

IT IS IMPOSSIBLE for us to understand comprehensively how the three persons of the Trinity are one God. Scripture gives us an additional aspect of mystery by speaking about the fact that the persons of the Trinity dwell "in" one another.

Indwelling in the Bible

Passages about indwelling come up particularly in the Gospel of John:

> Do you not believe that I [Jesus] am *in* the Father and the Father is *in* me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who *dwells in* me does his works. Believe me that I am *in* the Father and the Father is *in* me, or else believe on account of the works themselves. (John 14:10–11)

> That they may all be one, just as you, Father, are *in* me [Jesus], and I *in* you, that they also may be *in* us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. (John 17:21)

John 17:21 also talks about believers' being in the Father and the Son (the phrase "in us"). We who are human do not become divine ourselves, but the fellowship that we have with the Father and the Son is analogous to that exalted and perfect fellowship that the Father and the Son have with each other.

What about the Holy Spirit? Christ promises to send the Holy Spirit as the means through whom the Father and the Son dwell in believers:

You know him [the Spirit of truth], for he dwells with you and will be *in* you. (John 14:17)

A few verses later, Jesus talks about believers' participating in an indwelling involving the Father and the Son:

In that day you will know that I am *in* my Father, and you *in* me, and I *in* you. (John 14:20)

If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and *make our home with* him. (John 14:23)

In addition, Romans 8 indicates that if the Spirit is dwelling in you, Christ is dwelling in you:

You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God *dwells in* you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is *in* you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead *dwells in* you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who *dwells in* you. (Rom. 8:9–11)

First Corinthians 2:11 implies that the Spirit is *in* God, by analogy with a human spirit's being in a human person:

For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is *in* him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except *the Spirit of God*.

We may conclude that each person of the Trinity is *in* each of the other two persons. (See fig. 7.1.)

Indwelling in Theological Explanation

Theologians have several equivalent terms for describing this indwelling among the persons of the Trinity: *circumincessio*, *circumcessio*, *circumcession* (an English transliteration of the Latin), *perichoresis* (from
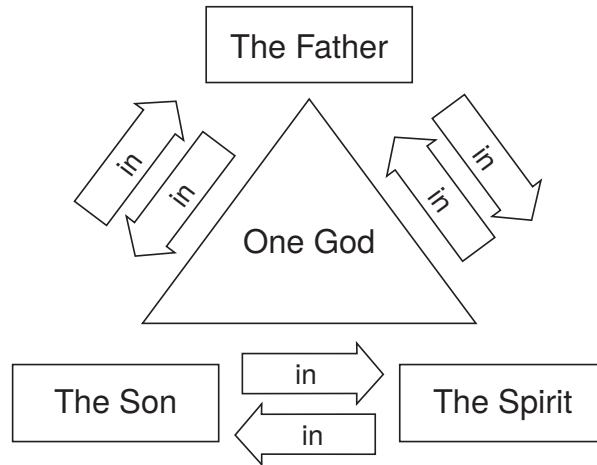
Fig. 7.1. Coinherence in Indwelling

Greek), and *coinherence*. In this book, I will use the last of these terms, *coinherence*. The terms arose not only to summarize the biblical language that directly speaks of indwelling of persons of the Trinity, but to affirm the harmonious involvement of all persons of the Trinity in the works of God—creation, providence, redemption, and consummation. The work of one person involves the presence and work of the other two. We can see one illustration of this mutual involvement in the baptism of Jesus. At Jesus' baptism (Matt. 3:13–17), all three persons of the Trinity are present and involved. But in this case their actions are distinguishable: the Father speaks from heaven; the Son is baptized and receives the Spirit; and the Spirit descends like a dove. Together the three persons participate harmoniously in the inauguration of Jesus' public ministry.

Likewise, all three persons of the Trinity are involved in the work of salvation, the work of adoption, God's speech to us, God's presence with us, and prayer (see Introduction). The idea of coinherence is a practical one because it underlines the unity of God's work in salvation, adoption, speech, and so on. So the language that directly speaks about being "in" or "dwelling in" a person is only one way of articulating the mystery of harmony among the persons. The whole of Scripture testifies to this harmony in various ways.

Coinherence in Knowledge

For brevity, we can choose three main ways to explore the harmony. The first way is to choose indwelling as our focus; this we have already

done. The second is to use knowledge as our focus. Each person of the Trinity *knows* the other persons:

> All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one *knows* the Son except the Father, and no one *knows* the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him. (Matt. 11:27)

Similarly, the Holy Spirit *knows* the things of God:

> For the Spirit *searches* everything, even the depths of God. For who *knows* a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one *comprehends* the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. (1 Cor. 2:10–11)

This knowledge is complete and exhaustive, unlike the limited knowledge that human beings have of one another. (See fig. 7.2.)
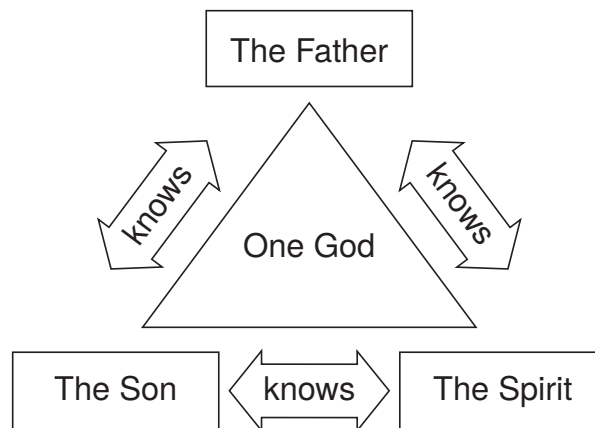
Fig. 7.2. Coinherence in Knowledge

It is noteworthy that these discussions of exhaustive knowledge take place in contexts that also draw implications for our human knowledge. Matthew 11:27 talks about the knowledge of the Father that is given to "anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." This human knowledge is real and reliable precisely because of the Son, who mediates the knowledge when he reveals the Father. The fullness and exhaustive character of the Son's knowledge of the Father offer the

ultimate guarantee that the knowledge that we receive from the Son is real and solid. Similarly, the knowledge by the Holy Spirit, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 2:10–11, forms the basis for knowledge that we receive from him:

These things God has *revealed to us* through the Spirit. (v. 10)

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that *we might understand* the things freely given us by God. (v. 12)

We receive real knowledge from the Son and from the Spirit. But we remain finite. Our knowledge is genuine and at the same time not exhaustive. In the language of classical theology, we *know* God truly, but we do not *comprehend* God; that is, we do not know him exhaustively. We do not know him with the thoroughness that the Son knows the Father and the Father knows the Son.

Parallel implications hold in the case of indwelling. In John 17, which discusses the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, one of the implications is that we who believe in the Son come to enjoy a mutual indwelling: "that they also may be in us" (v. 21); and "I in them" (v. 23). This mutual indwelling is real, but not on the same level and not with the same divine exhaustiveness that belongs to the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son in the Trinity. It is real and solid because it derives from the ultimate indwelling that belongs to the persons of the Trinity.

Coinherence in Exercising Power

A third way of considering coinherence is to focus on God's exercise of power. The creation of the world comes about through the work of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three persons are intimately involved. We can see this implication from John 1:1–2 and Genesis 1:1–2. John 1:1–2 speaks of the involvement of the Father and the Son, that is, the Word. First Corinthians 8:6 confirms the involvement of both persons. Genesis 1:2 mentions the Spirit as "hovering over the face of the waters," implying that he is present in the work of creation. Psalm 104:30 says, "When you send forth your *Spirit*, they are cre-ated," referring to the next generation of animals. In theological terms,

this creation of the next generation of animals is *providence*, but Psalm 104:30 describes it as analogous to the original creation in Genesis 1. So we conclude by analogy that the Spirit was also being "sent forth" in God's acts of creation in Genesis 1.[1]

Similar joint working of the persons of the Trinity takes place in providence, redemption, and consummation. In general, each person of the Trinity works *with* the working of the other persons in the works of God.[2]

All three ways of considering coinherence can be seen in the light of the basic reality: there is only one God. Each of the persons is God. The "sharing" or coinherence is as profound as could be, because God is one.

Implications from One Way of Description to Another

On this matter of the Trinity and on the matter of coinherence, it is wise for us to start with biblical teaching in its detailed textures. Some people would like to logically deduce various things about God, starting with just a single proposition or a single truth about God. But since we are not God, we cannot be confident that we know enough just from one short formulation of truth or one single verse of the Bible. It is important for us to be guided by the full teaching of Scripture. The larger body of biblical teaching helps to guide our understanding of any one verse.[3]

Once we have gathered a good deal from biblical teaching, we may explore cautiously and temperately whether we can see some ways in which the various aspects of biblical teaching reinforce one another. For example, can we see a way in which we could start with the truth about coinherent indwelling of persons, and move from there to see how it makes sense that the persons would know one another completely?

We say that it might "make sense" to us. We are not the ones who

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1. The distinctions between persons of the Trinity and the full doctrine of the Trinity were not fully revealed in the Old Testament. God reveals himself *progressively* through periods of Old Testament history. But when we look back at Genesis 1:2 from the standpoint of the fuller revelation about the Trinity in the New Testament, we can see that Genesis 1:2 anticipates the knowledge we now have about the Holy Spirit.

2. John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 105–6.

3. See also chapters 10 and 29 below, and the more thorough discussion of the nature of logic in Vern S. Poythress, *Logic: A God-Centered Approach to the Foundation of Western Thought* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

determine who God is or how the persons of the Trinity relate to one another. God, not humanity, is the all-controlling determiner. But when we receive from God knowledge about himself, we can still trace some connections. We can see how one truth reinforces another or one truth leads naturally to another. If we describe the process as "deducing" one truth from another, we run the risk of suggesting that one truth can be used in isolation, or that it can be used to "control" who God is. So we will use other terms. One truth *leads* naturally to another and one truth *reinforces* another. The reinforcement takes place within a human context, where we acknowledge that our grasp of truth is limited and derivative from God. We are continually guided by and informed by the full revelation of God in the whole of Scripture.

Within this context, does it make sense to travel from coinherence in indwelling to coinherence in exhaustive knowledge? Does one lead naturally to the other? Does one truth reinforce the other? Yes. A precedent for this kind of reasoning seems to be present in 1 Corinthians 2:10–11:

> For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.

The text uses an analogy between the spirit of a human being and the Spirit of God. For a human being, the spirit of the person "is in him." By being in him, the spirit "knows a person's thoughts." The expression "so also" that begins the last sentence in 1 Corinthians 2:11 indicates that there is an analogy between a human person and God. The analogy would then lead to the conclusion that because the Spirit of God is *in* God, the Spirit "comprehends the thoughts of God." That is to say, indwelling in the fullness of the Trinity (being "in God") reinforces fullness of knowledge. What is true of the Spirit is also true of the other persons of the Trinity. In sum, coinherence in indwelling leads us naturally to coinherence in knowledge. We see the connection between the two kinds of coinherence, not from one verse alone (1 Cor. 2:11), treated as if it were isolated, but from this verse when understood in harmony with the rest of the Bible.

We can also reason in the reverse direction, from knowledge to

indwelling. Consider the word *except* in 1 Corinthians 2:11a: "*except* the spirit of that person." The key word *except* shows that *only* what dwells in a person can know his thoughts thoroughly. So knowing the thoughts implies dwelling in the person. The second half of verse 11 applies the principle to the Holy Spirit. Only someone dwelling in God can know the depths of God. That is, if someone knows the depths of God, he can have that knowledge only because he is dwelling in God. Hence, with respect to God, having knowledge leads to indwelling. So coinherence in knowledge leads to coinherence in indwelling.

Similarly, it seems natural to say that the presence of each person *in* the other persons means participation in the works of each person. So we infer that the works of God involve all three persons. Coinherence in indwelling leads to coinherence in power.

If the works of God are works that coherently involve all three persons, the three persons must be present to one another for the sake of coherence in the work. So mutual involvement of the persons in the work of God—coinherence in power—leads to coinherence in indwelling.

Now let us try to reason from coinherence in power to coinherence in knowledge. The three persons work together harmoniously in the works of God. If knowledge is a necessary prerequisite for the wise work of God, mutual involvement of the persons of the Trinity in the work of God reinforces the idea that there is mutual involvement in knowledge. That is to say, coinherence in power leads to coinherence in knowledge.

Now we consider how to move from coinherence in knowledge to coinherence in power. It does not seem to be quite as simple. If we consider knowledge on a human level, sharing knowledge does not always lead to cooperation in specific works. But we can move from one to the other if we put in an intermediate step. One way of doing it is through coinherence in indwelling. We argued earlier that coinherence in knowledge leads to coinherence in indwelling. And coinherence in indwelling leads to coinherence in power. So by using these two truths together, we see that coinherence in knowledge leads to coinherence in power.

Another way of arriving at the same conclusion is to use love as an intermediate step. In the case of God, knowledge among the persons of the Trinity implies love. To know God as he ought to be known is also

to love him. And the same is true of the distinct persons of the Trinity. So coinherence in knowledge leads to coinherence in love, in which the persons of the Trinity all love one another with perfect and infinite love. Love implies desire to cooperate, and so coinherence in love leads to mutual participation in the work of God, that is, coinherence in power.

Coinherence and Deity

All these kinds of coinherence are consistent with the fact that each person is fully God. If the Son is fully God, he has the omnipresence of God. He therefore is present to the other persons by indwelling. If the Son is fully God, he has the fullness of knowledge of God. He therefore knows the other persons completely. If the Son is fully God, he has the omnipotence of God. And God's omnipotence involves not only his ability to control, but actual involvement in control. So the Son is involved in all the works of God, in harmony with the other persons of the Trinity. The same reasoning holds for each person of the Trinity. Deity leads to coinherence in all three aspects—coinherence in indwelling, coinherence in knowledge, and coinherence in power.

Conversely, coinherence reinforces deity. Only God knows God fully. Since the Son uniquely knows the Father, according to Matthew 11:27, he has knowledge in divine fullness, showing that he is himself divine. The comprehensive knowledge that the Holy Spirit has, according to 1 Corinthians 2:10–11, leads to the conclusion that the Spirit has knowledge in divine fullness, and therefore he is himself divine.

Perspectives on Coinherence

Altogether, the Bible offers three perspectives on Trinitarian coinherence: coinherence in indwelling, coinherence in knowledge, and coinherence in power. These three perspectives articulate one reality: the reality of coinherence. They can rightly be called *perspectives* because they represent examples of thematic perspectives (chap. 4). Each starts with a distinct theme: indwelling, knowledge, or power. Each uses this starting theme to look at the same reality of coinherence. Moreover, each perspective *includes* the other two. When we reflect on one, we see that it involves the other two. It presupposes the other two as truths already in the background, so to speak. And it reinforces the other two.

We can summarize some of the relations among these three

perspectives with several points, analogous to what we have seen with earlier instances of perspectives:

1. There is only one reality of coinherence because there is only one God.

2. The three perspectives on coinherence are distinct because each one starts with a distinct theme.

3. What stands out about coinherence varies subtly, depending on which perspective serves as our starting point for reflection.

4. Each perspective on coinherence is fully present to the other two perspectives, so that it implies the others.

5. Each perspective indwells the others. It is already there in the idea of coinherence, and we can perceive it by using one starting perspective on coinherence.

As in chapter 5, we can observe that these features look similar to the features belonging to the persons of the Trinity. Is this similarity merely an accident? If not, how do we explain it? We will have to travel further before considering these questions directly. (See Appendix J.)

For the moment, we may stop to stand in awe of the mystery of God in the mystery of the Trinity. There is a wonderful harmony about coinherence. We can appreciate this harmony, but we do not know it comprehensively. Only God knows himself comprehensively.

Key Terms
    coinherence[4]
    coinherence in indwelling
    coinherence in knowledge
    coinherence in power
    exhaustive knowledge
    indwelling

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4. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. What is the doctrine of coinherence?
2. Which verses indicate that the persons of the Trinity indwell one another?
3. Besides the language of "dwelling" and being "in" a person, what other kinds of expressions indicate the close relation of the persons of the Trinity to one another?
4. How can different expressions of coinherence be seen as perspectives?
5. In what ways is the doctrine of coinherence a practical doctrine? (Hint: see John 15:7; 17:21–23.)

For Further Reading

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of God*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002. Pp. 693–94. On coinherence.

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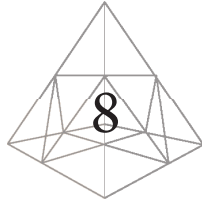
Analogies for Relations in the Trinity

WE SURVEYED IN chapter 6 some of the biblical passages that teach the Trinitarian character of God. The Bible also contains passages that give more specific pictures of the relations among the persons of the Trinity. As usual, these pictures give us real knowledge, but not exhaustive knowledge. God uses analogies that compare him to significant things and processes that belong to the created world. All of Scripture is relevant for helping us to understand the relations among the persons of the Trinity. For simplicity, we focus on three main analogies in the Bible that involve all three persons of the Trinity: an analogy with communication, an analogy with a family, and an analogy with images or reflections. Let us consider these, one at a time.

The Analogy with Communication

One analogy used in the Bible is the analogy with communication. The Son is called "The Word of God":

> He is clothed in a robe dipped in blood, and the name by which he is called is *The Word of God*. (Rev. 19:13)

> In the beginning was *the Word*, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Both verses designate the second person of the Trinity as "the Word." This designation implies that there is someone who speaks this Word. By implication, the speaker is God the Father.

The verses compare God's speech with the speech of human beings. The comparison involves an analogy. God's speech is analogous to

human speech. Human beings are made "in the image of God" (Gen. 1:27), so it should not be surprising that this analogy using speech or communication is valid and has an important function in God's instruction to us.

Is the Holy Spirit involved? He is not directly mentioned either in John 1:1 or in Revelation 19:13. But he clearly has a place in the larger context of the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. In both books, the statement that Jesus is the Word of God does not stand in isolation, but has relationships to many places where Jesus is the witness and proclaimer of the truth of God. He does this proclamation in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Spirit is the power that brings the proclamation to its destination.

For example, in John 3 Jesus says:

> Unless one is born of water and *the Spirit*, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. (John 3:5–6)

Jesus indicates that Nicodemus does not yet understand the things of the Spirit (John 3:10). It is the Spirit that gives new birth, and in new birth he provides new understanding of the things of God, including the meaning of Jesus' work of redemption. This giving of new birth and new understanding is the way in which the Spirit works in power to bring Jesus' verbal proclamation to bear on those who will be saved. In addition, the Spirit sent by Jesus guides the disciples into the truth (16:13). The Spirit "will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (14:26). The Spirit takes the message from Jesus and applies it to the hearts of the disciples, enabling them to remember and to understand.

A similar work of the Holy Spirit occurs in the book of Revelation. In Revelation 2–3 we find the repeated refrain, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the *Spirit* says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The messages to the seven churches are messages from Christ. They are identified as such by an introductory expression, "The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand" (2:1), or an analogous expression (2:8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). The Spirit brings the words of Christ to bear on the recipients. In fact, we know from Romans 8:15 and Galatians 4:6

that the Spirit stands *with* believers in teaching them to respond to the gospel with the cry, "Abba! Father!" Believers confess their adoption as sons because the Spirit empowers them and enlightens them.

The Spirit speaks to us, but only because he has heard and understood the things of God:

> These things God has revealed to us *through the Spirit*. For the Spirit *searches* everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might *understand* the things freely given us by God. (1 Cor. 2:10–12)

The Spirit has heard what belongs to the Father and the Son:

> When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he *hears* he will speak, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, for he will *take* what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you. (John 16:13–15)

In divine communication, the Spirit is the recipient of the word of God. God the Father speaks through the Word, and the Spirit speaks what he has first heard and received from the Father and the Son.

We also find passages where the Holy Spirit is compared to the *breath* of God bringing the word of God to fruition. In Ezekiel 37:1–14, God gives Ezekiel a vision of a valley of dry bones. The bones represent "the whole house of Israel" (v. 11). He tells Ezekiel to "prophesy to the *breath*; prophesy, son of man" (v. 9). Then breath comes into the bones and makes them live (v. 10). In verse 14, the life-giving breath is identified as "my Spirit." The word for "Spirit" and "breath" is the same Hebrew word, *ruach*. Thus, the name *Spirit* for the Holy Spirit has a close tie to this analogy with communication from God. The Holy Spirit participates in divine communication in a way analogous to human breath in human communication. (See fig. 8.1.)
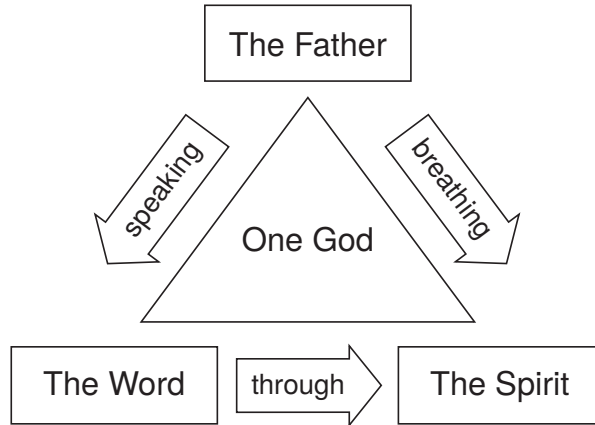
Fig. 8.1. The Analogy with Communication

Figure 8.1 should be seen as a summary of some of the main ways that the Bible represents the origin of God's speech. But since the persons of the Trinity indwell one another, the various aspects of divine communication are not isolated from one another. As we saw earlier, in John 1:1 God the Father speaks the Word. But later on in John, the Father speaks to the Son (12:49), and the Son speaks to the Father (17:1–26). The Father and the Son speak to the Spirit (16:13–15). The Spirit speaks to the Father (Rom. 8:15, 26–27). Jesus *breathes* on the disciples to impart the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). The richness in personal relations among persons of the Trinity cannot be captured by any simple diagram. Figure 8.1 represents a summary of *some* of the fundamental relations. These relations are also reflected in particular acts of communication among persons of the Trinity.

So figure 8.1 must not be understood as *excluding* other instances of communication. Each person communicates with words and breathlike power to each of the other persons, and to us as well. (See fig. 8.2.) Each person speaks to the other persons in the Trinity. Each person speaks to us when we receive the Word of God in Scripture. And we speak to each person when we pray, since we address God and each person in the Trinity is God.

Focus on Persons in Their Distinctiveness

We should still note something special about the key verses John 1:1 and Revelation 19:13 with which we started. Both verses identify the Son as "the Word" of God. This identification shows that the Son has
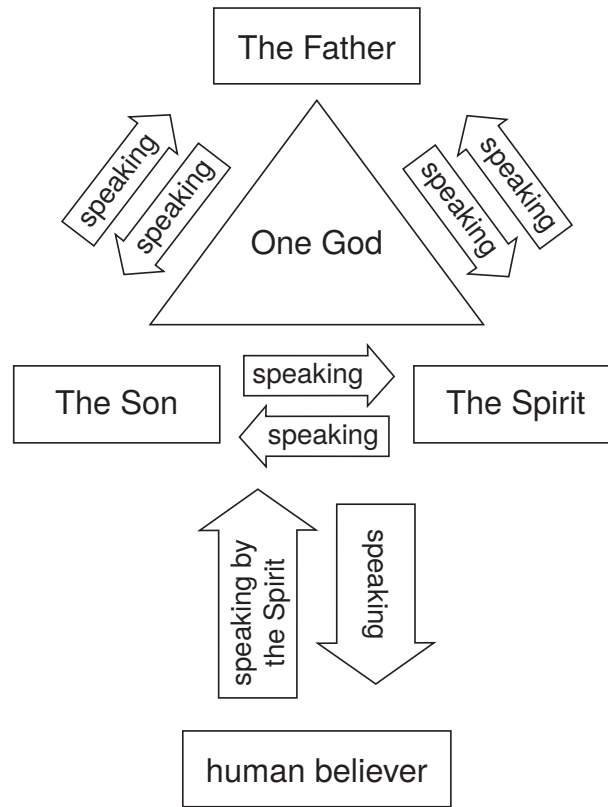
Fig. 8.2. Rich Communication in the Persons of the Trinity

a unique function in relation to the Father. He is "the Word" that the Father speaks. Similarly, the verses comparing the Spirit to the breath of God show a unique function of the Spirit. These unique functions show a differentiation in the ways that the three persons participate in divine communication. By differentiating distinct functions, verses such as John 1:1 go beyond what we observe in figure 8.2, where the functions of the persons are not directly differentiated. As figure 8.2 reminds us, it is indeed true that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit speak. These truths apply to all three persons. But they do not reveal by themselves what *distinguishes* one person from another, that is, what feature holds true for one person and *not* for the other two persons, at least not in the same way.

In our discussion we are interested in the distinctiveness of the persons, and not merely in what they share. So in our subsequent discussion we will customarily use the analogy with communication as an analogy that reveals the distinctiveness of persons. That is, we will use the analogy to think about the Father as the speaker and the Son as the Word;

we will not use it to stress the principle, true though it is, that all three persons can speak to one another and to human beings.

The analogy with breath is not far from the analogy in which the Holy Spirit receives the message from the Father and the Son. In human communication, breath is the medium and the power that brings human speech to its destination in the hearer. In Ezekiel, the breath also has the power to bring people to new spiritual life. The Holy Spirit receives the message from God in order to bring life, the life of new birth in the Spirit.

This analogy with communication has a practical bearing on Christian living. Christians receive God's Word and hear God speaking when they read the Bible, which is the Word of God. This practical experience involves all three persons of the Trinity. God the Father is the preeminent speaker. God the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, is above all present in the content of the message. God the Holy Spirit dwells in us to enable us to understand what the Father says (1 Cor. 2:14–15). This experience of receiving the Word of God reflects the original communication among the persons of the Trinity.

The Analogy with a Family

A second analogy used in the Bible is the analogy with a family. The Gospel of John often designates the first person of the Trinity as "the Father," and the second person of the Trinity as "the Son." This language indicates that the relation of the Father to the Son is analogous to the relation between a human father and a human son.

It is analogous, but obviously not identical. Human fathers become fathers by a biological process of procreation. God is God and does not have a body and does not biologically procreate. Human sons come into existence at a certain point in time. The divine Son always existed (John 1:1). These are some of the obvious differences.

But there are also similarities, or else the analogy between divine fatherhood and human fatherhood would not be appropriate. Good human fathers love their sons. God the Father loves his Son: "The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand" (John 3:35; cf. 5:20). Human fathers speak to their sons; the divine Father speaks to his Son: "For I have given them [the disciples] the *words* that you gave me" (John 17:8). Human fathers send their sons to do certain tasks; the heavenly Father "sent forth his Son" (Gal. 4:4).

Does the Holy Spirit participate in this analogy with a family? He does. One key passage is found in John 3:34–35:

> For he [the Son] whom God has sent utters the words of God, for he gives *the Spirit* without measure. The Father loves the Son and has given all things into his hand.

To whom does God give the Spirit in verse 34? To human beings? No, that idea, though true, does not fit the immediate context. The giving in verse 34 is closely related to the giving in verse 35: God "has given all things into his hand." The Father gives the Spirit to the Son. This interpretation is confirmed by the final expression in verse 34, "without measure." We who believe in Christ do receive the Holy Spirit from Christ, but we receive the Spirit only in a measure. Christ is unique in having the Spirit "without measure." What we receive is "measured" by the finality of what Christ possesses (Eph. 4:7).

John 3:35 indicates that this giving is an expression of the family love between the Father and the Son. So the Holy Spirit expresses family love.

In sum, within the Trinity, the Father is the initiator in love. The Son is the recipient of love. And the Holy Spirit given by the Father is the expression of the Father's love. These relations in love within the Trinity are analogous to loving relations within a human family. We can call this analogy for the Trinity the *analogy with a family* or the *love analogy*. It is both. (See fig. 8.3.)
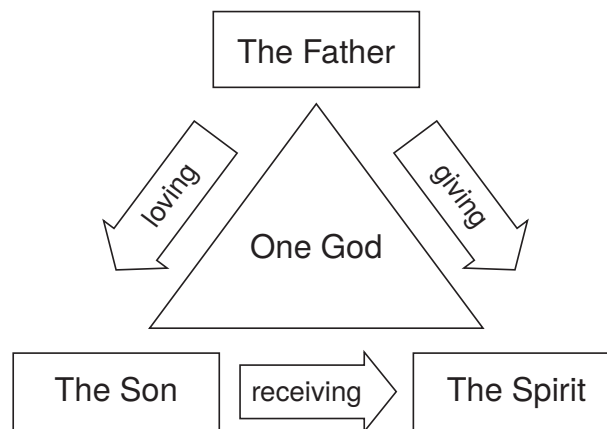
Fig. 8.3. The Analogy with a Family or Love Analogy

We can observe here a similarity to what we saw in the analogy with communication. Figure 8.3 summarizes one of the main ways that the Bible talks about relations among the persons of the Trinity. But it does not exclude other relations that involve loving and giving. Each person of the Trinity loves each of the other two persons, and gives as an expression of love. The love that we receive from God as human beings is an expression of the original love within God. (See fig. 8.4.)
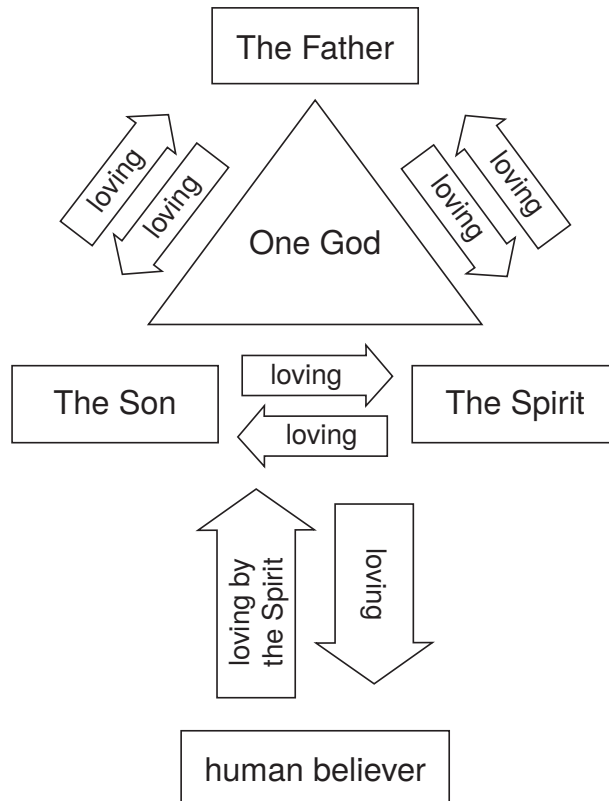
Fig. 8.4. Rich Relations Expressing Love

Love characterizes all three persons of the Trinity. But we can still see something special about verses that use the distinct terms *Father* and *Son* and the verses in John 3:34–35 that give a distinct function to the Holy Spirit as an expression of love. The Father and the Son are not interchangeable. The Father is the Father, and the Son is the Son. They exist in a special relation to each other, in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. These truths show us a differentiation in the relations and functions of the persons. In this respect, they make a deep contribution; it is different from just observing that all three persons of the Trinity exercise love.

What is true of all three persons does not reveal what *distinguishes* one person from another, that is, what feature holds true for one person and *not* for the other two persons. We are interested in the distinctiveness of the persons, and not merely in what they share. So in our subsequent discussion, we will customarily use the analogy with a family as an analogy that reveals the distinctiveness of persons. That is, we will use the analogy to think about the Father as the Father and the giver of love, and the Son as the Son and the recipient of the Father's love. We will not use the analogy with a family to stress the principle, true though it is, that all three persons in the Trinity love one another and can give love to human beings.

The analogy with a family has a practical bearing on Christian living. It shows us the ultimate foundation for our *adoption*. The original family relation is the relation between the Father and the Son, a relation that exists eternally. Through Christ the Son, the Father adopts us as sons (Gal. 4:4–5). Our adoption is based in this way on the Trinitarian character of God. As adopted sons, we experience God's fatherly love toward us, through the Holy Spirit: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5).

The Analogy with Reflections

A third analogy is the analogy in which an image reflects an original. According to the Bible, Christ is the image of God the Father:

> The light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the *image* of God. (2 Cor. 4:4)

> He is the *image* of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. (Col. 1:15)

> He is the *radiance* of the glory of God and the *exact imprint* of his nature. (Heb. 1:3)

These verses use the word *image* and the closely related expression *exact imprint*. In our own discussion, we will mostly use the words *reflect* and *reflection*, which represent broader conceptions. We choose the broader

language because we want to talk about instances of reflection within the created order, as well as the original, uncreated, eternal relation between the Son of God and the Father.

One of the backgrounds in the Old Testament for this language about reflections is the occurrence of *theophanies*, that is, specially appointed appearances of God.[1] A number of these theophanies involve a human form, anticipating the incarnation of Christ. For example, we can see similarities between the description of Christ in his glory in Revelation 1:12–16 and the description of the central manlike figure in Ezekiel 1:26–28 and Daniel 7:9 and the "man" in Daniel 10:5–6. Christ in his incarnation is the permanent visible appearing of God. He reflects the character of God the Father. His permanent appearing is the climax corresponding to the temporary, preliminary appearances in the Old Testament.

So the dialogue with Philip makes sense:

Philip said to him, "Lord, show us the Father, and it is enough for us." Jesus said to him, "Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has *seen* me has *seen* the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father'? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own authority, but the Father who dwells in me does his works." (John 14:8–10)

Does the Holy Spirit participate in theophany and in the process of reflecting God? Theophanies in the Old Testament reflect God by displaying the *glory* of God (Ex. 16:10; 24:16–17; 33:22; 40:34–35; Lev. 9:23; Num. 14:10; etc.). A number of texts associate the Holy Spirit closely with the glory of God:[2]

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the *Spirit* of *glory* and of God rests upon you. (1 Peter 4:14)

1. For a fuller discussion of the ideas of image and theophany, see Vern S. Poythress, *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).
2. See further Meredith M. Kline, "The Holy Spirit as Covenant Witness" (Th.M. thesis, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1972); Meredith G. Kline, *Images of the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980).

> Then he remembered the days of old,
>   of Moses and his people.
> Where is he who brought them up out of the sea
>   with the shepherds of his flock?
> Where is he who put in the midst of them
>   his Holy Spirit,
> who caused his glorious arm [Hebrew: arm of his *glory*]
>   to go at the right hand of Moses,
> who divided the waters before them
>   to make for himself an everlasting name . . . ? (Isa. 63:11–12)

The text in Isaiah 63:11 mentions that God "put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit." The reference is probably to the cloud of glory that was in the midst of Israel during the people's wilderness wandering. The cloud of glory covered the tabernacle after it was consecrated (Ex. 40:34–38), and filled Solomon's temple after it was completed (1 Kings 8:10–11). The cloud represented God's presence with his people, and so foreshadowed the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:2–4).

In Old Testament theophanies, we can see a movement outward. The movement has God himself as its origin. God manifests himself in a theophany, which may include a human shape, as in Ezekiel 1:26. The outward side of theophany shows the glory of God to the human recipient, as in Ezekiel 1:28: "Such was the appearance of the likeness of the *glory* of the Lord." These three stages in movement have connections with the three persons of the Trinity: (1) God the Father is at the origin. (2) God the Son is closely connected with the human appearance, which anticipates the Son's incarnation. (3) God the Holy Spirit is connected with the glory that characterizes the outward display to a human recipient. This pattern has a fulfillment in the New Testament. God the Father sends the Son, who becomes incarnate and displays the Father in visible form (John 14:9). When we are illumined by the Holy Spirit, we see the glory of the Son. The Holy Spirit brings this glory to bear on us (2 Cor. 3:18; 4:6; 1 Peter 4:14). The Son is the image of the Father; the Holy Spirit applies the glory of this image through his presence.

Putting all this information together, we can say that Jesus is the

image of the Father and displays the glory of God, in connection with the presence of the Holy Spirit, who displays that glory to us. (See fig. 8.5.)
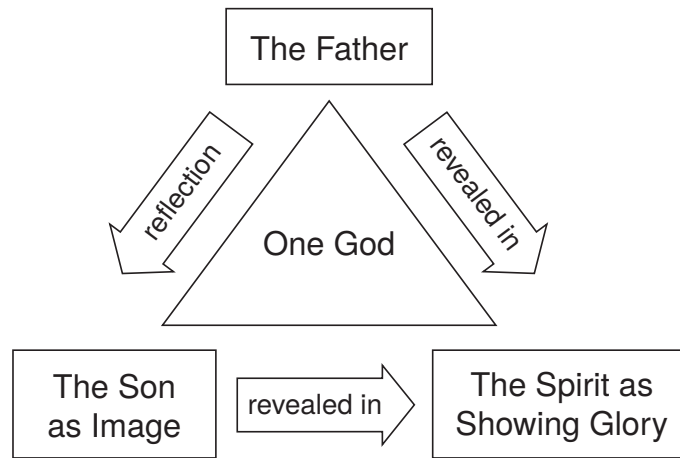
Fig. 8.5. The Analogy with Reflections

When we focus on the Son as image and the Spirit as the manifestation of glory, we do not mean to *exclude* other relations. The glory of God is the glory of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Because of the indwelling of persons (coinherence), we cannot confine the glory to the Holy Spirit. Likewise, since the Holy Spirit is God, in a broad sense he displays and reflects both the Father and the Son. When God comes to us, he reveals his glory to us. And when we are transformed into the image of Christ, we ourselves reflect his glory. (See fig. 8.6.)

The special verses that identify Christ as the image of God indicate a differentiation in function among the persons of the Trinity. So they show us something in addition to the general principle that each person in the Trinity displays the glory of God and shows us the character of God.

The analogy with reflections has practical implications. It is closely related to the theme of God's presence. Christ the Son, in his incarnation, is "God with us" (Matt. 1:23). He is God, and by being God he makes God present to human beings. He is the fulfillment of the Old Testament theophanies that were temporary manifestations of God's presence. The theophanies reflected God's character. Christ, who is the image of God and who is God, is the supreme reflection of God—God,
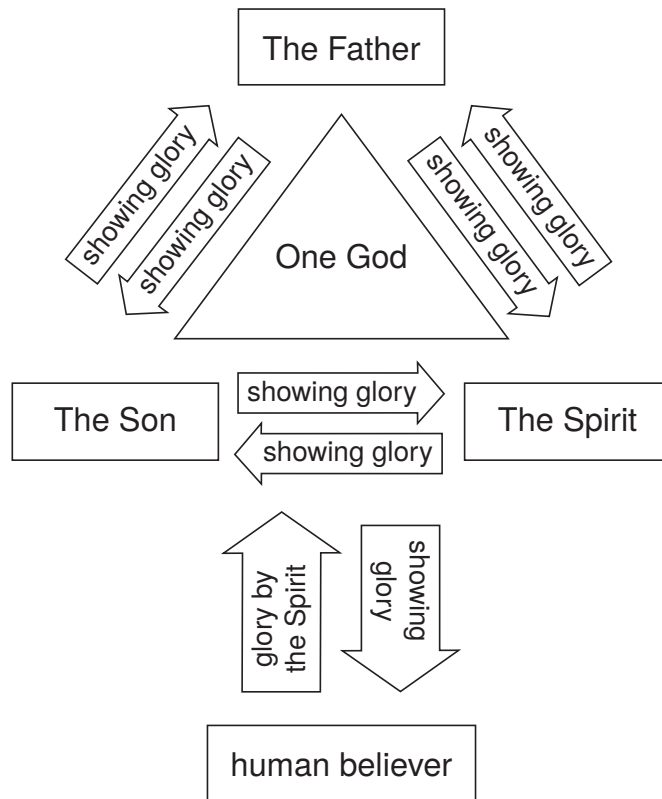
Fig. 8.6. Rich Display of Glory

who has come down to us. The character of Christ is worked in us as the Holy Spirit transforms us into the image of Christ (2 Cor. 3:18).

The Special Character of the Three Analogies

Altogether, we have now considered three analogies for the Trinity: the analogy with communication, the analogy with a family, and the analogy with reflections. In each of the three cases, the analogy at its heart reveals distinct functions for distinct persons of the Trinity. For example, in the analogy with communication, the Father is the speaker and the Son is the speech, that is, the Word. These two—speaker and speech—are not interchangeable. The speaker and the speech are distinct and irreversible.

The Bible uses many analogies in teaching about God. God is the King over all; he is a rock and a fortress and a deliverer (Ps. 18:2). God's compassion to his people is like a father's compassion to his children (103:13). But only a few of these analogies give us insight into *distinctions* between different persons of the Trinity. The three that we have

discussed—the analogy with communication, the analogy with a family, and the analogy with reflections—are the main ones.

Analogies in Biblical Context

All these analogies need to be interpreted within the larger context of biblical revelation. All three analogies occur within a larger and richer context of biblical teaching. They are not self-standing, self-contained analogies that exist in isolation. We must not treat them as if they were, nor should we neglect the larger context as though it were merely "secondary" to these primary affirmations.

Consider the analogy with communication. The analogy with communication is clear in two texts that designate the second person of the Trinity as "the Word" or "the Word of God" (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13). These texts fit into a larger context in the Gospel of John and in Revelation where Jesus is the revealer and witness. Hebrews 1:2 has something similar when it says that God "has spoken to us by his Son." But the detailed textures in Hebrews 1:1–2 make a connection between the Son and the prophets who pointed forward to him. Hebrews does not directly identify him as "the Word."

The Holy Spirit is not explicitly mentioned in either of the two key texts (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13). We can coherently add the Holy Spirit to the picture of communication based on *other* texts. But the addition of the Spirit represents a step toward a *synthesis* of several texts. Such a synthesis is justified, but it inevitably leaves things out as well as highlighting others. We should respect the fact that the Bible has a certain restraint in its discussions of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit glorifies the Father and the Son, rather than himself, so much of the teaching in the New Testament focuses more on the Father and the Son than on the Spirit as such. Our analogy with communication makes *explicit* the way in which the Spirit participates. That represents a difference in comparison to the two main starting texts in the Bible (John 1:1; Rev. 19:13).

Similar observations hold for the other two analogies. Two texts directly identify the second person of the Trinity as the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15), and Hebrews 1:3 has the closely related expression "the exact imprint of his nature." Philippians 2:6 talks about Christ's being "in the form of God," a related expression. But none of these passages mentions the Holy Spirit directly. We have to synthesize the

import of several passages to see how the Holy Spirit is implicitly present in the idea of reflecting God's character.

In the analogy with a family, the Holy Spirit is mentioned in John 3:34 as the gift of the Father's love. But other texts that use aspects related to the analogy with a family have their own textures. There are many of these texts. Any summary will not capture everything.

Robert Letham observes the richness:

> Overall, the Bible paints a complex picture of the relations of the Spirit to the Father and to the Son. . . . The Holy Spirit hears the Father, receives from the Father, takes from the Son and makes it known to the church, proceeds from the Father, is sent by the Father in the name of the Son, is sent by the Son from the Father, rests on the Son, speaks of the Son, and glorifies the Son. The relation between the Spirit and the Son is not one-directional, but mutual and reciprocal.[3]

Key Terms
    adoption[4]
    analogy
    analogy with a family
    analogy with communication
    analogy with reflections
    breath
    communication
    family
    father
    hearing
    image
    incarnation
    love
    original
    reflection
    son
    theophany

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3. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2004), 204.

4. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

Study Questions

1. How are the relations among the persons of the Trinity illustrated by human speech? What principal texts affirm this analogy?
2. How are the relations among the persons of the Trinity illustrated by a human family? What principal texts affirm this analogy?
3. How are the relations among the persons of the Trinity illustrated by a pattern and its image or reflection? Which principal texts affirm this analogy?
4. How do all the persons of the Trinity actively communicate? love? show glory?

For Further Reading

Köstenberger, Andreas J., and Scott R. Swain. *Father, Son, and Spirit: The Trinity and John's Gospel*. Nottingham, England: Apollos; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008. Includes a discussion of Trinitarian analogies used in the Gospel of John.

Owen, John. *Communion with the Triune God*. Edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007. An older work expounding the distinct communion that a Christian has with each of the three persons of the Trinity.

Poythress, Vern S. *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018. Chaps. 16–17. A discussion of the relation of Christ, the image of God, to theophanies.

9

Comparing Analogies for the Trinity

WE MAY NOW compare the three main analogies for personal relations in the Trinity, and see how they reinforce one another.

The Principle of Limited Knowledge and the Importance of Biblical Context

As usual, we must exercise care. We have to respect that our knowledge of the Trinity is derivative and limited. At the same time, God has given us knowledge through the many specific passages in the Bible. And when he saves us, he gives us actual personal experience of fellowship with him. We experience salvation, adoption, verbal communication, personal intimacy, and prayer. All these experiences take place because God comes to us in harmony with his Trinitarian nature. Based on what God tells us in the Bible, and illustrated by our experience, we can see that there are appropriate, suitable relationships between the three distinct analogies. We can make sense of how one analogy reinforces others. We explore these reinforcements not by pretending to master God through would-be autonomous reasoning, but by admiring and adoring the mystery of God's character (as we said at the end of chapter 7).

So in gratitude to God, who has revealed himself, we may explore how one analogy may lead to the others and reinforce the others.

From the Analogy with a Family to the Analogy with Reflections, and Back

We begin with the analogy with a family. On a human level, a son is like his father. Adam "fathered a son in his own *likeness*, after his *image*, and named him Seth" (Gen. 5:3). Included in sonship is the idea that the son is an image of his father. When we apply this insight to God,

we see that the analogy with a family leads to the idea of reflection. In analogy with the fact that a human son reflects his human father, on the divine level the Son reflects his Father. Thus, the analogy with a family reinforces the analogy with reflections.

Now suppose that we start with the analogy with reflections. The second person of the Trinity is the image of the first. Since the first is a person, it makes sense that the second is also a person, reflecting the personhood of the first. God has within himself the original relation of one person's reflecting another, because the Son reflects the Father. The instances of reflection that take place among human beings are reflections of that original. In particular, the relation between Adam the father and Seth the son is a reflection of the original divine relation of reflection between the Father and the Son. If so, the *divine* relation of reflection is the origin for the human relation of father and son. The original pattern for human fathers and sons is in God; it does not merely have an ultimate origin in human beings. Thus, God the Father and God the Son are the original or *archetypal* Father and Son. The Father and the Son have an eternal relation that God helped us to understand by creating human fathers and sons. Adam and Seth are derivative father and son. The derivative pattern is called an *ectype*. Thus, we have traveled from the analogy with reflections to the analogy with a family.

From the Analogy with Communication to the Analogy with Reflections, and Back

Next, let us start with the analogy with communication. The Father is the speaker and the Son is his Word. Since God is truthful, the Word of God actually expresses the very character and mind of the Father. That is, in his *expression* of the original, the Word is the image of the Father and reflects the Father. So the analogy with communication leads naturally to the analogy with reflections. Now consider the Holy Spirit. With respect to the analogy with communication, the Holy Spirit carries the divine communication to its destiny. Does this work of the Holy Spirit correspond to a similar work in the context of theophany, that is, the context of God's reflecting his character? In theophany, the Spirit represented by the cloud of glory carries to its destiny the presence of God manifested in the Son. So the work of the Spirit in communication reinforces his work in theophany.

Can we move in the opposite direction, from the analogy with reflections to the analogy with communication? The analogy with reflections is illustrated in theophanies. Theophanies *tell* us about God through visual display. Verbal communication is another form of telling about God. In theophany, an appearance of a human shape foreshadows how the Son tells us about the Father. Similarly, in the context of verbal communication the Son as the Word expresses the character of the Father. So the analogy with reflections in theophany reinforces the analogy with communication.

From the Analogy with Communication to the Analogy with a Family, and Back

Can we move from the analogy with communication to the analogy with a family? Since God is love, his love will be expressed through his speech. God's speech is full of his love. This presence of love is true of the eternal Word. Since God is love, the *relation* between God and the Word will also be full of love. So we are led to see that there is a loving relation between God the Father and his Word. This rich personal relation implies an analogy between God and the human father-son relationship. So we may move from communication to the analogy with a family.

Or we may start with the analogy with a family. Can we move from there to the analogy with communication? The Father loves the Son. Love includes within its scope the expression of love, and expression of the meaning of love. So it is natural for it to find expression also in the verbal sphere. The Father in loving the Son *communicates* his love to the Son. The Son himself is then the expression of the meaning of the Father's love, and so it is natural to see the Son as the expression of the Father or as the Word of God.

Interlocking Perspectives

The three analogies offer three thematic *perspectives* on the relations among the persons of the Trinity. The starting themes are (1) communication, leading to the communication perspective; (2) the family, leading to the family perspective; and (3) reflection, leading to the reflection perspective. These three are naturally in harmony because there is only one God, who is in harmony with himself. His revelation of himself uses these analogies to express the inner harmony of who he is. (See fig. 9.1.)

We also experience harmony when God comes to save us. He
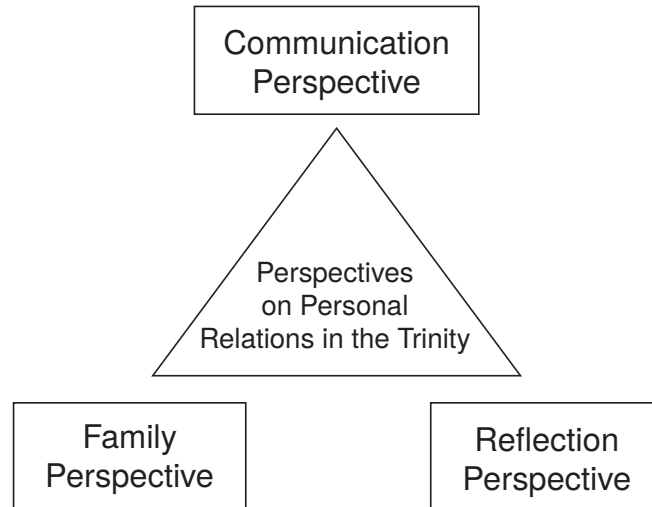
Fig. 9.1. Perspectives on Relations in the Trinity

communicates to us verbally in the gospel, based on the analogy with communication. He gives his love to us and adopts us, based on the analogy with a family. He comes to be present with us and in us, based on the analogy with reflections. All these three kinds of action cohere because God's work with us is consistent and harmonious.

We may summarize these three perspectives or analogies with points similar to what we have seen in earlier chapters:

1. There is only one reality of personal relations in the Trinity because there is only one God.

2. The three perspectives on personal relations in the Trinity are distinct because each one starts with a distinct theme (communication, family love, or reflection).

3. What stands out about relations in the Trinity varies subtly, depending on which perspective serves as our starting point for reflection.

4. Each perspective on relations is fully present to the other two perspectives, so that it implicitly includes the others.

5. Each perspective indwells the others. It is already there in the idea of relations in the Trinity, and we can perceive it by using one starting perspective on relations.

We have here a wonderful harmony among the three main analogies or perspectives for Trinitarian relations. As usual, this pattern of perspectives has similarities to the pattern that we see in the relations among persons of the Trinity. Once again it raises the question whether the pattern *derives* from the Trinity.

A Fourth Analogy: The Analogy of Carrying Out the Work of God

Theologians have explored another analogy for Trinitarian action, namely, an analogy based on the working out of the history of redemption. God the Father is the planner of redemption and of all of history. God the Son is the executor. And God the Holy Spirit is the sanctifier and consummator.[1] It has been suggested that 1 Peter 1:2 is relevant:

> according to the *foreknowledge* of God the Father, in the *sanctification* of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and for *sprinkling* with his blood.

The foreknowledge of God the Father is closely related to his activity in planning redemption. Jesus Christ executes the plan by accomplishing redemption in his life, death, and resurrection. This accomplishment of redemption is alluded to in the phrase "sprinkling with his blood." And the Holy Spirit is mentioned as the sanctifier.

There does seem to be a movement involving distinct functions for the persons of the Trinity. The New Testament repeatedly uses language about the Father's *sending* the Son. This language suggests that the Father is the planner and the Son is the executor. Other passages indicate the intimate involvement of the Holy Spirit in the application of Christ's accomplished redemption to believers and to the church. Christ *sends* the Spirit to his disciples so that they receive redemption and its benefits (John 15:26).

Moreover, the consummation of all things in the new heaven and the new earth includes the consummate presence of the glory of God in Christ (Rev. 21:23; 22:5). The glory of God, displayed in the consummation, is closely linked to the Holy Spirit, as is the theme of the

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1. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2002), 694.

presence of God. So we can say that the Holy Spirit is associated with the work of consummation. More broadly, in sanctification the Holy Spirit applies the work accomplished by the Son.

This distribution of functions for the three persons of the Trinity needs qualification. As we indicated earlier, all the works of God in creation, providence, redemption, and consummation involve all three persons of the Trinity. Planning, execution, sanctification, and consummation involve all three persons, not just one. We can easily see this involvement in the consummation, because Revelation 21:23 says that the "glory of God" (that is, the glory of God the Father) gives the city light and that "its lamp is the Lamb" (God the Son). God the Father and God the Son clearly have significant participation in the meaning of the consummation and the display of the glory of God. The same holds for Revelation 22:1, in which the throne is "the throne of God and of the Lamb" and "the river of the water of life" may symbolize the Holy Spirit's proceeding from the Father and the Son, in harmony with the identification of the Spirit as "living water" in John 7:37–39.

We may still affirm an association of God the Father with planning, God the Son with executing, and God the Spirit with application, sanctification, and consummation. But we should say that this association is a matter of prominence of one person of the Trinity with respect to a particular activity. We do *not* imply that the other persons do not participate in the activity. If we wish, we can call this analogy the *action analogy*, and summarize it in a diagram (fig. 9.2).
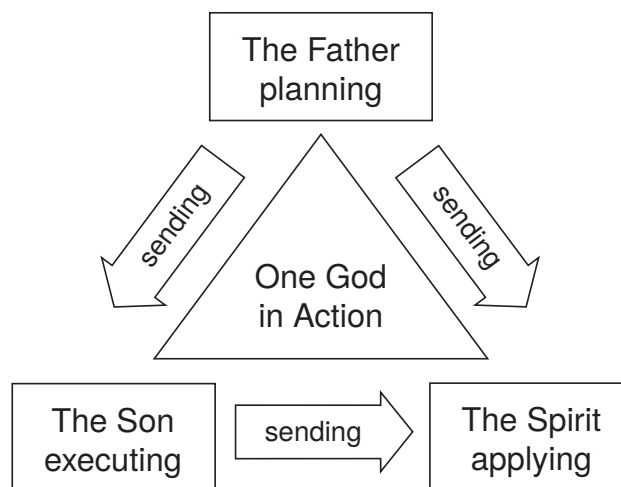
Fig. 9.2. The Action Analogy for the Trinity

Since the activities of planning, executing, and applying are all actions of one God, it is also true that all three persons are mysteriously involved in all three phases of activity. (See fig. 9.3.)
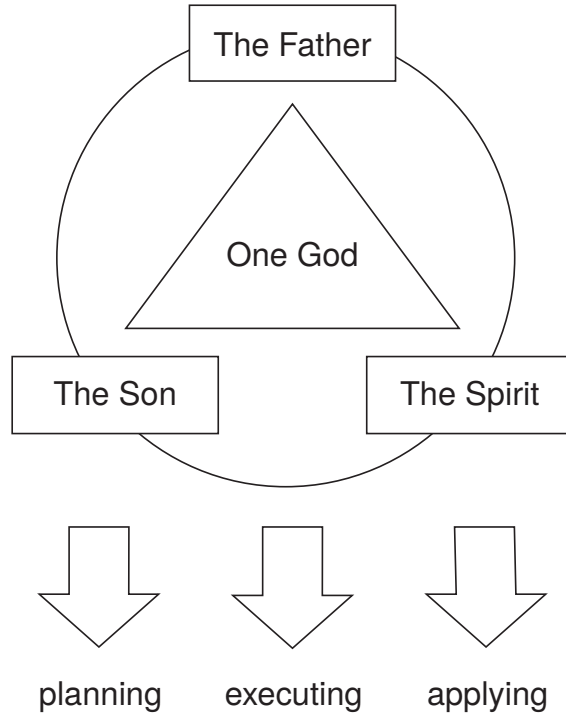
Fig. 9.3. Rich Divine Activity

We can provide another kind of summary of God's work, coming from John Owen. Owen reflected extensively on the distinct functions of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in our communion with God. He provides this summary of the distinctions in communion with each person:

> The Father does it [gives communion] by the way of *original authority*; the Son by the way of communicating from a *purchased treasury*; the Holy Spirit by the way of *immediate efficacy*.[2]

This way of explaining it makes clear the fact that we are not dealing with three distinct works, separated in time from one another, but rather one

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2. John Owen, *Communion with the Triune God*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007), 104 (italics original).

work of giving communion. In this work, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit participate in distinct ways.[3] And as Owen goes on to say in the same book, our response in communion includes a distinct relation to each of the three persons.

How should we classify this fourth analogy, the action analogy? I have chosen *not* to consider this fourth analogy as completely like the first three. For one thing, as an analogy it does not mainly focus on the *relations* among persons of the Trinity. Rather, it focuses on God's activity in carrying out his purposes in history. In God's work in history, a unique function belongs to one person, and then another unique function belongs to the second person, and another to the third. Second, this analogy is somewhat vaguer than the rest, because it does not become so clearly visible in any one passage (though Romans 8:11 and 1 Peter 1:2 come close). Rather, it becomes visible primarily through synthesizing the contents of many texts.[4]

This analogy has practical implications. When we are saved, all three persons of the Trinity are involved in powerful action. This action includes planning, execution, and application.

A third reason for considering this analogy to be of a different kind has to do with what kind of divine activity it explains. It explains divine activity *in the world*, activity in history working out God's plan in time.

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3. Note also Owen's important qualification to all his reflections:

> First, when I assign any thing as *peculiar* wherein we distinctly hold communion with any person, I do not exclude the other persons from communion with the soul in the very same thing. Only this, I say, *principally*, in such a way, and by the way of eminency . . . .
>
> Second, there is a concurrence of the *actings* and operations of the whole Deity in that *dispensation*, wherein each person concurs to the work of our salvation, unto every *act* of our communion with each singular person. (Ibid., 105–6 [italics original])

4. Even in the immediate context of Owen's summary statement, given above, he provides several supporting texts. For the Father's agency: John 5:21; 14:26; 15:26; James 1:18. For the Son's: Isa. 53:10–11; Matt. 28:18; John 1:16; 5:25–27; Phil. 2:8–11; Col. 1:19. For the Holy Spirit's: Rom. 8:11.

The last verse, Romans 8:11, does contain a reference to the distinct agencies of all three persons of the Trinity: "If the *Spirit* of *him* who raised *Jesus* from the dead dwells in you, *he* who raised *Christ Jesus* from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his *Spirit* who dwells in you." Owen comments:

> Here is the Father's authoritative quickening ("He raised Christ from the dead, and he shall quicken you"), and the Son's mediatory quickening (for it is done in "the death of Christ"), and the Spirit's immediate efficacy ("He shall do it by the Spirit that dwells in you"). (Ibid., 104)

The three main analogies that we already explored in chapter 8 do have illustrations in history, but they also describe eternal relations between persons of the Trinity. For example, the Son is eternally the Word in relation to God the Father. His function as the Word is before the creation of the world. "In the *beginning* was the Word" (John 1:1). In addition, the Father eternally loves the Son. The Son is eternally the "exact imprint" of his nature (Heb. 1:3). By contrast, execution and application are activities that take place in time. The planning of God is eternal, but we see the planning through execution and application. God's acts in time do show something about who God is, and about the persons of the Trinity, but they show it *through* the interaction of God with the created world. That way of reflecting the Trinity is not on the same level as the analogy with communication, the analogy with a family, and the analogy with reflections.

Relationship between the Action Analogy and the Analogy with a Family

Finally, the action analogy is close to being a kind of reexpression of the analogy with a family or of the analogy with communication when either of these is applied to God's work in history. Let us first consider the analogy with a family. The passages in John that mention the Father's love for the Son and the giving of the Holy Spirit have a close relationship to the accomplishment of redemption. Let us consider this tie between love and redemptive accomplishment.

In the key verse in John 3:34, the giving of the Spirit by the Father has a particular purpose. The Spirit is active in the work of Christ, as Christ accomplishes the work for which the Father sent him. The gift of the Holy Spirit does not result in immediate rest for Christ, but rather activity. We can see this activity in the first part of John 3:34: "he whom God has sent *utters* the words of God." This description points to the rest of the Gospel of John, and indeed to all of Jesus' ministry, because Jesus speaks to us. He speaks "the words of God," and he does this speaking in the power of the Holy Spirit. His speech leads to the response of believing in him and having life: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life" (3:36).

Other passages confirm this picture. In Luke, Jesus indicates that he has received the Holy Spirit for the purpose of accomplishing God's redemptive work:

The *Spirit* of the Lord is upon me,
>   because he has anointed me
>   to proclaim good news to the poor.
> He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives
>   and recovering of sight to the blind,
>   to set at liberty those who are oppressed,
> to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. (Luke 4:18–19, quoting
>   Isa. 61:1–2)

A similar participation by the Holy Spirit is seen at Pentecost:

> Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having *received* from the Father the promise of *the Holy Spirit*, he [Christ] has *poured out this* that you yourselves are seeing and hearing. (Acts 2:33)

In John 5:20–21, the family love between the Father and the Son is the basis for the Son's miraculous work:

> For the Father *loves* the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing. And greater *works* than these will he show him, so that you may marvel. For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, so also the Son *gives life* to whom he will.

In sum, the loving relation between the Father and the Son leads to the accomplishment of redemption.

We can reexpress the same truths in another way. We have mentioned the expressions in the Bible that speak of the Father's "sending" the Son. This sending is an aspect of the analogy with a family, typically occurring in wider contexts that contain the terms "Father" and "Son" (see John 5:23; 10:36). The terminology of "sending" leads directly to the picture of the Father as the planner and the Son as the executor. We have also seen that, within the analogy with a family, the Holy Spirit is a gift to the Son. The gift is given to carry out the purposes of the Father and the Son, and this idea of carrying out divine purposes leads to considering the tasks of application, sanctification, and consummation.[5]

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5. John Owen speaks of "immediate efficacy" in the Holy Spirit's communion with us (ibid.).

The Holy Spirit also carries out God's purposes in creation: the Spirit of God is present in God's acts of creation, according to Genesis 1:2 and Psalm 104:30.

God expresses his love in action in the world. All his actions are loving actions. The planning, accomplishment, and application of redemption are acts of love. So it is convenient to view the action analogy, the analogy of carrying out the work of God, as the result of the analogy with a family being applied to God's work in history. (See fig. 9.4.)
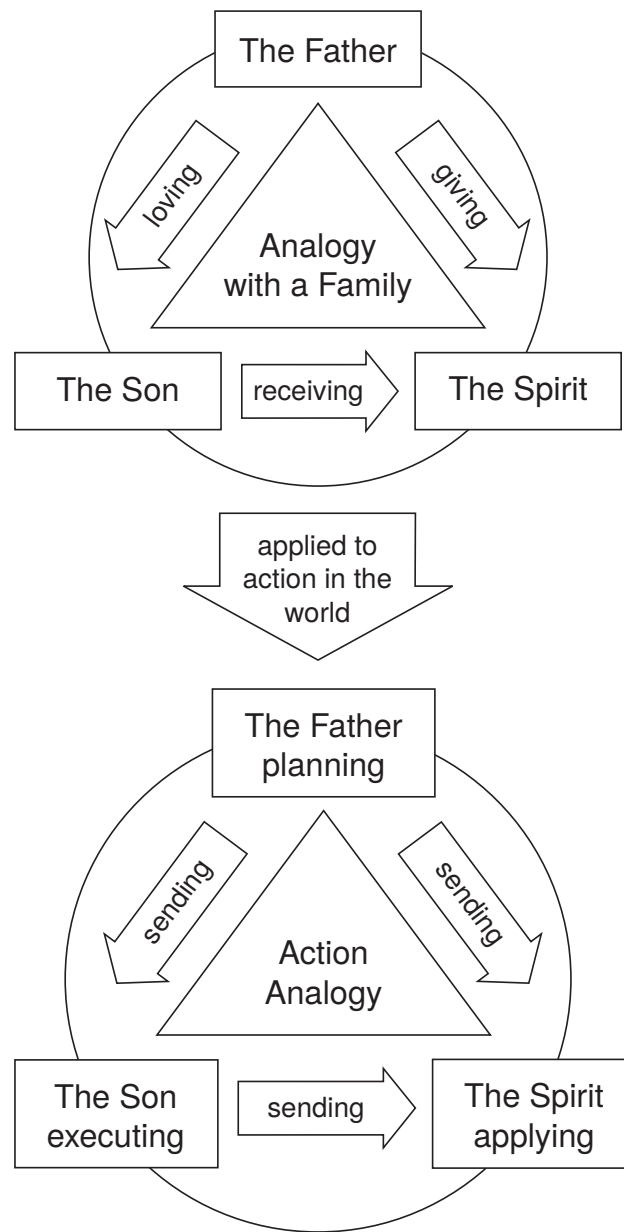
Fig. 9.4. Combining the Action Analogy and the Analogy with a Family

Relationship between the Action Analogy and the Analogy with Communication

We can also take our point of departure from the analogy with communication and move toward the action analogy. The analogy with communication applies to the eternal relation between God and his Word, as we have observed. But it is also the source for the pattern of action when God speaks to govern the world. God the Father plans what he says. God the Son embodies the expression of the Father by being his Word, which leads to words of command that execute the plan of the Father in time. God the Holy Spirit is present like the breath of God to apply the word and bring it to its destination. So the analogy with communication reinforces the action analogy. The eternal reality of God's eternal speech is reflected in his speech in time, which accompanies his acts in time. (See fig. 9.5.)

Key Terms

    action
    action analogy[6]
    application
    archetype
    consummation
    ectype
    execution
    planning
    reinforcement
    sanctification

Study Questions

1. How does the analogy with a family reinforce the analogy with reflections, and vice versa?
2. How does the analogy with communication reinforce the analogy with reflections, and vice versa?
3. How does the analogy with communication reinforce the analogy with a family, and vice versa?
4. What is the relation between the three main analogies: the

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6. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

The Father

speaking   *breathing*

Analogy with
Communication

The Word — through → **The Spirit**

applied to
action in the
world

**The Father
planning**

sending   *sending*

Action
Analogy

**The Son
executing** — sending → **The Spirit
applying**
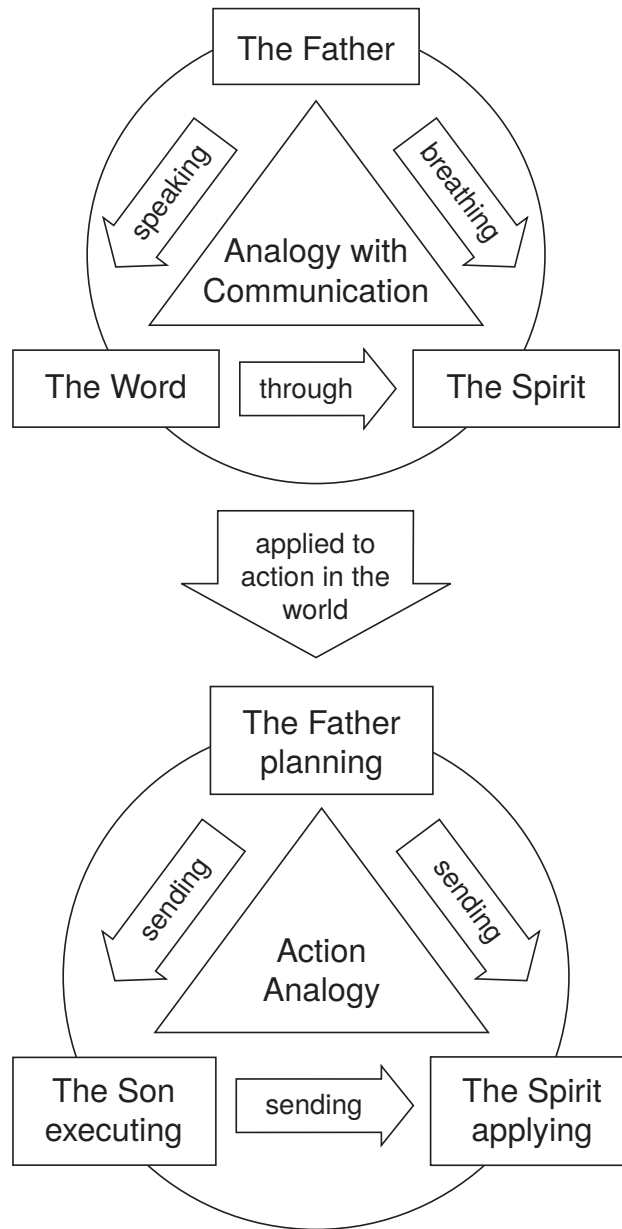
Fig. 9.5. Combining the Action Analogy and the Analogy with Communication

    analogy with communication, the analogy with a family, and the analogy with reflections?

5. How does each person of the Trinity participate in a distinctive way in divine work, as illustrated by God's actions in redemption?

6. Discuss whether God's execution of his plan is the work of the Son alone, or of the Son in fellowship with the Father and the Spirit.

7. What relation does the action analogy have to the analogy with a family? to the analogy with communication?

For Further Reading

Owen, John. *Communion with the Triune God.* Edited by Kelly M. Kapic and Justin Taylor. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2007. An older work expounding the distinct communion that a Christian has with each of the three persons of the Trinity.

10

Knowledge of the Trinity

WE SHOULD NOW consider how we know all these things about God. In particular, how can we know about the Trinity, since the Trinitarian character of God is mysterious and not like anything within the created world?

The basic answer is that we can know about God only if God reveals himself. And God *has* revealed himself. According to Romans 1:18–23, he reveals himself in the things he has made:

> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth. For what can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, *in the things that have been made*. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

As we indicated earlier, this display of God's character through created things is called *general revelation*.

God also reveals himself through *special revelation*, found in Scripture. Scripture is the very Word of God. And it gives us more than what is found in general revelation. In particular, it reveals the way of salvation in Christ. Through Christ's salvation working in us, our minds are transformed and we come to know God more and more deeply (Rom.

12:1–2). We receive God's salvation, adoption, verbal communication, and presence.

In sum, we need to bear in mind several principles in considering human knowledge of God:

1. All people know God.

2. But knowledge of God through creation is suppressed and does not lead to salvation.

3. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, believers in Christ come to know God in a saving way.

4. The knowledge given by the Holy Spirit through the Bible is true and valid.

5. Since God is infinite, human beings do not know God exhaustively or comprehensively. Only God knows himself comprehensively.

Frame's Square of Transcendence and Immanence

These principles about our knowledge can be conveniently summarized in a diagram invented by John M. Frame that has come to be known as *Frame's square of transcendence and immanence.*[1] (See fig. 10.1.) The left-hand side of the square represents the Christian understanding of God's transcendence and immanence, while the right-hand side of the square represents the non-Christian understanding (which is a distortion of the truth).

The Christian view of transcendence (corner 1 of the square) says that God is the Creator and Sustainer of the world, and has authority and power over it. The Christian view of immanence (corner 2) says that God is present in the world. The non-Christian view of transcendence (corner 3) says that God is far away, inaccessible, and irrelevant. The non-Christian view of immanence (corner 4) says that God is identical with the world.

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1. John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1987), 14.

CHRISTIAN
POSITION

NON-CHRISTIAN
POSITION

TRANSCENDENCE
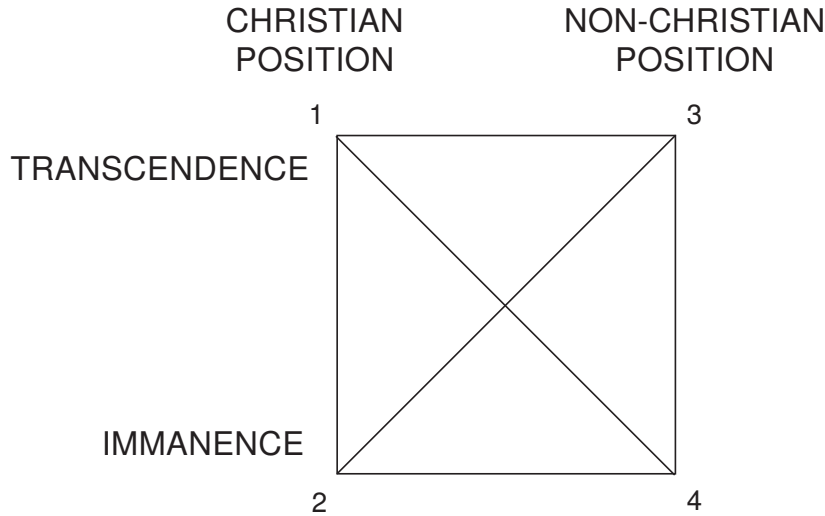
IMMANENCE

Fig. 10.1. Frame's Square of Transcendence and Immanence

God's transcendence and immanence have implications for knowledge. According to God's transcendence, God is the standard for all knowledge, including knowledge of God himself (corner 1 of the square). God knows himself completely. According to God's immanence, God makes himself truly known to human beings (corner 2). Precisely because God knows himself completely and controls all things according to his knowledge, he is fully able to reveal himself to us. Transcendence provides the basis for immanence; the two go together in harmony. This is the position taught in the Bible, and accordingly it is the Christian position. (People who call themselves Christians may sometimes be inconsistent or confused, but they *should* accept the position taught in the Bible.)

Now let us contrast this position with the non-Christian position. In a sense, there are many different non-Christian positions, corresponding to the many different kinds of idolatry, which arise when people exchange the true God for idolatrous substitutes. The substitutes can be physical idols in the form of statues, such as those in ancient Greece and the ancient Near East. Or they can be conceptual substitutes, such as the idea that nature is god (*pantheism*). Or people can worship money or pleasure, when they give their ultimate allegiance to money or pleasure. Though at a superficial level there are many forms of idolatry, the common pattern is summarized in Frame's square.

The non-Christian view of transcendence says that God is

unknowable (corner 3 of Frame's square). Since non-Christians suppress the knowledge of God, we could also say that they think that what is ultimate is unknowable. The people who serve money or pleasure implicitly hold this view. Money or pleasure receives their allegiance because they have given up on seeking anything more ultimate.

The non-Christian view of immanence says that human knowledge or an individual's knowledge can effectively serve as the ultimate standard for knowledge (corner 4 of Frame's square). There is a kind of kinship between non-Christian transcendence and non-Christian immanence. If God is unknown (transcendence), nothing is left except human viewpoints (immanence). Yet there is also deep tension in this view, because the absence of an ultimate standard really implies that there is no standard, rather than implying that human knowledge is the standard. The standard for knowledge is both infinitely inaccessible (transcendence) and perfectly accessible (immanence). This kind of tension is to be expected. Non-Christians live in God's world and cannot actually escape God. So their position can never work.

The diagonal lines in Frame's square represent contradictions. The non-Christian view of transcendence (corner 3) says that God is unknowable, while the Christian view of immanence (corner 2) says that he is not only knowable but known. The non-Christian view of immanence (corner 4) says that human knowledge is the standard, while the Christian view of transcendence (corner 1) says that God's knowledge is the standard.

The horizontal lines in Frame's square represent similarity in wording. The Christian view of transcendence (corner 1) can *sound like* the non-Christian view of transcendence (corner 3). Both use the word *transcendence*. Both might say that God is "exalted." The two sides have "formal similarity." But they *mean* different things. The non-Christian view makes itself plausible only by borrowing some language from the Christian side and distorting it.

The similarity means that we have to be careful. If we have believed in Christ for salvation, we are fundamentally saved, while others are lost. But we are not completely freed from sin, including sins of the *mind*. We can unconsciously slide over into forms of non-Christian thinking. The square is therefore useful not only in distinguishing Christian thinking from non-Christian thinking, but also in reminding those of us who are

Christians of the need to think consistently in a Christian manner. That is not as easy as it may seem, because sin can subtly creep in.

We may conveniently summarize the principles for *knowledge* by filling out Frame's square as it applies to knowledge. (See fig. 10.2.)

CHRISTIAN
POSITION

NON-CHRISTIAN
POSITION

1   3

TRANSCENDENCE

God knows
everything and
is the standard
for knowledge

God is
unknowable

IMMANENCE

2   4

God is present and
gives knowledge of
himself and the world
to human beings

our knowledge
can serve as our
standard; God must
conform to it
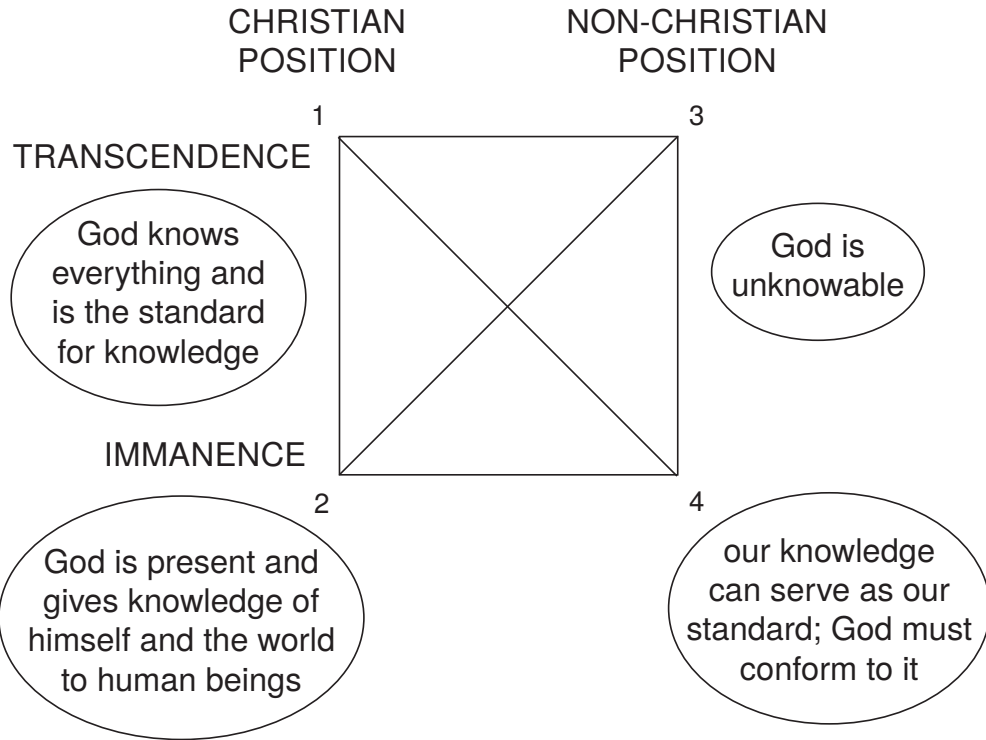
Fig. 10.2. Frame's Square for Knowledge

This diagram is a *summary* that synthesizes much teaching in the Bible. It is useful as a summary, but in the end, that is all it is. The Bible itself has much more detail and much richer textures in its teaching about the knowledge of God. The summary is meant to remind us of this full-orbed biblical teaching, rather than to stand on its own, as if it were a complete, self-enclosed statement.

Mystery in the Trinity

Because of the nature of our knowledge, we should not be surprised that we find mystery in the doctrine of the Trinity. There is mystery for us because we are creatures. We are not the standard of knowledge (we deny non-Christian immanence, corner 4). God knows himself completely, and there is no mystery for him (corner 1). Heretical teachers

have gotten into trouble when they have ignored this situation. They may say that the Trinity is "irrational," and therefore that it cannot be what the Bible really teaches. Or they may say that the Bible contradicts itself and cannot be trusted. But in this move they fall into a non-Christian view of immanence, under which they make themselves their own standard for what God can and cannot be like.

Knowing God as He Really Is

The principles for knowing God are also relevant in another way. On the basis of Scripture, we can be confident that God, by speaking to us in the Bible, tells us who he really is. We can know who he really is. The Trinity as described in the Bible is what God really is. In expressing this confidence, we reexpress the Christian view of immanence.

This principle is important in dealing with God's eternal existence. We know from the Bible that God always exists. He existed even without the created world, while the created world came into being by God's activity: "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1). God did not have to create the world, but he did. Biblical teaching includes a fundamental distinction between God and the world. In opposition to the false teachings of pantheism and panentheism, the Bible makes it clear that the world is not God and is not a part of God. To worship any created thing or the world as a whole is idolatry (Rom. 1:18–23). Nothing within the world duplicates God. There is mystery for us about God's eternal existence, because we as human beings have experiences in time. We find that we cannot fully conceptualize what it would mean for God to exist independent of the universe in which we live.

What about the Trinitarian character of God? God is always the Trinitarian God. He did not "become" Trinitarian only by creating the world. This eternality of the Trinity is clear from John 1:1: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John is here speaking about what God is like even apart from the acts of creation that are mentioned later in verse 3. The Word was God, and at the same time the Word was distinct from God the Father "in the beginning."

At this point, theologians distinguish between the *ontological Trinity* and the *economic Trinity*. The *ontological Trinity* (also called the

immanent Trinity) is the Trinitarian character of God, apart from his work of creation. It concerns what God *is*. The *economic Trinity* is the Trinitarian character of God expressed in activity toward the world—creation, providence, redemption, and consummation. It concerns what God *does*. The word *economic* here has a special technical meaning. Etymologically, it comes from the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means "household management." The term *economic* is applied to God because God "manages" all the created order and "manages" the whole design and accomplishment of salvation.

The Bible focuses a great deal on what God does, because that is what we need to know. We need to know that he created the world and that he providentially controls it. We need to know how he accomplished salvation in Christ, and how we can receive this salvation and participate in it. We need to understand how he is working in us through the power of the Holy Spirit. All these things concern the *activities* of God—his "economic" management. Through these activities and what he says about them, we also know God. We know him *through* what he says and what he does.

The same is true for the Trinitarian character of God. We understand the Trinitarian character of God by what he says and does in connection with his "economic" management. For example, we know that the Father *sent* the Son into the world; we know that the Son became incarnate. We know that the Son was exalted to the right hand of God, and poured out the Holy Spirit (Acts 2:33). In these events, the persons of the Trinity are interacting with the created order and with us, creatures within that order. We have seen how the Trinitarian character of God is displayed in God's work of salvation, planned by the Father, executed by the Son, and applied by the Holy Spirit. Our adoption as sons, God's speech to us, and God's presence with us also express his Trinitarian character.

So do we know God *as he really is*—the ontological Trinity? The answer is yes. The Bible stresses that we *know* God. We know God, not a substitute. To worship a substitute instead of the true God is idolatry, as Romans 1:23 indicates. We know God *through* what he says and does. We could put it this way: that through God's *economic* activity, we know God *ontologically*. That is the only way that it could happen, because God must reveal himself (economic) for us to know him (ontological).

God's economic activity includes his work in history, his communication to us in the Bible, and the work of the Holy Spirit *in* us, illumining our hearts.

It is easy here to fall into a non-Christian view of transcendence, and to undercut the genuine character of human knowledge of God. It may sound humble to say that we know only created manifestations of God, not God himself. But that is not right. We know *God*, precisely through the created manifestations that are mentioned in Romans 1:20, "the things that have been made." We know God even more deeply when he teaches us through the Holy Spirit's illumination of Scripture. Scripture comes through created media—human writers, and stone or papyrus or parchment on which the biblical books are written. It is proclaimed by human preachers. Through these means, God addresses us with divine power, and makes himself known with divine efficacy. He succeeds. We know him.

This means that we also know the ontological Trinity. We know the ontological Trinity through the economic Trinity. God reveals himself in harmony with who he is. So the revelation of the Trinity in economic terms is in harmony with the ontological Trinity. If we deny this, we fall into a form of non-Christian transcendence, in which we imply that the ontological Trinity becomes unknowable. If God were unknowable, it would destroy genuine worship. An unknowable God could not be worshiped properly, because the actual object of worship would be some God-substitute; it would be merely our best (but false) idea of who God is.

Dealing with Biblical Texts

We have actually been presupposing these truths in the earlier chapters of this book. Most of the biblical passages that we have examined describe God in connection with his works of redemption. That is, they focus on economic activity of God. The passage in John 1:1 is an exception. It talks about what was "in the beginning," that is, even apart from God's acts of creating the world.

But even here, this passage is preparing the way for understanding that Jesus in his person and in his proclamation communicates who God the Father is. He communicates to *us* as ones who are in this world, and he communicates for the sake of *redemption*. So even the verse John 1:1,

which gives us a direct description of aspects of the ontological Trinity, is not really focused exclusively on the ontological Trinity. It is preparing us for the economic Trinity. God acts redemptively in the events described in the rest of the Gospel of John. And the Gospel of John is itself the Word of God, written to those of us who are in the world.

John 1:1 confirms the close relation between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. John 1:1 tells us who God is—ontologically. God the Father is eternally the speaker, and God the Son is eternally the Word. Precisely because he is who he is, in his Trinitarian character, God reveals himself to us through Jesus the Word. Jesus in his ministry of proclamation on earth faithfully reveals God: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). We have seen the Father. We know God, *through* the economic Trinity. Jesus also says, "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (17:3). To have eternal life, we must "know you the only true God." If we know only a finite, created substitute, we are sunk. We have missed eternal life. We may put it another way: if we know *only* the economic work of God, in a way that is alleged to be independent of who God really is, we are sunk, because we have missed knowing the true God that Jesus the Son knows. But for Christians, the key assumption (the *if*) is false. God does make himself known to us through his economic activity.

John 1:1 also alludes to the account of creation in Genesis 1. Because the Word is eternally the Word, God creates the world by speaking words, such as "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). The work of God in creation reflects who God always is. And the specific words of command in Genesis 1 reflect the eternal Word who is God and who is always with God (John 1:1). In other words, the economic Trinity expresses the ontological Trinity.

Thus, with respect to both creation and redemption, the economic Trinity expresses the reality of the ontological Trinity. Consequently, in discussing Scripture in the preceding chapters, we have presupposed that the passages show us the true Trinitarian character of God. In considering the passages, we start with the activities of the Trinity (economic Trinity). We infer the nature of the Trinity, including the relations among the persons of the Trinity (ontological Trinity). When faithfully done, this procedure respects the derivative character of our knowledge,

and the fact that we must base our knowledge on what God tells us in Scripture. At the same time, we respect the reality of the knowledge that God has given. We know God. And we know the persons of the Trinity in their relations to one another. These relations existed even before the world began. The acts of God in time are naturally expressive of and in harmony with the pretemporal personal relations in the Trinity.

It is also true, of course, that not every feature we see in the world should be naively projected back onto God. God ordained that there should be horses. But God is not a horse. God ordained a world in which human beings grow in knowledge over time. But God himself does not grow in knowledge. When we respect everything that the Bible teaches about the distinction between God the Creator and the created world that he has made, we have guidelines for seeing in what respects God's actions in the world reflect who he is, and in what respects God is different from the creatures he has made.

Meaningful Descriptions

The principles about knowing God also have implications for our assessment of the *meaning* of biblical passages about God. Consider John 1:1 again. We describe God the Father as speaking the Word. But does he speak in exactly the *same* way that we experience human beings speaking to one another? No. We speak in time. Our speeches are spread out. And we do not completely think out all the implications of what we say. God speaks eternally. And his knowledge of his speech is complete.

So do we know completely what we *mean* when we say that God speaks? No. God is God. His speaking is unique. His speaking is *analogous* to ours, but is not on the same level. There is mystery here, as always. If we thought we could understand divine speaking completely, we would be making our understanding the standard for divine speech. We would be using the non-Christian view of immanence.

But we must also avoid the non-Christian view of transcendence. We should avoid saying that God is unknowable or that the Bible verse John 1:1 is unknowable. We *do* understand that God speaks. When the Bible uses the expression *the Word*, the expression is meaningful. It tells us something (by the principle of Christian immanence, corner 2 in Frame's square). It is not just a blank, as it would be if we made up a new nonsense syllable: "In the beginning was the Bloor." The use of the

expression *the Word* shows us that the second person of the Trinity in his relation to the Father presents us with an analogy with other instances of communication that we know.

We avoid two extremes. In the one extreme, an expression used for God has no relation to anything else. This extreme is *equivocism*. It equivocates on meaning—in this case, the meaning of *Word*. Complete equivocation makes knowledge impossible. It is non-Christian transcendence in operation.

The other extreme considers an expression used for God, and forces it to mean exactly the same thing in every respect as it would if it were used any other way. This extreme is *univocism*. It emphasizes *single* meaning (*uni-*, "one," plus *voc-*, "voice"). This view misrepresents the truth because it dishonors the unique character of who God is. This extreme represents non-Christian immanence. In non-Christian immanence, God must "submit" to *our* idea of meaning.

Among all these forms of speaking, which is the *original* speech? We may further appreciate the nature of God's communication in the Bible if we reflect on the question of what is original, and what is derivative, when we use analogies to describe God. God speaks, and human beings speak. The relation between the two is neither univocism (non-Christian immanence) nor equivocism (non-Christian transcendence). It is a relation of analogy. In this analogy, which is the original?

Clearly, God is the original. God made man in his image (Gen. 1:27). That is why we can speak. Before God created human beings, he was already a speaker, as we can see from Genesis 1:3 and the other verses in Genesis 1 where God issues commands to bring forth creation. We may use the term *archetype* for the original and the term *ectype* for the copy. So God's speech is the archetype, while man's ability to speak is the ectype. In God's speech, there is an even more ultimate archetype, namely, the eternal Word. The eternal Word existed even before God began to create. The eternal Word is therefore the *archetype* in relation to the instances of *ectypal* specific speeches, such as "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3).

It is important that we reckon with God's being the original. That is one way in which we affirm the Christian view of transcendence. God is the standard for meaning. Meanings within creation, such as the meaning of human speech to other humans, are not self-sufficient. Only God

is self-sufficient. Meanings within creation have God as their ultimate standard. God has specified these meanings, beginning with who he is as God.

It is *also* important that we affirm that meanings in human speech do retain a relation to the original. If in our own mind we try to cut off or deny all relations with God's meanings, we leave ourselves with a situation of equivocism in any attempt to talk about God. We have no way of talking about God unless God supplies it by giving us meanings that in fact are analogically related to who God is.

In consequence, we make two related affirmations. First, God *really* does speak, and in this speech the eternal Word *really* is the Word. He is the original Word, and without him there is no communication at all, either in God or in us. Second, we do not understand our own language with perfect mastery. Our own language is entangled in the mystery of God's language, to which it is inextricably related. Because God is the standard, and not us, God alone is the perfect Master. Because God reveals himself, we do have meanings. We can communicate. We can communicate even about God, because the meanings that he gives us are already—before we begin to speak—analogically rooted in God as the origin of meanings.[2]

Father and Son

The same principle applies when we use the words *Father* and *Son* to describe the persons of the Trinity. The word *Father* shows an analogy between God the Father and human fathers. The word *Son* shows an analogy between God the Son and human sons. If we treat the analogy like an identity, it is *univocism*. We fall into non-Christian immanence, and we pretend that we can bring God down to our level and capture perfectly the nature of God the Father. On the other hand, if we treat the analogy as though God's fatherhood were *completely different* from human fatherhood in every respect, we have *equivocism*. We fall into non-Christian transcendence, according to which God is unknowable. As a result, *Father*, when used to describe God, means nothing at all.

2. Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009).

Value for Worship

These observations are valuable as we endeavor to worship and praise God as he deserves. For true worship and praise, we must know the God we worship and worship him according to who he is. Otherwise, we fall into idolatry; we worship a substitute of our own devising. At the same time, worshiping God means acknowledging his supreme greatness. We stand in awe of him, and so we confess that we do not know him completely. His infinite superiority to us is one motivation for true worship.

Key Terms

archetype[3]
comprehensive knowledge
contradiction
economic
economic Trinity
ectype
equivocism
father
Frame's square of transcendence and immanence
general revelation
immanence
immanent Trinity
knowledge of God
meaning
non-Christian immanence
non-Christian transcendence
ontological
ontological Trinity
revelation
self-sufficiency
son
special revelation
tension (in non-Christian understanding)
transcendence

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3. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

univocism
worship

Study Questions

1. What does it mean to know God?
2. Do non-Christians know God? If so, how?
3. What is the difference between Christian and non-Christian knowledge of God?
4. What is the difference between Christian knowledge of God and God's knowledge of himself?
5. How can we be confident that we know God truly?
6. What is equivocism, and why is it a problem?
7. What is univocism, and why is it a problem?
8. What is the relation between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity?
9. What kinds of non-Christian views of knowledge can interfere with our understanding of what it means to know the Trinity?

For Further Reading

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PART 3

PERSPECTIVES
FROM THE TRINITY

NOW WE CONSIDER some triads of perspectives that originate from the Trinity.

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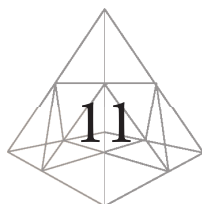
Perspectives on Reflections

LET US NOW consider more closely the analogy with *reflections* for the Trinity. From this analogy we can obtain some perspectives.

Three Perspectives on Reflections, Related to Fatherhood

According to the analogy with reflections, the Son is the image of the Father (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). He reflects the Father. This Trinitarian relation of reflection is analogous to the case in which Adam fathered Seth "in his own likeness, after his *image*" (Gen. 5:3).

So let us begin by thinking about Adam's fathering Seth. We can choose to look at the relation of Adam and Seth from any of three complementary thematic perspectives.

First, we can look at it from the standpoint of Adam as the original. We start with Adam, and we consider how Seth is like him and how Adam brought Seth into being by a process of procreation. Let us call the perspective that starts with Adam as the original the *originary* perspective.

Second, we can look at the relation from the standpoint of Seth as the image. We start with Seth, and we consider how Adam is like him and how Seth came to be. Let us call this way of looking at the relation the *manifestational* perspective, because Seth as an image of Adam "manifests" things about Adam, who was the original after which the reflection was patterned.

Third, we can look at the relation between Adam and Seth *as* a relation, in which many similarities hold between Adam and Seth. We notice all the ways in which things about Adam and things about Seth agree with each other and connect to each other. Let us call

this way of looking at the relation the *connectional* perspective.[1] (See fig. 11.1.)
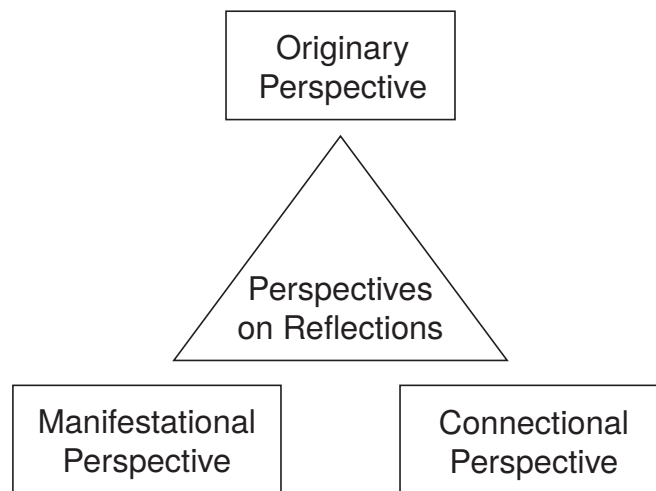
Fig. 11.1. Three Perspectives on Reflections

Each of the three perspectives leads to the other two and includes the other two. For example, if we start with the originary perspective, we begin with Adam as original. But the original leads to the copy, to Seth. In a sense, Adam was "original" even before he had a son. That is, he existed at the origin of the human race. (God is the absolute original, who exists even before the creation of the world, and independently of creation.) But the word *original* often designates someone or something that not only is first in time, but functions as the origin *for something else.* In that sense, for an original to be an original implies the existence of a copy, from which we can then look at the original and the process leading to the copy. So the copy is included in the complete picture. Thus, the originary perspective implicitly includes the manifestational perspective.

The situation of being an original also implies the existence of a relation between the original and what has been produced as a copy. So the connectional perspective is implicitly included in the originary perspective. Similarly, the existence of a copy implies the original and a relation between the original and the copy.

Finally, the connection between original and copy arises by the same

1. Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 36–42. In this earlier book, I call the third perspective the *concurrent perspective*. I have decided to rename it the *connectional perspective* because the latter term is more clearly descriptive.

process that produces the copy. The connection originates in the original and exists only because both original and copy exist. The connectional perspective presupposes the originary perspective and the manifestational perspective. The original is an original in relation to the copy only because there is a connection between the two. So the originary perspective presupposes the existence of the connectional perspective.

As usual, we can see some general principles about the relations between the three perspectives:

1. There is only one reality of Seth's being in the image of Adam because there is only one God who brought it about.

2. The three perspectives on reflections are distinct because each one starts with a distinct thematic focus.

3. What stands out about reflections varies subtly, depending on which perspective serves as our starting point for thought.

4. Each perspective on reflections is fully present to the other two perspectives, so that it implicitly includes the others.

5. Each perspective indwells the others. It is already there in the idea of reflection, and we can perceive it by using one starting perspective on reflections.

The three perspectives on reflections are themselves a reflection of the Trinity in several features. The five principles mentioned above with respect to the perspectives on reflections also hold for the persons of the Trinity:

1. There is only one reality of God.

2. The three persons in God are distinct.

3. What stands out about God varies subtly, depending on which person serves as our starting point for thought.

4. Each person in the Trinity is fully present to the other two.

5. Each person indwells the others. He is already there, indwelling each other person, and we can perceive this by using any one of the three persons as the starting point.

Thus, each of the five points represents one aspect of the analogy between the Trinity and the three perspectives on reflections. If we like, we can condense these five points into three:

a. (corresponding to 1) The three perspectives all focus on the same subject matter, which is analogous to the fact that in the Trinity the three persons are one God. The unity of the three perspectives reflects the unity of God.

b. (corresponding to 2) There are three perspectives, each of which is a reflection of a distinct person of the Trinity. (Also, because each perspective is distinct, what stands out would naturally vary, as in 3.)

c. (corresponding to 4 and 5) The *relations* among the persons of the Trinity, in coinherence, are reflected in the *relations* among the three perspectives.

As a further subpoint under point c, we may also mention an analogy with respect to the *dynamics* of relationship:

6. The *dynamics* of the relations are also in harmony. As the Son is the image eternally *generated* from the pattern of the Father, so the manifestational perspective is a reflection *generated* from the originary perspective. How so? The manifestational perspective imitates the originary perspective, in the fact that it starts from one pole within a relation of reflection, and moves out to the other pole. This imitation is itself a form of reflection. But the manifestational perspective moves in the reverse direction: it starts with the reflection generated from the original.[2]

2. If we wish, we can confirm that the relation between any two of the six listed principles is itself perspectival. Points a, b, and c correspond, respectively, to the classificational perspective, the instantiational perspective, and the associational perspective, defined later in chapter 26. The

The three perspectives on reflections can be applied not only to analyze the relation of reflection between Adam and Seth, but to analyze *any* relation of reflection, including the archetypal relation between God the Father and God the Son, as we will see.

Three Perspectives on Reflections in Theophany

Let us first apply the three perspectives on reflections to the instances when God appears to human beings in theophany. In these instances, God himself is the original. His visible manifestation—let us say in human form as in Ezekiel 1:26–28—is a kind of reflection of God. Ezekiel 1:28 speaks of "the appearance of the *likeness* of the glory of the Lord."

God brings about the manifestation. He is the original in relation to the manifestation. We can speak of an *originary* perspective when we are looking at the theophany from the standpoint of its origin in God. Or we may start with the specific manifestation. The point of the manifestation is that it is a manifestation *of God*. When we start with the manifestation, we are using a *manifestational* perspective. From there, we travel in our thinking and find that this manifestation is a manifestation of God, who is the original.

The glory that appears in the manifestation is the glory of the manifestation and the glory of God that it manifests. The theme of glory connects the original and the manifestation. The same is true for other attributes of God. For example, the righteousness of God is revealed when God appears as Judge, such as in Daniel 7:9–10. The righteousness belongs both to God and to the manifestation of God. We might say that the glory and the righteousness in the original (God) and his manifestation (his reflection) are *connected*. The *connectional* perspective starts with the common features belonging to the original and the manifestation. These common features give meaning to the claim that the first subject (God himself) has a reflection in the second (the visible manifestation).

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points a–c arise when one applies the classificational, instantiational, and associational perspectives to the issue of unity and diversity in a triad of perspectives.

   Within point c, the subpoints 4, 5, and 6 correspond, respectively, to the particle view, the field view, and the wave view (defined in Appendix D) when these views are applied to coinherence.

   Principle 3, concerning what stands out, is an instance of applying the perspective of prominence (from Appendix F) to the diversity of perspectives (point b).

In all these instances with visible manifestations of God, we must take care to affirm the distinction between the Creator and the creature. God the Creator is distinct from his creatures, including the creaturely phenomena involved in his visible manifestation. At the same time, the visible manifestation does actually reveal the true God.

For any instance of theophany, several principles hold for the perspectives on theophany:

1. Only one reality of God appears in the theophany.

2. The three perspectives on reflections—the originary, the manifestational, and the connectional—are distinct, because each one starts with a distinct thematic focus.

3. What stands out about the theophany varies subtly, depending on which perspective serves as our starting point for thought.

4. Each perspective on reflections is fully present to the other two perspectives, so that it implicitly includes the others.

5. Each perspective indwells the others. It is already there in the idea of reflection, and we can perceive it by using one starting perspective on reflections.

As we saw before, these five points reflect the analogous principles that hold for the persons of the Trinity.

The Work of the Holy Spirit in Theophany

We should note a difference between the work of the Spirit in theophany and the connectional perspective. The Holy Spirit functions to bring God's presence to human beings. The connectional perspective reaches back to focus on the connection between God and his manifestation.

Let us be more specific. In an earlier chapter (chap. 8), we observed that the Bible associates the Holy Spirit with the cloud of glory in Old Testament theophanies. The cloud functions as a kind of outward side to theophanies such as the one in Ezekiel 1. The glory of theophany touches and influences the person or persons who see the vision. In

some sense, what they "take away" from the experience is a reception of the glory of God. This outward expression and impact of theophany are akin to the special work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament. The Spirit *applies* the work of Christ and expresses most directly and intimately the presence of God *to* those who believe, and *in* believers (by the fact that he dwells in them).

On the other hand, when we use the connectional perspective, we focus on the connection between the original and the manifestation. We might think of the connectional perspective as a way of standing between the original and the manifestation.

Nevertheless, the two approaches to theophany are related. The Spirit brings the glory of God to its human reception. But what is received is communion with the presence of God in his manifestation, and the glory revealed is indeed the glory of both the manifestation and God himself, who reflects himself in his manifestation. So it is appropriate to see the connectional perspective as especially related to the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the Holy Spirit establishes and maintains a connection between theophanies and their human recipients. The connectional perspective can be used to focus on the connection not only between the original and its manifestation, but between the manifestation and its absorption in a human recipient.

In addition, the Holy Spirit is associated in the Bible with the presence of God and the dwelling of God with us and in us. The presence of God functions to connect us to God. The dwelling of God with us establishes an intimate connection with God. So more than one theme helps to affirm a close association of the Holy Spirit with communion, the connection between God and man. By analogy, we may infer that the Holy Spirit functions also to mediate communion among the persons of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit's work reflects who he always is as a particular person of the Trinity.

Theophanies Foreshadowing Christ

The Old Testament theophanies in their temporary character foreshadow the permanent "theophany" of God in Christ (John 1:14). So the analogy between the Old Testament appearances and Christ as the image of God is a genuine analogy. It is an analogy, but not an identity. The incarnation is unique. The Old Testament theophanies were

temporary; the incarnation is permanent. The Old Testament theophanies used visual and aural media such as a cloud, fire, and thunder; the incarnation involves the existence of the full human nature of Christ, with a complete human body. His human nature is permanently united to his divine nature.

This analogy between Christ and Old Testament theophanies encourages us to apply to Christ the triad of perspectives that we just used with theophanies. God the Father is the original and Christ is the image. Christ is the *reflection* of God the Father, to use our key category of reflection. There is a relation of reflection between the Father and the Son. If we look at this relation from the starting point of God the Father, we have an *originary* perspective on reflection. God the Father is the original pattern or archetype. The Son is the manifestation of this archetype. The Son is the image of the Father because the Father reflects his own character in the Son. If we start with the Son as the image, we may say that we know the Father through the Son, who is the image of the Father. We are using the *manifestational* perspective, with the Son as our starting point for contemplating the nature of God the Father and for knowing God the Father.

In the case of God, we must observe that these descriptions apply to the Father and the Son *eternally*. The Son is always the Son and always the image of the Father, even before the creation of the world. Christ became incarnate at a particular point in time, and then in his incarnation and his earthly existence he reflects the character of God the Father. But the Son did not begin to exist only at the moment of incarnation. He always exists, and he is always the image of the Father, even before he begins to reflect the Father in his incarnate state (Heb. 1:3).

Second Corinthians 4:4 associates Christ the image with the *glory* of God. It says that unbelievers are blinded "to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the *glory* of Christ, who is the image of God." Against the background of the Old Testament, this reference to "glory" alludes to the glory of God as it appears in Old Testament theophanies. We have already seen that the Holy Spirit is closely related to the theme of glory (1 Peter 4:14). In theophanies, the glory of God is present in two *connected* aspects: (1) God as the original and (2) the theophanic appearance of God as the manifestation. This connection reflects the work of the Holy Spirit. In God himself, the Holy Spirit is

present in God the Father and in Christ the Son. The Holy Spirit also brings the glory of Christ to us as recipients. *We* become connected to his glory.

Christ in his incarnation manifested the glory of God. This manifestation took place in time. But as usual, it is in harmony with who God always is. The pattern of reflection in theophany and in Christ represents to human beings what God actually is. Now, as we have seen, the pattern in theophany includes the threefold structure of perspectives, namely, the originary, manifestational, and connectional perspectives. This threefold pattern is in harmony with who God is. So we expect to find an analogous threefold pattern when we consider God himself in his own being.

And we do indeed find such a threefold pattern, as we saw above. Christ is the image of God the Father. This relation was true even before the creation of the world (Col. 1:15; Heb. 1:3). It is in fact one aspect of the necessary foundation for God's acts of creation.

Once again, the same principles for perspectives hold true:

1. There is only one reality of God.

2. The three perspectives on reflections—the originary, the manifestational, and the connectional—are distinct, because each one starts with a distinct thematic focus.

3. What stands out about God varies subtly, depending on which perspective serves as our starting point for thought.

4. Each perspective on reflections is fully present to the other two perspectives, so that it implicitly includes the others.

5. Each perspective indwells the others. It is already there in the idea of reflection, and we can perceive it by using one starting perspective on reflections.

The relation between the incarnation and Old Testament theophanies is complex. The Old Testament theophanies come earlier in the history of revelation. God meets with his people in temporary theophanies,

and these temporary manifestations foreshadow and anticipate the incarnation. But they are only shadows in comparison to the fullness of God's coming in the incarnation. They anticipate the incarnation, and we can see that from the standpoint of human knowledge, the earlier records of theophanies help us to make sense of the incarnation when it comes.

Conversely, when the incarnation takes place, it helps us to make sense of the earlier theophanies. God brought about the earlier appearances as a kind of foreshadowing of the incarnation, because he had already planned the incarnation. In this way, the theophanies are reflections backward in time of the incarnation, and are subordinate to it in character, according to the plan of God. So even though theophanies come earlier in time, they come "later" from the point of view of the logic of God's plan, according to which they are subordinate reflections of the incarnation that is still to come.

In sum, there are analogical relations between (1) reflection in God himself, (2) reflection in God in the incarnation of Christ, and (3) God's manifesting himself in theophany. The second is a kind of reflection of the first, and the third a reflection of the first and the second. We can summarize these analogical relations in a diagram. (See fig. 11.2.)

All these instances embody the pattern of three perspectives on reflections, namely, the originary, manifestational, and connectional perspectives. The perspectives themselves reflect the Trinitarian character of God. (See fig. 11.3.)

Reflections of Reflections

Since the three perspectives on reflections reflect God, they function as a kind of reflection of the Trinity. The pattern of reflection within the created world reflects God, who has within himself the archetypal instance of reflection. The archetypal reflection is in the Son, who is the image of the Father.

This kind of repetition of reflections is what we saw already with Adam. Adam fathered Seth as a son in his image. This instance of reflection imitated and reflected the archetypal reflection between God the Father and his Son. We can also have reflections of reflections. Adam is a reflection of the Son, who is the image of the Father. Seth had a son in his likeness, namely, Enosh (Gen. 5:6), who was a reflection of Seth, the
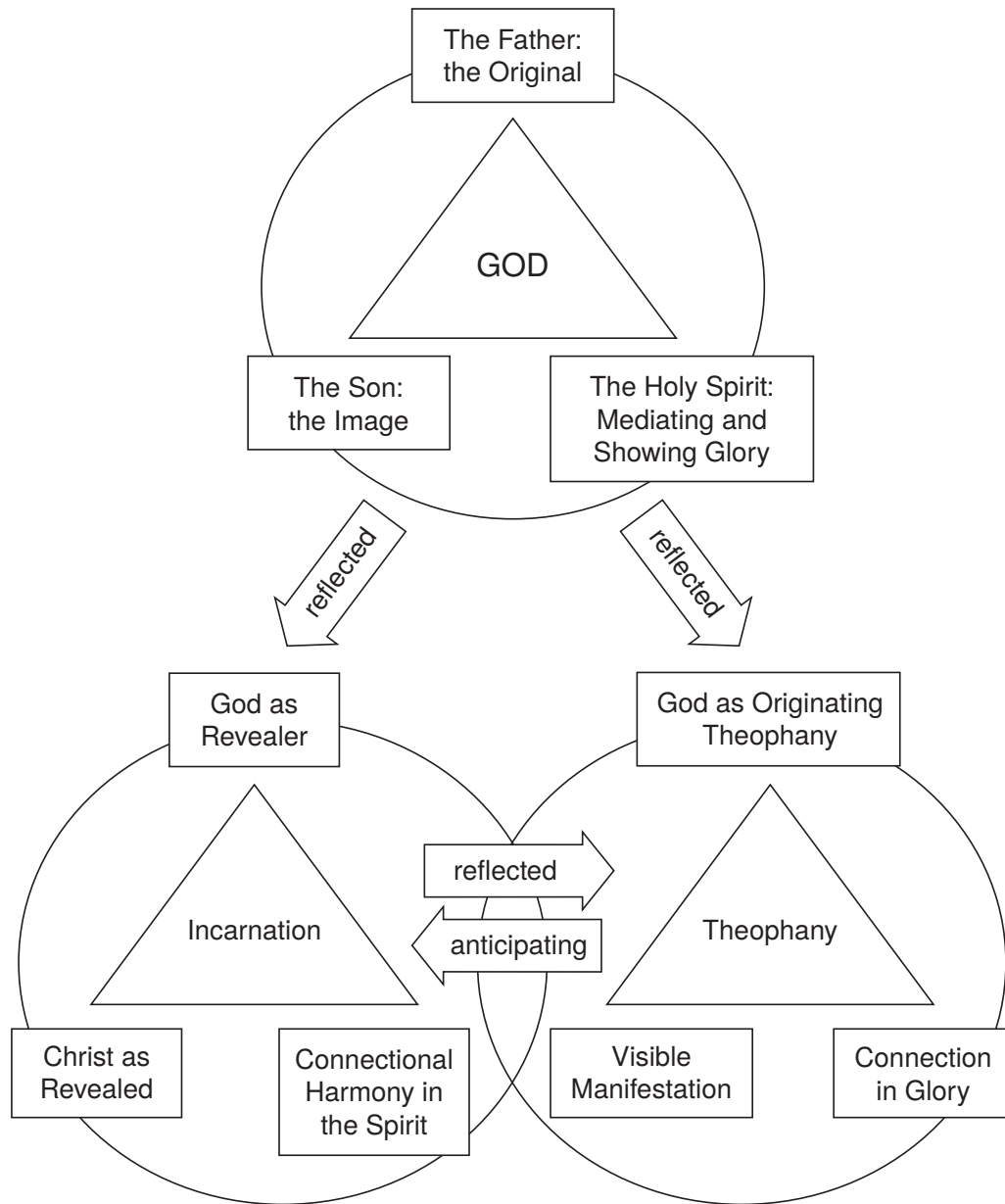
Fig. 11.2. Patterns of Reflection in God and His Manifestation

reflection of Adam, the image of God. We can also have reflections of the *process* of reflection. The process of Adam's fathering a son reflects the creation of man in the image of God. And this process of creation reflects the eternal begetting of the Son from the Father.

The glory in a theophany, we have said, is a feature belonging to God the original and to the specific visible manifestation. The visible manifestation displays God. But glory is also *itself* a kind of manifestation of one aspect of the visible reflection of God. It is then a reflection of a
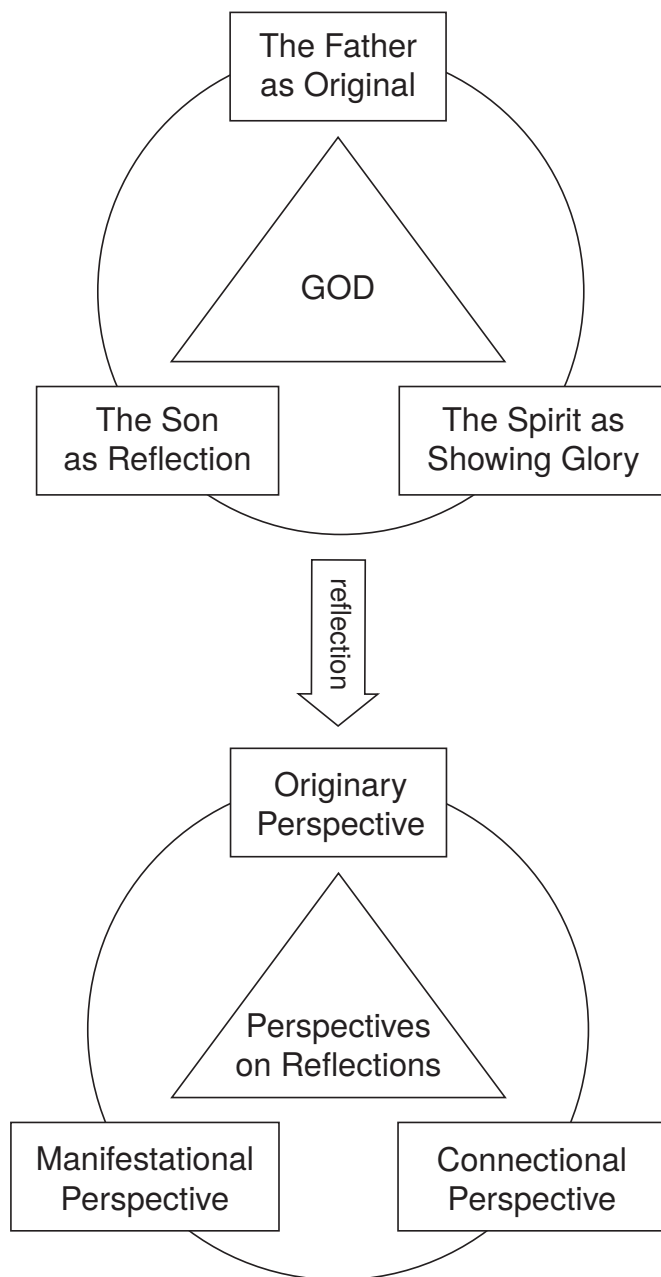
Fig. 11.3. From the Trinity to Perspectives on Reflections

reflection. The same is true concerning the work of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit "manifests" Christ in us by dwelling in us (Rom. 8:9–10). The Spirit as "another Helper" (John 14:16) helps us in a way that manifests or reflects Christ the helper and his help for us. The help of the one is the help of the other.

Since God himself is the original, in relation to us as creatures, we can apply the pattern of reflection in understanding God's relation to

us. God is the original. God's manifestation in Christ is the central manifestation. God's manifestation in Old Testament theophanies reflects the climactic manifestation in the incarnation. The Holy Spirit reflects the manifestation of Christ in our hearts, as we receive the gospel and the Holy Spirit teaches us. Then our reception through the Holy Spirit results in a reflection in the form of understanding and knowing God in our own minds. Included in this understanding is an ability to understand the process of reflection, using originary, manifestational, and connectional perspectives. These three perspectives within our minds constitute a mental reflection of God, who is the original. (See figs. 11.4, 11.5.)
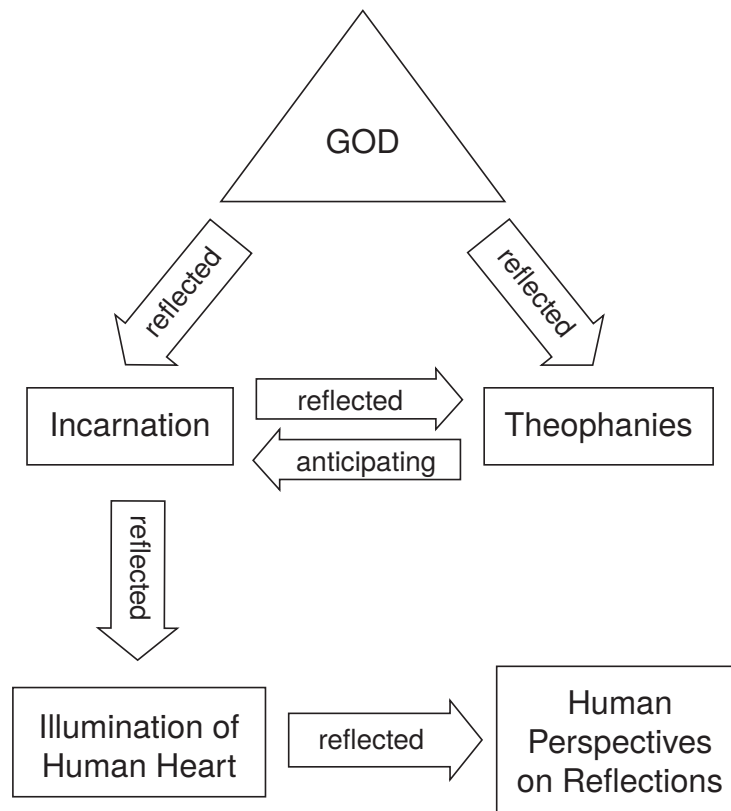
Fig. 11.4. The Reproduction of Reflections

Having received the Holy Spirit, we in turn begin to manifest the glory of God in our words and actions: "You are the light of the world" (Matt. 5:14; cf. Eph. 5:8). This means that, through the Spirit, we become a proximate source of light, which is then manifested in the world. (See figs. 11.6, 11.7.)

The Father:
the Original

GOD

The Son:
the Image

The Holy Spirit:
Showing Glory

reflected

reflected

God as
Revealer

God as Originating
Theophany

reflected

Incarnation

anticipating

Theophany

Christ as
Revealed

Connectional
Harmony in
the Spirit

Visible
Manifestation

Connection
in Glory

reflected

God as Teacher

Originary

Illumination
in Human Heart

reflected

Perspectives
on Reflections
(within human mind)

Christ as
Known

Connectional
Harmony in
the Spirit

Manifestational

Connectional

Fig. 11.5. Repeated Reflections in Divine Manifestations

God $\rightarrow$ Incarnation $\rightarrow$ Illumination $\rightarrow$ Light Shining
of Christians *from* Christians

Fig. 11.6. Reflection Extending to Christians
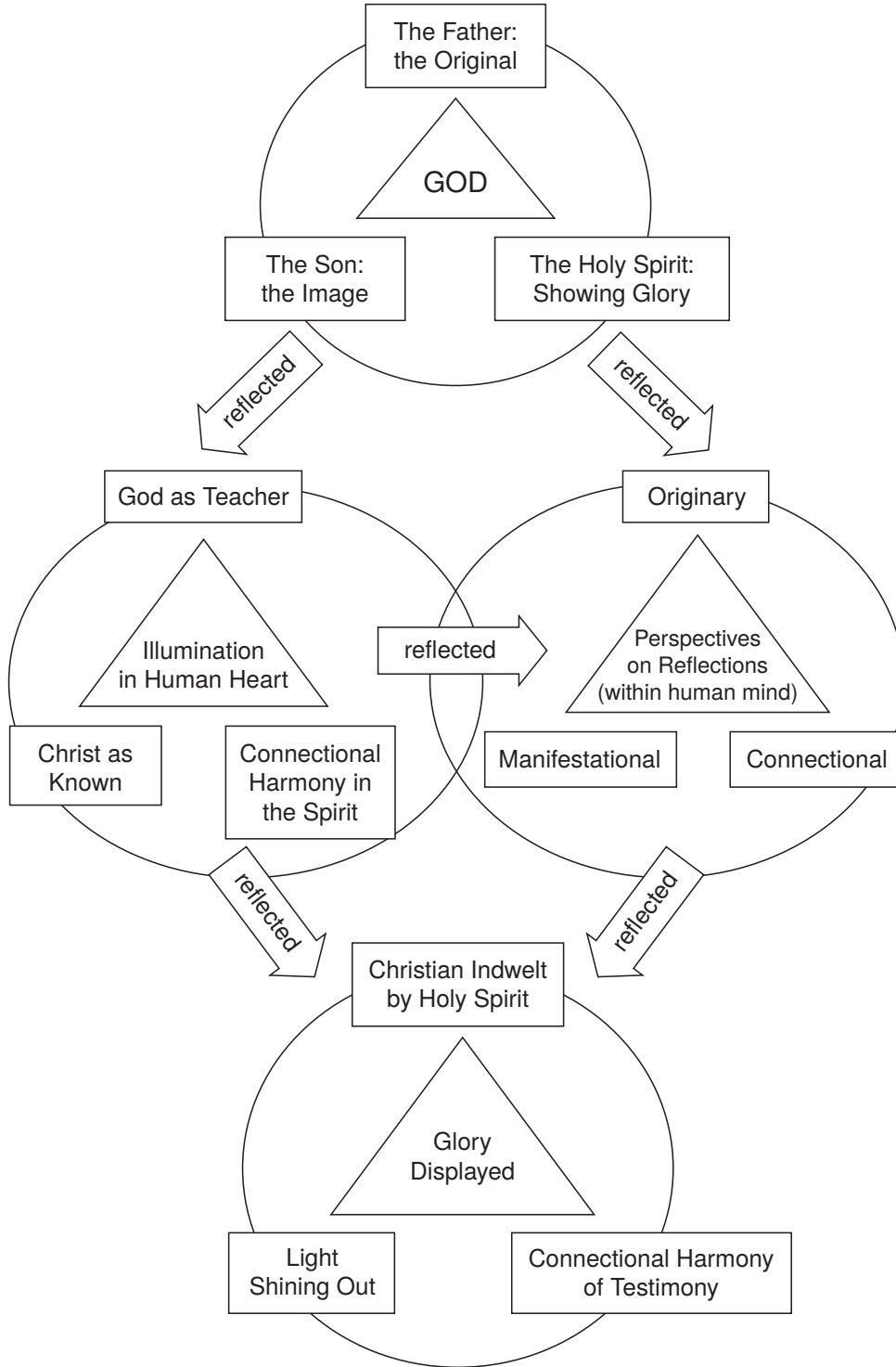
Fig. 11.7. Christians' Manifesting the Light of God

The Reality of Perspectives from the Trinity

We conclude that there is a genuine, organic relationship between the relationship of reflection in God himself and the three perspectives on reflections. We obtain these perspectives precisely by thinking about how God shows himself to us. The three perspectives that we use in our minds are a reflection within us of the divine personal relations within the Trinity. They are a reflection by means of theophany, which is a visible reflection of the invisible God.

Reflections of Coinherence

If the perspectives on reflections themselves reflect God, it is natural that they reflect the coinherence of the persons, such as we have discussed in chapter 7. That is, the coinherence among the persons of the Trinity is reflected in a kind of derivative coinherence among the perspectives. (See fig. 11.8.)

Coinherence in the   Coinherence among
Person of the Trinity $\rightarrow$ Three Perspectives
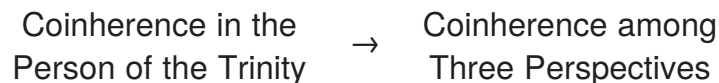
Fig. 11.8. Reflected Coinherence

On this point of "derivative coinherence" we must maintain appropriate reserve and caution. God is unique. Accordingly, the coinherence among the persons of the Trinity is unique. Using the word *coinherence* for anything *other* than the persons of the Trinity runs the risk of obscuring the uniqueness of the persons in God. We should acknowledge this danger. We should vigorously affirm and appreciate the *uniqueness* in the coinherence in the persons of the Trinity. (See fig. 11.9.)

While we acknowledge this uniqueness, we choose nevertheless to use the word *coinherence* more broadly, in order to make a complementary point. God in his uniqueness displays his character in the things that he has made. This display includes theophanies, as particularly intense displays of his character. So we should not be shocked if he also displays within creation reflections of his coinherence. We ourselves as human beings are made in the image of God, yet we are not God. So the perspectives that we use in our minds can reflect God without being strictly identical with the coinherence of the Trinity.

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        Creator                        Unique
    ┌─────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐
    │     △       │              │   Trinitarian    │
    │    GOD      │              │   Coinherence    │
    └─────────────┘              └──────────────────┘

    ┌───────────────────── Distinct ─────────────────────┐
    └─────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘

         │reflected                      │reflected
         ▼                               ▼
                                      Derivative
    ┌─────────────┐              ┌──────────────────┐
    │   Creature  │              │  Coinherence of  │
    │             │              │  Human Mental    │
    └─────────────┘              │  Perspectives    │
                                 └──────────────────┘
```
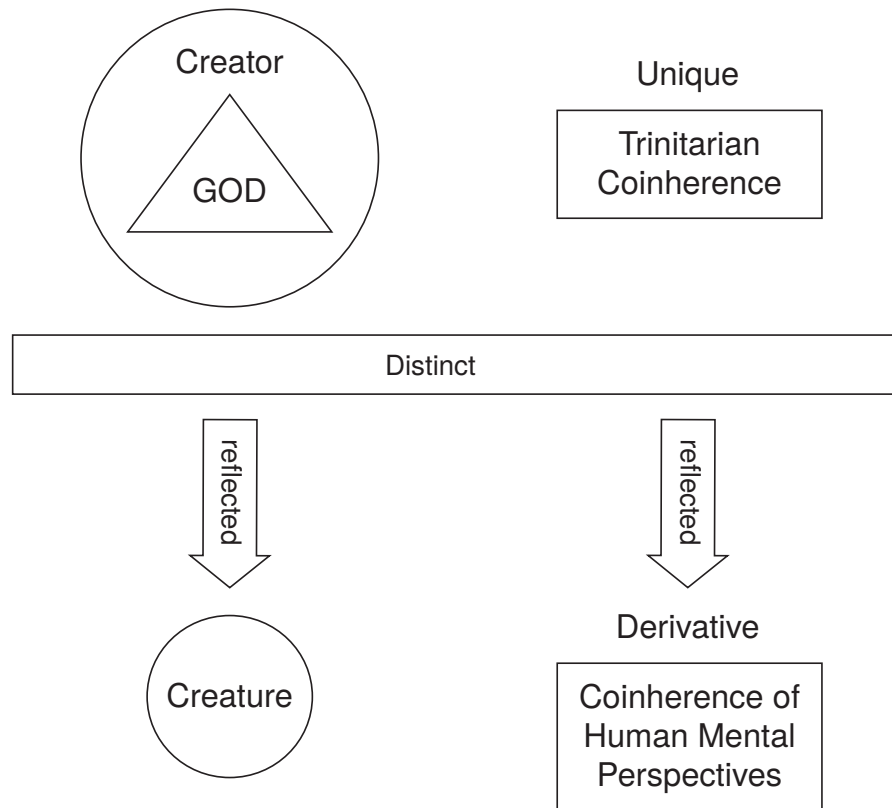
Fig. 11.9. Unique Coinherence

As usual, we must endeavor to preserve a Christian view of human knowledge of God. When we are taught by God through his Word in the Spirit, we have genuine knowledge of God, and this includes genuine knowledge of coinherence. Our reflection of coinherence in our minds has a genuine relation to the divine original, though it is also distinguishable from the divine original because we are creatures and not God.

In fact, the Bible uses the language of indwelling not only with respect to the persons of the Trinity, but with respect to God's dwelling in us and our dwelling in God. We have already seen this kind of language coming up in John 17:

I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are *in* me, and I *in* you, that they also may be *in* us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I *in* them and you *in* me, that they may become perfectly one. (John 17:20–23)

God's dwelling in us is not the *same* as the persons of the Trinity dwelling in one another. But it is analogous. So also, the coinherence among the persons of the Trinity is not the same as the human experience of coinherence among perspectives used by human beings. But it is analogous. Without analogy, we fall back into the error of treating God as unknowable.

Mystery in Perspectives

Coinherence in perspectives helps to explain why it is difficult to make precise the meaning of a perspective. It is difficult because perspectives are not neatly separable from one another. Part of what it means to be a perspective of this kind is that it is coinherent with other perspectives. Now, coinherence among the persons of the Trinity is incomprehensible. This derivative coinherence among perspectives is derivatively incomprehensible. It is incomprehensible because manifestational coinherence in human thinking is indwelt by originary coinherence among the persons of the Trinity: "*in him* we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

We should praise God both for the mystery of his infinity and for making himself clearly known. Our praise should include the mystery of coinherence. We praise God because his coinherence is mysterious and incomprehensible. It reminds us of his awesome greatness. At the same time, we praise him for making known his coinherence, so that we can understand it enough to see something of his greatness. We praise him for impressing reflections of his coinherence in his interactions with the world he has made.

The Ability of God to Make Himself Known

God makes himself known in theophany as well as in other ways (the Bible and general revelation). A theophany is a reflection of God, mirroring who God is. God can do this in perfect consistency with who he is, because from all eternity God already has within himself an archetypal reflection. The Son is the exact image of the Father (Heb. 1:3). This archetypal reflection is the foundation and source for instances of reflection in theophany. God not only reflects himself in theophany, but reflects in theophany the relation of reflection between the Father and the Son. The production of a reflection is not a "problem" for God

because he himself has this capability in his Trinitarian nature. Praise the Lord!

Key Terms

> **coinherence**[3]
> **connectional perspective**
> derivative
> divine nature
> human nature
> image
> **incarnation**
> **manifestational perspective**
> original
> **originary perspective**
> **perspectives on reflections**
> **reflection**
> shadow
> **theophany**

Study Questions

1. What is the relation between Adam's being in the image of God and Adam's fatherhood?
2. What is an archetype, and how is it related to a corresponding ectype?
3. What is the original (the archetype) for Adam's being made in the image of God?
4. What verses indicate that Christ is the image of God?
5. What are the three perspectives on reflections? How are they related to one another?
6. What is the origin for the three perspectives on reflections?
7. What is coinherence? What is the original coinherence, and are there derivative forms of coinherence?
8. What dangers do we confront with respect to the Creator-creature distinction when we talk about coinherence?

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3. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *Theophany: A Biblical Theology of God's Appearing.* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018. Chaps. 14–24. A study of reflections that occur when God manifests himself (especially in theophany).

12

Perspectives from
Trinitarian Analogies

IN CHAPTER 8, we discussed three main biblical analogies for personal relations in the Trinity. Each of these analogies can serve as the origin of perspectives. In the previous chapter, we considered the analogy with reflections. Let us now consider the analogy with communication and the analogy with a family.

The Analogy with Communication

According to the analogy with communication, God the Father is the speaker; God the Son is the Word; and God the Holy Spirit is the breath of God carrying the Word out. The Holy Spirit also functions in some instances as the *recipient* or hearer of the Word (John 16:13). From this analogy, we can produce three perspectives on communication, based on the three persons of the Trinity.[1]

Communication at both the divine and the human levels involves a speaker, a speech (the word), and an audience. Each of these can be a starting point for a perspective on communication. The perspective from the standpoint of the speaker may be called the *expressive* perspective. The speaker expresses himself through speaking. The perspective from the standpoint of the speech may be called the *informational* perspective. The speaker communicates *content*. This content (information) proceeds from speaker to audience, so the content can be the starting point for considering the entire communication. Finally, the perspective from

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1. See further Vern S. Poythress, *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009), chaps. 2–4.

the standpoint of the audience may be called the *productive* perspective, because the speech is intended to produce something—to produce an effect.[2] (See table 12.1; fig. 12.1.)

Person of the Trinity	Function in Communication	Perspective
The Father	speaker	expressive perspective
The Son	speech	informational perspective
The Holy Spirit	breath and recipient	productive perspective

Table 12.1. Perspectives on Communication
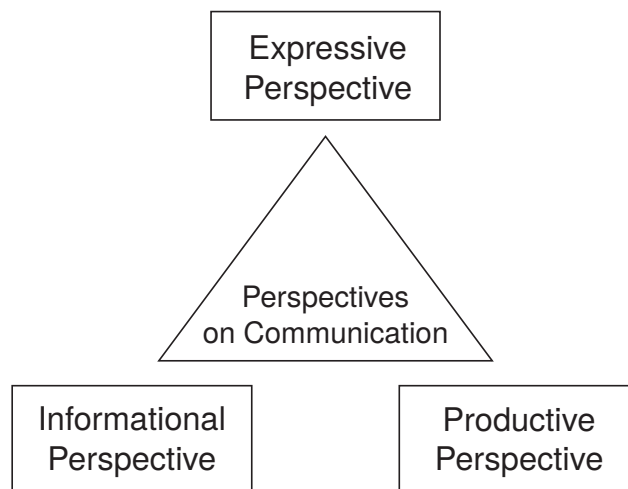
Fig. 12.1. Perspectives on Communication

We should say that the label *informational perspective* is not very satisfactory. The word *information* can in our day be a cold, colorless, bloodless word that denotes data isolated from persons and human purposes. That is not what we have in mind. The informational perspective

2. See Vern S. Poythress, *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999), 101–7.

leads to and in the end includes reckoning with the person of the speaker and the purposes for the hearer. Maybe the word *content* or *discourse* would be better, but those two labels also have their own potential for misunderstanding. We will stick with the term *informational*, with the understanding that it designates a perspective that starts with the speech or writing and uses it as a perspective on the whole communication.[3]

Each of these three perspectives implicitly encompasses the others. To be expressive implies expressing something by way of content. That is, for someone to be a speaker implies a speech. The expressive perspective encompasses the informational perspective.

For a speaker to be expressive also implies that he intends some effect. That is, for someone to be a speaker implies the existence of someone to whom words are spoken with intentionality. (In the unusual case of soliloquy, the recipient or hearer is the same as the speaker—but there is still an intended hearer.) The expressive perspective encompasses the productive perspective.

To have a speech with information implies the existence of a speaker of the speech. That is, the informational perspective encompasses the expressive perspective.

To have a speech with information implies a destination for the speech. That is, the informational perspective encompasses the productive perspective.

To be the recipient of a speech implies the existence of a speaker and a speech. Thus, the productive perspective encompasses the expressive perspective and the informational perspective. To put it another way, in the process of hearing, the hearer is instinctively drawn in to considering the speech and the speaker. The hearer from his productive perspective naturally considers what the speaker is doing, and thus constructs within his productive perspective an expressive perspective for the speaker to whom he is listening. He also constructs an informational perspective as he considers the meaning of the speech's content. The speaker naturally considers whom he is addressing and what he wants to accomplish. So he begins to have within himself a sense of a productive perspective.

3. Since I used the expression *informational* in an earlier book, I am trying to avoid confusion by not needlessly multiplying terminology (ibid., 102).

Relation of the Trinity to Perspectives on Communication

With human beings, understanding of communication is never exhaustive. Speakers may misapprehend what will be effective for their listeners, and listeners may misapprehend what a speaker intends. Each person involved may be subject to sluggishness or dullness or duplicity. A human speaker may have a view of his audience that does not fully correspond to the audience. For instance, he may use English without realizing that the audience does not understand English. In such a case with human beings, the expressive perspective, from the standpoint of the limited and faulty knowledge of the speaker, does not fully encompass the productive perspective (though the speaker intends that it should). With God, on the other hand, there are no such limitations. So with God, each of the three perspectives is a perspective on the whole of communication.

The three perspectives on communication clearly have a relation to the persons of the Trinity, because the persons of the Trinity offer us the *archetype* or original for communication. All human communication consists in *ectypes* imitating the archetypal communication among the persons of the Trinity. We can therefore summarize the derivation of the perspectives on communication in a diagram that relates the perspectives to the Trinity (fig. 12.2).

The Trinity is the archetype for perspectives on communication, while the perspectives on human communication are ectypes. Even when we use the three perspectives to think about divine communication, our use remains subordinated to or derivative from the Trinitarian character of God, who is one God in three persons. So the perspectives we use are still ectypal.

The relation between the Trinity and the perspectives is a relation of an original (the Trinity) to a derivative manifestation (the three perspectives). This relation offers an instance involving reflection. The perspectives on communication are a reflection of the persons of the Trinity in their relations. The reflection encompasses at least three aspects:

1. Only one communication is being examined, and this communication reflects the unity of God.

2. There are three perspectives on communication, reflecting the three persons in God.
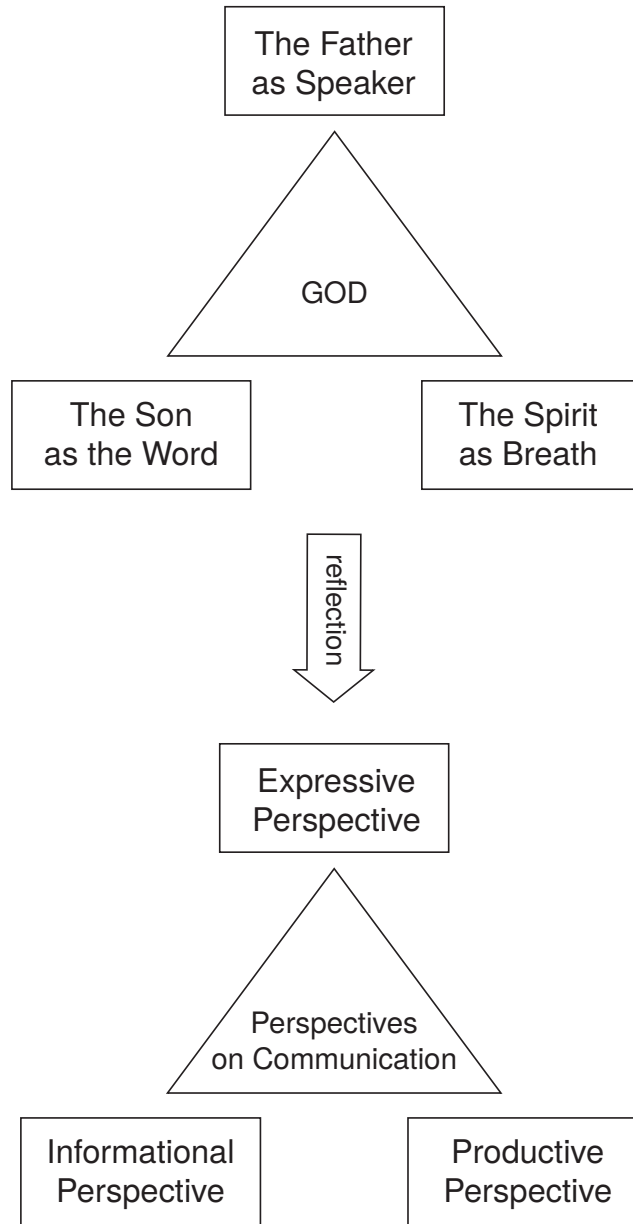
Fig. 12.2. From the Trinity to Communication

3. The three perspectives coinhere (they encompass one another),
    reflecting the coinherence among the persons in God.

Since the knowledge of the Trinity is mediated to us by divine speech
to us, we can represent the mediating status of divine speech to us as a
third triad, reflecting the Trinitarian character of God and reflected in
turn in human perspectives. The eternal speech of God in his Word is
reflected in his speech to us in time (God's covenantal speech). And the

pattern shown in his speech is reflected in our human communication. (See fig. 12.3.)
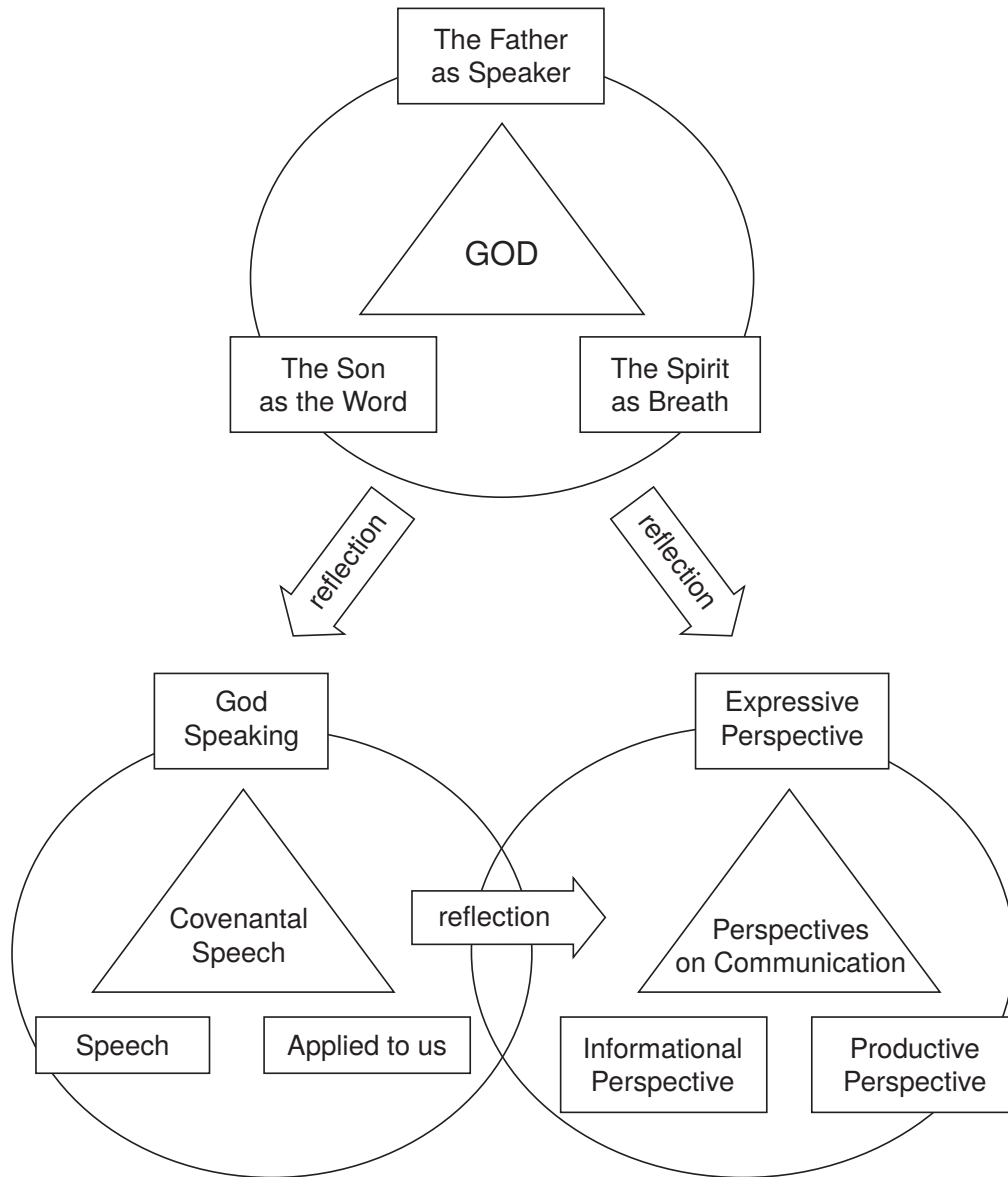
Fig. 12.3. From God through Covenantal Speech to Us

This reflection of God's character in his communication to us has practical bearing. Whenever we listen to God speaking to us in the Bible, we receive communication that has an inner structure reflecting the Trinity. We are supported by God's Trinitarian character, whether we are aware of it or not.

Family Perspectives

Next we consider the analogy that compares the Trinity to a family. It is an analogy using love. The Father loves the Son and gives him the Holy Spirit (John 3:34–35). The action of love can be viewed from the perspective of any of the three persons. The Father is the initiator of love. The Son is the recipient. And the Holy Spirit is the gift who expresses love. (See table 12.2; fig. 12.4.)

Person of the Trinity	Function in Love	Perspective
The Father	initiator	initiation perspective
The Son	recipient	reception perspective
The Holy Spirit	gift expressing love	gift perspective

Table 12.2. Perspectives on Love

Fig. 12.4. Perspectives on Love

Love is an activity within the Trinity. But it is also an activity in which God engages in relation to human beings. God loves his people.

He is the initiator; the people are recipients and the gift is love, expressed preeminently in the gift of the Holy Spirit: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom. 5:5). Love is also an activity in which human beings can engage in their relations to one another: "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to *love* one another" (1 John 4:11).
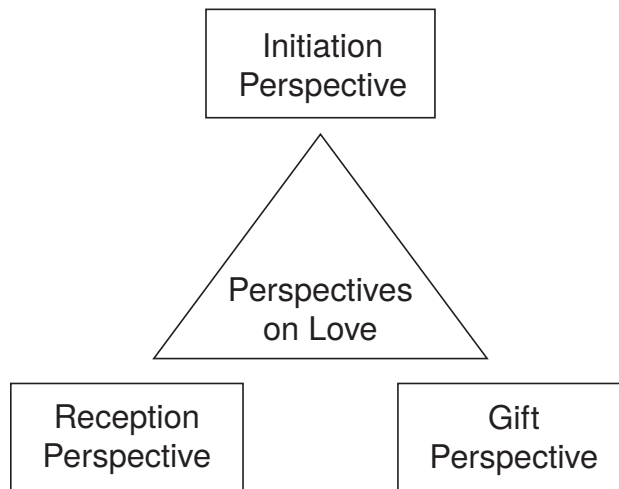
We can see a common pattern with all three of the main analogies from chapter 8. In all three cases, God acts within himself, in relations between persons of the Trinity. God also acts toward us, and we act toward one another. God speaks to us, and we speak to one another. God makes a human being in his image, and fathers produce sons in their image. (See table 12.3.)

Analogy with Communication	Analogy with Reflections	Analogy with a Family
God speaks the Word	The Father begets his Image	The Father loves the Son
God speaks to us (covenantal)	God makes man in his image	God loves us
We speak to one another	Adam fathers Seth in his image	We love one another

Table 12.3. Reflections of Three Main Analogies

The Action Analogy

We are now in a better position to consider the action analogy (introduced in chapter 9). In table 12.2, we have three perspectives: the initiation perspective, the reception perspective, and the gift perspective. These three perspectives are quite general in character and can apply in situations other than the original one, in which we are focusing on God's love. For example, let us focus on the language in the New Testament about the Father's *sending* the Son. The Father is the initiator; the Son is the recipient of the Father's initiative. The Father gives the Holy Spirit to the Son so that the Son carries out the Father's initiative in the power of the Holy Spirit. And in addition, the Son sends the Holy Spirit as a

gift to his disciples. The language of sending is still closely connected to the analogy with a family, since the Father is called the *Father* and the Son called the *Son* in connection with the sending.

In fact, since all of God's actions involve his love, we can expand to consider all of God's actions. The analogy with a family then leads naturally to what we have called the *action* analogy, with the Father as planner, the Son as executor, and the Holy Spirit as one who makes application. The Father as planner is the initiator. The Son is the recipient of the Father's plan and his commission, which the Son then executes. The Holy Spirit is the gift from the Father and the Son, and the Spirit is central in the application of the Son's work of redemption.

The action analogy for the Trinity can become the starting point for three perspectives. We can view an action from the standpoint of its planning, or from the standpoint of its execution and accomplishment, or from the standpoint of its completion in application. This triad of perspectives applies to human action. I plan to get bananas from the store. I go to the store and get them—I execute the plan. This act of obtaining the bananas is the stage of accomplishment. And when I get home, my family and I eat them—they become a gift to enjoy. Each stage in the action makes sense only because it goes together with the other two. Let us call these three viewpoints the *planning perspective,* the *accomplishment perspective*, and the *application perspective.* (See fig. 12.5.)

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                  ┌──────────────┐
                  │   Planning   │
                  │  Perspective │
                  └──────────────┘
                        /\
                       /  \
                      /    \
                     / Perspectives \
                    / on Personal Action \
                   /_____\
   ┌────────────────┐        ┌──────────────┐
   │ Accomplishment │        │  Application │
   │  Perspective   │        │  Perspective │
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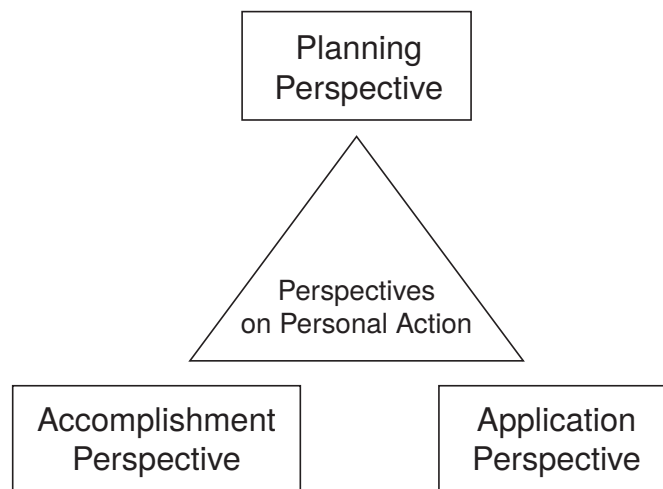
Fig. 12.5. Perspectives on Personal Action

Each of these three perspectives encompasses the other two. Planning is planning for accomplishment and application. So the planning perspective implicitly includes planning an accomplishment and planning an application, and includes within it a picture of both.

Accomplishment is accomplishment of a plan, leading to a conclusion (application). So the accomplishment perspective encompasses the planning perspective and the application perspective.

Application is application of what has been planned and accomplished. So the application perspective encompasses the planning perspective and the accomplishment perspective.

Human actions are not always *fully* planned out beforehand. And they do not always have clear goals in application. So when applied to human intentions, the three perspectives may not fully encompass one another. But God's exhaustive knowledge implies that the perspectives are all-encompassing when we consider divine action. And divine action always undergirds human action, since God sustains us all.

The three perspectives on personal action have their origin in the distinction among the persons of the Trinity. The perspectives in this way are a reflection of the persons of the Trinity. (See fig. 12.6.)

The Trinitarian character of God is the archetype or original. The perspectives are a derivative manifestation in human thought. They are an ectype, a reflection of the original.

The reflection includes several aspects:

1. Only one action is being examined, and this action reflects the unity of God.
2. There are three perspectives on the personal action, reflecting the three persons in God.
3. The three perspectives coinhere (they encompass one another), reflecting the coinherence among the persons in God.

Let us praise God for reflecting his Trinitarian character in his redemptive works and in perspectives that we may use in considering his works. This reflection of God's character has practical bearing. We experience salvation as a work of God. It is God who saves us, not we ourselves. And the way he saves us reflects his Trinitarian character, in planning, accomplishment, and application.
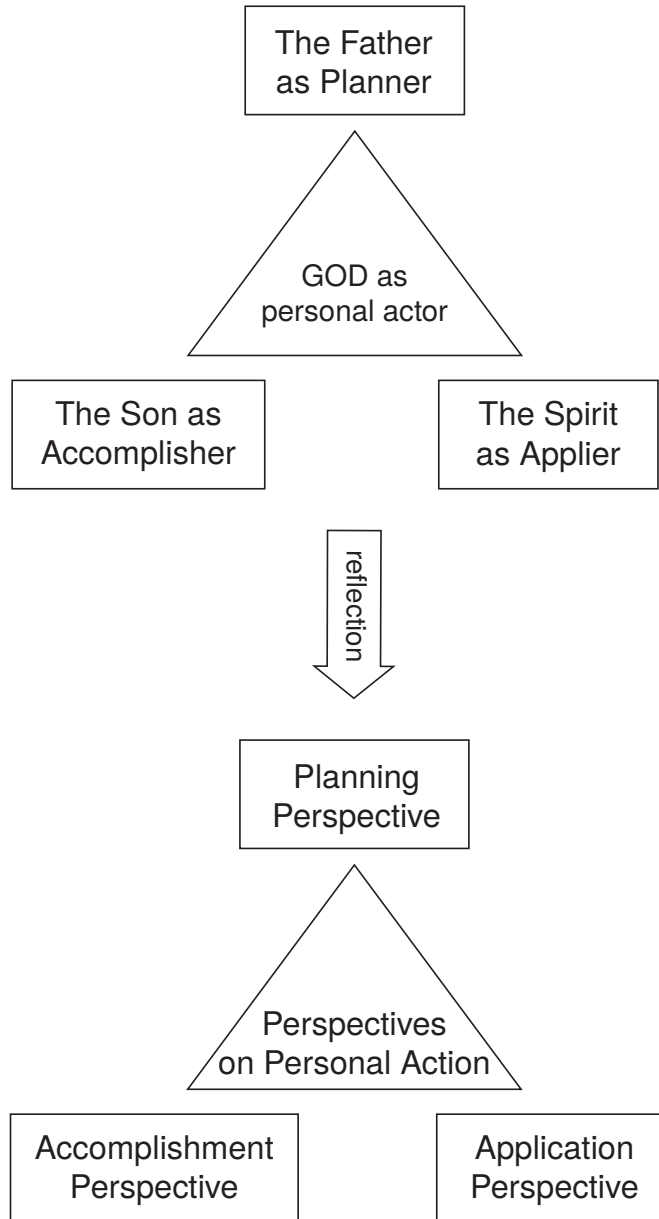
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                    ┌──────────────┐
                    │  The Father  │
                    │  as Planner  │
                    └──────────────┘
                          △
                         ╱ ╲
                        ╱GOD as╲
                       ╱personal╲
                      ╱ actor    ╲
                     ╱────────────╲
      ┌──────────────┐          ┌──────────────┐
      │ The Son as   │          │  The Spirit  │
      │ Accomplisher │          │  as Applier  │
      └──────────────┘          └──────────────┘

                        ⇓ reflection

                    ┌──────────────┐
                    │   Planning   │
                    │  Perspective │
                    └──────────────┘
                          △
                         ╱ ╲
                        ╱Perspectives╲
                       ╱on Personal Action╲
                      ╱────────────────╲
      ┌──────────────────┐      ┌──────────────┐
      │  Accomplishment  │      │  Application │
      │   Perspective    │      │  Perspective │
      └──────────────────┘      └──────────────┘
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Fig. 12.6. From the Trinity to Personal Action

Key Terms

accomplishment perspective[4]
action analogy
analogy with a family
analogy with communication
analogy with reflections

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4. Key terms in **bold** are defined in the glossary at the end of this volume.

application perspective
archetype
covenantal speech
derivative
expressive perspective
gift perspective
informational perspective
initiation perspective
manifestational
originary
perspectives on communication
perspectives on love
perspectives on personal action
planning perspective
productive perspective
reception perspective
reflection

Study Questions

1. In what way can perspectives be derived from the analogy with communication? from the analogy with a family or action analogy?
2. What are the three perspectives on communication? How do these relate to the persons of the Trinity?
3. In what way do the three perspectives on communication cohere with one another?
4. What are the three perspectives on love?
5. In what way do the three perspectives on love cohere with one another?
6. What are the three perspectives on personal action? How do these relate to the persons of the Trinity?
7. In what way do the three perspectives on personal action cohere with one another?
8. By thinking about the perspectives on communication and the perspectives on personal action, what can we learn about human nature and human abilities in relation to God?

For Further Reading

Poythress, Vern S. *God-Centered Biblical Interpretation*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1999. Pp. 101–7. An explanation of the three perspectives on communication.

———. *In the Beginning Was the Word: Language—A God-Centered Approach*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2009. Chaps. 2–4. On the origin of language in God.