"The Christian doctrine of the Trinity has been professed and debated by countless believers and scholars for two millennia. What more insight can a new book bring? Doctor Spencer's astute observations and robust arguments advocate for the use of imperfect imagery for better understanding of God and for effective evangelism. While the book will benefit anyone who wants to know more about the mysterious God they worship, the author as a renowned theologian and a lifelong urban minister intends it for thousands of his urban-campus seminary students who are bivocational ministers in practical ministries. It speaks volumes about using images and illustrations as legitimate and profitable ways to reveal the nature of God to profound effect."

—Lance Pan,
Investment Research Professional,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"William David Spencer treats us to a cultural linguistic medley on the identity of the Trinity in his book *Three in One: Analogies for the Trinity*. He brings to bear on the topic his energies as theologian, biblical scholar, novelist, and cultural critic. Spencer's goal is through language to ask whether the Bible really teaches that God is a Trinity, whether it is even legitimate to express the inexpressible in language. Jesus' example offers such permission. This sanction is followed by a cross-cultural analysis from early Christian exegesis into the present. The chapter that asks about an analogy to that of a family raises such questions as whether God has a wife, is gendered, or is best thought of as community. Spencer's answer to these and other questions takes us on a journey from the ancient Near East to the contemporary world through the eyes of 'one-third world' scholars but also through those of students and theologians from Asia, Africa, Latin America, and other cultures. Throughout, Spencer stays centered on the role of language, its capabilities and limits, while emphasizing the personal identity of the triune God in dynamic, analogical thinking."

—Rev. Rodney L. Petersen, PhD
Visiting Scholar, Duke Divinity School

"Bill Spencer has a penchant for going after the tough questions, and in *Three in One* he takes us on an important journey through the history, theology, and morphology of explaining the nature of the unexplainable. Concerned that we use illustrating images correctly in talking about the nature of the triune God, Spencer urges caution in our use of one-dimensional images for our multidimensional God. But he also reminds us of the profoundly effective ways in which Jesus' parables helped his listeners grasp truths about God."

—Alice Mathews, PhD
Lois W. Bennett Distinguished Professor Emerita,
Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary

"At a time when many continue to revisit and reexamine the gains and losses of the so-called twentieth century Barthian and Rahnerian trinitarian 'revival', 'renaissance', or better put 'reengagement', here comes globally-minded churchman and biblical theologian Dr. William David Spencer's particular contribution to the growing literature: *Three in One*. While focusing on questions and issues attending to language, Spencer's *Three in One* is both a testament to his high view of Scripture as well as his expertise in the theological retrieval of the Christian tradition. What is unique to *Three in One* among many recently published treatises in trinitarian theology, is Spencer's evident trajectory as a life-long urban pastor-scholar and his urgent call to once again consider the practical implications of images for the Trinity."

—David A. Escobar Arcay ThM, PhD
Associate Professor of Theology and Director Hispanic Ministry Program
Western Theological Seminary

THREE
IN
ONE

Analogies for the Trinity

WILLIAM DAVID SPENCER

KREGEL ACADEMIC

To my dear wife,
the Rev. Dr. Aída Besançon Spencer,
whose profound gifts of wisdom and
organization enhanced this book.

HEAVEN'S TERMS FOR PEACE

I

CREATOR/ CONQUEROR/COMFORTER

II

One God—when no one else—sufficient.
One Love creating us, proficient.
Our wills, returning love, deficient.
One Sacrifice applied, efficient.

III

The Voice spoke to conceive
not a replica or a reflection
but the Ray from the Sun of affection
to image the source of election: the only Fountainhead.
Thus, the Word came to reprieve,
with an amnesty with proviso,
the news on its combat radio:
fleshing in our own barrio is heaven's bold beachhead.
The Nurse heals to relieve
the wounds of warring wills of lovers
to unify sisters and brothers, equally,
loving God and others: peace terms of the Godhead.

William David Spencer, August 17, 2011[1] / May 23, 2022

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1.   An earlier version of the poem appeared in *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 4 (2011): 30.

OTHER BOOKS BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Theology and the Arts

God through the Looking Glass: Glimpses from the Arts (ed. with A. B. Spencer)

Mysterium and Mystery: The Clerical Crime Novel (Edgar Award nominee by the Mystery Writers of America)

Redeeming the Screens: Living Stories of Media "Ministers" Bringing the Message of Jesus Christ to the Entertainment Industry (ed. with J. C. DeFazio)

Theology, Apologetics, and Culture

Chanting Down Babylon: The Rastafari Reader (ed. with N. S. Murrell, A. A. McFarlane)

Dread Jesus: A Christian Response to Rastafarian Views of Jesus

The Goddess Revival: A Biblical Response to God(dess) Spirituality (with A. B. Spencer, C. C. Kroeger, D. F. G. Hailson) (a *Christianity Today* Book of the Year)

Theological and Biblical Studies

The Global God: Multicultural Evangelical Views of God (ed. with A. B. Spencer)

Joy Through the Night: Biblical Resources on Suffering (with A. B. Spencer)

The Prayer Life of Jesus: Shout of Agony, Revelation of Love: A Commentary (with A. B. Spencer)

Reaching for the New Jerusalem: A Biblical and Theological Framework for the City (ed. with A. B. Spencer, S. H. Park)

Second Corinthians: A Commentary (with A. B. Spencer)

Christian Living and Ministry

Christian Egalitarian Leadership: Empowering the Whole Church according to the Scriptures (ed. with A. B. Spencer)

Empowering English Language Learners: Successful Strategies of Christian Educators (ed. with J. C. DeFazio)

Global Voices on Biblical Equality: Women and Men Serving Together in the Church (ed. with A. B. Spencer, M. Haddad)

Marriage at the Crossroads: Couples in Conversation about Discipleship, Gender Roles, Decision Making and Intimacy (with A. B. Spencer, S. R. Tracy, C. G. Tracy)

Novels

Cave of Little Faces: A Novel (with A. B. Spencer)

Name in the Papers (Golden Halo Award for Outstanding Contribution to Literature by the Southern California Motion Picture Council)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I thank the triune God, without whom this book would not have been written.

I thank my wife, Rev. Dr. Aída Besançon Spencer, who looks out for everyone, especially for her family. In this case she initially read and critiqued each chapter as it appeared, and at the end she rallied around, double-checking the references and inputting the corrections. She is also my Bible-answer woman to whom I bring any sticky translation issues; it's so nice to have a world-renowned senior professor of New Testament in the house! I also want to highlight the exemplary work of Dr. Robert Boenig, a lifelong friend and consummate scholar whose example encouraged me to explain each technical term for my readers, as he does in his masterpiece *C. S. Lewis and the Middle Ages.* Reading his insightful pages in which he carefully explains every technical term he uses so that readers would understand, I realized that neglecting to do this was a failing in my own discipline, as I note we theologians often use terms without adequate explanation that not even our students can follow. So, applying his model, I tried to explain every term so that lay readers can follow my discussion too. I also intentionally used both popular and accessible books, like a college Latin dictionary and the Langenscheidt Hebrew and Barclay Newman Greek lexicons, so that students could see them in use, as well as the scholarly staples like Brown, Driver, Briggs; Liddell and Scott; and BDAG resources. On resources I owe a great debt to our former Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary librarian James Darlack, who graciously helped me retrieve the 110 passages of the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* that I slowly studied over ten months while I taught in our Gordon-Conwell Boston Campus Center for Urban Ministerial Education. I was assisted by Anastasios Markoulidakis and Josh Reno, and for the final key entry, I compared my translation with that of Dr. Catherine Kroeger, our school's treasured classical scholar. She was blessed, as is Dr. Boenig, with a photographic memory. I am also continually grateful to David Shorey and Adam Davis who run our copy services as a ministry, and the gracious Robert McFadden, who helped me

ABBREVIATIONS

ACW Ancient Christian Writers

ANF *Ante-Nicene Fathers*

BDAG Danker, Frederick W., Walter Bauer, William F. Arndt, and F. Wilbur Gingrich. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* 3rd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

BDB Brown, Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1907.

BDF Blass, F., and A. Debrunner. *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature.* Translated and edited by Robert W. Funk. 10th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961.

BN   Newman, Barclay M., Jr. *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament.* Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft/ United Bible Societies, 1993.

FC   The Fathers of the Church

HPA House of Prisca and Aquila Series

ICC   International Critical Commentary

IDB *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible.* Edited by George Arthur Buttrick. 5 vols. Nashville: Abingdon, 1962.

LCC Schaff, Philip, and Henry Wace, eds. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.* Library of Christian Classics. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969.

LCL   The Loeb Classical Library

LSJ   Liddell, Henry George, Robert Scott, Henry Stuart Jones. *A Greek-English Lexicon.* 9th ed. With revised supplement 1968. Oxford: Clarendon, 1940.

LXX *The Septuagint Version of the Old Testament and Apocrypha.* London: Samuel Bagster, n.d.

MT   Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible
NICNT   New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIGTC   New International Greek Testament Commentary
NT   New Testament
OCD   Hammond, N. G. L., and H. H. Scullard, eds. *The Oxford Classical Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970.
ODCC   Cross, F. L., and E. A. Livingstone, eds. *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church.* 2nd ed. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983.
OT   Old Testament
Thayer   Thayer, Joseph Henry. *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament.* Marshallton, DE: National Foundation for Christian Education, 1889.
TLG   Thesaurus Linguae Graecae

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This book is about a variety of attempts Christians use to explain the triune God using illustrations and images of the Trinity and the theologies—good, bad, and confusing—that these illustrations convey. The approach is to analyze a number of these images, highlight what is good about them, warn about what might be misleading in them, and then suggest how they may be used best to teach about God's nature.

This is not an easy task. Why is that? Because God, who is at the center of the message we find revealed in the Bible, is completely other than humans. In our world, and indeed our universe, where everything we see or experience is breaking down or beginning, we have no point of reference by which we could have created the concept of an eternal and almighty Being who is forever unified and diverse, three in one—not three as in the case of three parts, but a triunity beyond our experience, yet graciously self-revealed by God to humanity. That this information was even given to us by our Creator is a great gift of love. It identifies the first Cause that brought ourselves and everything around us into being, since adequate cause reasoning tells us the material in which we exist has no eternal dimension and could not have created itself out of nothing. Is such information hard to fathom? Of course it is! Why would it not be? So, this revelation by the one we call "God" is a precious treasure of love we want to share with everyone.

Goals of This Book

Why Have I Written This Book?

Before setting out on any journey where one is not just wandering about but has a destination in mind, the wise traveler programs the GPS, downloads the directions, and checks the map. The wise chef consults the recipe. The wise student reviews the syllabus. The wise assembler who does not want to end up with a handful of odd bolts and a rattling machine studies the manufacturer's instructional pamphlet. That is what this introduction is. It is an orientation so you can get the most out of this book. I start with why I wrote it, who it is for, what it's not about and what it is about, where its focus lies, and what it is assuming. If you read it and the next chapter, you will be equipped with tools you need for theological interpretation.

Theology is the central part of a three-part scholarly endeavor to understand God's revelation. The first stage of inquiry is exegesis (from *ek* = "out" and *ago* = "I lead," meaning to derive the truth out of God's self-revelation in the Bible). The second is theology: ordering and interpreting that revelation. The third stage is application: learning to apply what we have learned through preaching, teaching, counseling, church administration, and so on. Doing this three-stage preparation (what was called "rightly dividing the Word of Truth" from the King James Bible's rendering of 2 Timothy 2:15, beloved in the church in which I was born and reared) helps us to become selective with all the opinions about what the Bible means that constantly bombard us as we gather information that we hope will help us in our understanding and our ministries. In this book, our focus will be all these images and interpretations about God's nature and actions among us that we will encounter.

Also, on a personal note, I love God, and I love theology. I find learning about God nourishing and exhilarating. If this book helps you draw nearer to God and fills you with gratitude and praise to the incomprehensible One who, having no necessity to do so, still determined to communicate with us, animated dust, and that realization results in your greater desire to know God through God's self-revelation and to explain the content of that communication more and more accurately to those you serve, then I will be blessed. If it helps you commit yourself to making every effort to understand what we limited humans can about the great, mysterious God we worship and to present the revelation of God's nature in the Bible as accurately as you can in your discourse and the illustrative images you choose to use, then I will be doubly blessed.

Who Is My Audience?

As an author, I have learned that to reach everybody, we have to reach somebody specifically. Explaining what one means to people one knows is the first step in communicating to someone one has not yet met.[1] So, for this topic, the particular audience I have in mind is a group of friends interested in this topic who are very dear to me: the more than 3,600 seminarians to whom I have had the privilege to teach theology for more than forty years in a variety of courses throughout the great range of systematic theology.

Their fields before, during, and after graduation have varied widely. And one feature I have built into this book is to include their contributions, particularly answers to a brief survey, where these scholars from many different cultures have graciously told me what images they use when they describe the Trinity. I also made this survey anonymous to dispel any fears among students who disagree with my views—that they can speak plainly without worrying that, when I inevitably disagree with them in print, I will do so by name (which no responsible teacher should ever do with trusting students still formulating their viewpoints). Understandably, I am indebted to my students for graciously providing so many of these illustrations from their own ministries, gathered over these many decades.

Most of these former students I had the privilege to teach at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, and the overwhelming majority of them at its multicultural Boston Campus for Urban Ministerial Education (CUME). As a result, they ensure my approach in this book is both global and melded with my own heritage. My parents came from diverse backgrounds (my mother being a second-generation child of Greek and Czech immigrants; while my father descended from Leni Lenape First Nations heritage, mixed down the years with Pennsylvania Dutch [Deutsch], French, and Irish ancestors, with an English surname picked up somewhere along the way). I was reared in urban New Jersey, the "two-thirds world state" of the US (as I like to call it for its vast ethnic diversity), with a conscious understanding of my Native American heritage. My father was a Renaissance man who dabbled in everything, but he focused in my earliest years on collecting artifacts and pursuing incessant research in First Nations history. So, my perspective was already budding multiculturally when I married into Latino culture and today reside for a portion of each year in the Dominican Republic. Add to these factors fifty-five

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1. Les Stobbe develops the value of Luke writing to Theophilus, "Earning the Right to Be Published," *Africanus Journal* 10, no. 2 (2018): 4–11.

years now of urban ministry, and together all of these sources account for most of the interesting illustrations this book contains.

My varied, globally oriented student body initially came to me, of course, as individuals, sensing a calling from God and having a variety of preparation levels. But the challenge for all of them, as well as for their professor, was the same as it is for any informed lay leader, elder, deacon, Sunday school teacher, pastor, or chaplain (or those aspiring to fill one or more of these callings): How does one explain the inexplicable Trinity to ourselves, our children, and those with whom we have the opportunity to share the good news that Jesus Christ brought us about: that the God who created us loves us and sent the only Son to redeem us?

I decided to share my intentions with all readers so that you will understand why I care so much about this topic and why I want to communicate as accurately as I am able who God is to a wandering world, and why my desire is to help each of you do the same.

What This Book Is *Not* About

A book's introduction is where authors are supposed to tell readers not only what they are up to but also what they are not attempting to do. Often that second part of the task is skipped over by readers who see the so-called delimitations statement as at best boring, and at worst depressing, since it convinces some they have not gotten their money's worth. I can also assure you, since I have been an editor for two journals, that bad habit is even worse for the well-being of authors when it's done by reviewers who enjoy carping on what writers admit they are not including. I've had to send back reviews to some reviewers who have let that aspect dominate their reviews with the warning to let it go, with a passing mention and focus the review on what the book does have. Clearly, with books, it's essential for readers to know the point of it all in order to stay on track. That is how a delimitation statement operates: like positive and negative images in art, if you see what is being shadowed, it may help highlight for you what is actually the focus.

So, here is what I am *not* trying to do in this book, so that you won't expect it and be disappointed when you don't find it. This is not an introduction to a survey course on theology covering everything from creation to the end times. I am not writing yet one more history of theological thought on the Trinity. My library is full of them. Gordon-Conwell's Goddard Library has many more. And every new catalogue I receive from my fellow scholars and their publishers provides us even more. Do I value these books? Of

course! And I consult them constantly. And you'll find this book replete with references and even analyses that touch past and current perspectives on the Trinity. But the present book you are holding is trying a different approach to this sacred and cardinal topic than a history would. Therefore, I am not able to load up the text or the footnotes with references to every single wonderful book on the Trinity I have managed to get in my hands, as these are countless. I know that I will disappoint so many fellow scholars who have done fine work in the field and who themselves will automatically flip to the index looking for a reference to their work and find nothing.

In addition, it's always a temptation to any academic writer to demonstrate to peers (and particularly to those who are book reviewers) that she or he knows the field and, therefore, should be taken seriously, respected, and heeded. Well, that's an irresponsible way to write a book. Space is precious, and as good writing demands, I am confining mine to references that move my analysis forward. This is not to say that I have dismissed the worth of all the other books and articles and manuscripts and recorded talks that I reviewed but didn't make the final cut of this book. It just means I did not feel a particular argument being covered was the best place to interact with a specific and, unarguably, thoroughly worthwhile piece of scholarship. So, readers, if you don't see a particular book on the Trinity listed in the bibliography, it doesn't mean it's not a present or future classic. Go ahead and read it anyway. You're bound to learn something worthwhile, whether you agree or disagree with it.

At the same time, I am not annotating a picture book of depictions of the Trinity over the ages or throughout a variety of cultures, as delightful and valuable as such books are—and again, I have also gathered up many of these over the years, enjoy them immensely, and often draw from them in talks and lectures I have given.

While I am listing this set of denials, I also realize a book like this could never be exhaustive. New images for the Trinity are being created constantly. For example, while I was working on this chapter, an announcement arrived of Andrew Farley's challenge to Kenneth Copeland whether his "fleet of private jets" was "a biblical thing." Dr. Farley's promoter, Grant Soderberg, gave this email a clever title: "The Holy Trinity: Three Gulfstream Jets or the Father, Son, and Spirit?"[2] When we arrive at our chapter on static images that are not human

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2.   Grant Soderberg, "The Holy Trinity: Three Gulfstream Jets or the Father, Son, and Spirit?," email advertising Dr. Andrew Farley, *Twisted Scripture: Untangling 45 Lies Christians Have Been Told* (Washington, DC: Salem, 2019).

to illustrate the Trinity under the section of three-parts images, we'll review the strength (distinctness) and the weakness (division) of these. In other words, new images are being invented constantly, but we cannot fit in every illustration everybody has used over the centuries. So we will deal with representative ones in the hope you can use what you learn in each analysis to interpret and make a judgment on the usefulness of any new ones you encounter.

As for the illustrations I have selected to discuss, each is intended to be instructive, fitting the book's goal to show images in use that can illuminate or obscure the revealed nature of God, depending on how they are being presented. I am not writing as a historian, artist, or art historian but primarily as a biblically oriented theologian with an interest in the arts and history.

What This Book Is About: An Overview

So, what is this book about? It is an introduction to doing theology and the importance of forging a biblical understanding of the Trinity in correspondence with the Scriptures and primal creeds of the Church such as the Old Roman Creed (c. AD 100s); its elaboration, the Apostles' Creed; and the Creed of Nicea (AD 325). A creed is a reaffirmation of the central tenets of the Christian faith, useful for when biblical orthodoxy is threatened. New creeds are functional. Like the Nicean Creed announcing that the Arian redefinition of the Godhead was a pernicious error, or the Barmen Declaration of 1934 proclaiming to the Nazi party there was only one leader that the church could follow, Jesus Christ, creeds have re-confessed the bedrock doctrines of our faith generation after generation. A few years ago, when arguments opposing relational equality in the Trinity by promoting subordination of the Son and the Holy Spirit were tightening their grip into a stranglehold on current evangelicalism, I was asked to create a creed under the title "An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity." Realizing that wisdom is found in the counsel of the wise, I recruited a sounding-board team of experts in Bible in its original languages, church history, classics, and theology. I drafted a creed along with a theological defense for it, which I sent back and forth until everyone in my smaller and larger circles could sign. Since then, this reaffirmation has served as a confession of faith for all those who have signed it. And it articulates my statement of belief for this book as well as for all my writing and teaching:

> We believe that the sole living God who created and rules over all and who is described in the Bible is one Triune God in three co-eternal, co-equal Persons, each Person being presented as distinct yet equal, not as three separate gods, but

one Godhead, sharing equally in honor, glory, worship, power, authority, rule, and rank, such that no Person has eternal primacy over the others.[3]

As a result, I hold what I call an Eternal Trinity Position. What I mean by that is I believe the monotheistic, immutable God, while eternally being one God, is also eternally triune, forever existing in three persons.

Did the term *person* mean the same to the early church theologians that it does to us today? To answer that question, we need to ask who inserted it into theology and what it meant for its initiator. Church historians trace the source to Tertullian, the incisive, controversial Christian lawyer and apologist who used it to distinguish the eternal Father God from the eternal person of the Godhead who incarnated on earth as the divine and human Son of God: Jesus Christ.

Tertullian's choice of *persona* (in Latin), translated as *prosōpon* (in Greek), seems a good initial choice to recognize complete unity and still observe distinctions between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit of the Godhead.[4] Scriptural

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3.   See www.trinitystatement.com for "An Evangelical Statement on the Trinity" in several languages with both a biblical and theological exposition and a place for readers who wish to do so to affirm the statement. My theological version first appeared in *Priscilla Papers* 25, no. 4 (Autumn 2011): 15–19, and reprinted in Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House, *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 213. The creed and its explanation is on 213–22. Stanley Gundry later added a Bible verse–oriented creed with the same title on the website.

4.   What those distinctions are is contested among contemporary theologians. Much of this controversy, I note, is centered on the contributions of the Cappadocian theologians born immediately after the Nicean Creed was signed (AD 325), among the most prominent being Gregory of Nazianzus (born c. AD 326–330), Basil of Caesarea (born c. 330), and Gregory of Nyssa (born c. 330–335). Lucian Turcescu in his book-length study *Gregory of Nyssa and the Concept of Divine Persons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), considers him "a great theologian, philosopher, and mystic" (4), who "conceives of a person as a unique collection of properties that in themselves are not unique. Each such collection has causal relationship and finds itself in communion [*koinōnia*] with other similar collections. These relationships are what make the collections persons" (5) as opposed to the modern "understanding of person as a center of consciousness" (4). Catherine Mowry LaCugna in *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (New York: HarperCollins, 1991) explains, "Largely due to the influence of the introspective psychology of Augustine and his heirs, we in the West today think of a person as a 'self' who may be further defined as an individual center of consciousness, a free, intentional subject, one who knows and is known, loves and is loved, an individual identity, a unique personality endowed with certain rights, a moral agent, someone who experiences, weighs, decides, and acts. This fits well with the idea that God is personal, but not at all with the idea that God is three persons. Three persons defined in this way would amount to three gods, three beings who act independently, three conscious individuals" (250). Gregory of Nyssa himself, in "On Not Three Gods," argues, "Although we acknowledge the nature is undifferentiated,

background for such use might be seen in 2 Corinthians 4:4–6, where the face (*prosōpon*) of Jesus Christ displays or reveals (*phōtizō*; think of the English word *photograph*) "the knowledge of the glory of God." An example might be Jesus' face revealing glory in the transfiguration (Matt. 17:2; Luke 9:29; "face" is also used to represent the presence of God in passages like Rev. 20:11).

Tertullian was driven to come up with a term describing permanent distinctions in the three-in-one Godhead in his battle against Praxeas (c. AD 200), an ancient "Oneness" teacher who claimed the Father became the Son in the incarnation. This modalistic, dynamic Monarchian view, dubbed "patripassianism" (the suffering of the Father), saw the one God appearing as the Father in the Old Testament, the Son in the New Testament, and finally the Holy Spirit after Christ's ascension (and still continuing in that mode today). As a result, Tertullian charged Praxeas with two tasks of the devil: he set the

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we do not deny a distinction with respect to causality. That is the only way by which we distinguish one Person from the other, by believing, that is, that one is the cause and the other depends on the cause. . . . Thus the attribute of being only-begotten without doubt remains with the Son, and we do not question that the Spirit is derived from the Father. For the mediation of the Son, while it guards his prerogative of being only-begotten, does not exclude the relation which the Spirit has by nature to the Father" (266) (Gregory of Nyssa, "On Not Three Gods," ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson, in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, eds. Edward Rochie Hardy and Cyril C. Richardson [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1950]). Gregory illustrates this view in his defense *Against Eunomius* by depicting the Father as the sun and the Son as a sunbeam (3.7). These views could be seen as reflected in humanity in Genesis 1:26–27's description of the creation of man and woman as sharing jointly the image of God. They are able to relate not only to each other but to God, who of course is already in an eternal love relationship in the Trinity. We, of course, need to keep in mind that reflecting humans are material and God is not, so that they are two individuals, united as humans, but God is a spirit and not material and is not individuated in the same sense. An image is not necessarily a point-by-point allegory. It is a limited reflection or depiction of a truth. I also think, however, that because the ancients seemed to think collectively about persons, being influenced by the Platonic and Aristotelian systems, the traditionally received orienting thought patterns of their day, such an influence of pagan philosophy, so evident in their views, does not by itself make these views necessarily biblical. The Bible is the revelation of God and not a product of pagan philosophizing. So I think that seeing the persons of the Godhead as centers of consciousness could still be admissible if one banished the word "individual" from one's definition and stressed the unity of the One monotheistic God with three centers of consciousness with one will. This understanding would resonate with the Gospel reports of the presence of Jesus among us, who underscored doing the will of the Father (e.g., John 10:25–38) as he modeled being the second Adam. But he was still revealed as possessing the full deity of the One God (Col. 1:19), not a part or a third of it, as one of three gods would have, but as possessing equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit one divine will. The perfect triune God might then be understood as One monotheistic God, distinguished with three distinct centers of divine consciousness perfectly related, encapsulating the knowledge, glory, substance, will, and nature of the triune Godhead: the monotheistic triunity of the one God.

"Holy Spirit to flight" (*paracletum fugit*) and "crucified the Father" (*et patrem crucifixit*).[5]

Tertullian (c. AD 160–c. 240), the son of a centurion at Carthage, North Africa, applied the term *persona*, meaning "mask, part, character" or "person"[6] (rather than the *vultus* or *voltus,* "face," "features," "appearance").[7] The Greek apologists of the next century translated his term into Greek's *prosōpon*, the word for "mask," "dramatic part as in a drama," "character," "person," "legal personality, "face," "countenance," sculptural "bust," "portrait," "front," or "façade."[8] But, as the discussion continued heating up, by the 300s orthodoxy's defenders widened the discussion to include other terms, such as *hupostasis*, a word in classical times meaning initially "that which settles at the bottom, sediment." It had come to mean what endures through time; a "substructure" or "foundation" supporting a building; a firm resolution undergirding a belief or argument; something with "substance," "actual existence," "reality," "real nature," "essence."[9] What they were trying to express is that the monotheistic God has three enduring centers of consciousness in the one divine nature. These are distinct, yet share the same nature, substance, eternal duration, and consciousness perfectly as one, yet they are distinct. As we can see, much of this language is as metaphorical in both Latin and Greek as it is imaging God.

One fascinating image introduced today by John Jefferson Davis, the Andrew Mutch Professor of Theology at Gordon-Conwell, seeks to capture these meanings in an image from jazz, depicting what he names "The Reciprocally Nested Hypostasis Model: A Jazz Trio Analogy." He pictures "a trio of jazz musicians—a pianist, a drummer, and a bass player playing together." These are "personal, conscious human beings in communication and cooperation with one another, enjoying their common experience."[10] The positive contribution of this image is that these are three distinct persons who share a common humanity and experience. The analogy ceases to hold beyond that,

5. Q. Septimii Florentis Tertulliani, *Adversus Praxean Liber* (*Tertullian's Treatise against Praxeas)*, ed. Ernest Evans (London: SPCK, 1948), 1.33.
6. John C. Traupman, *The New College Latin and English Dictionary* (New York: Bantom, 1966), 224.
7. Traupman, *The New College Latin and English Dictionary*, 335.
8. LSJ, 1533.
9. LSJ, 1895.
10. See the much fuller explanation of this fascinating analogy and the light it sheds on the nature of the triune God, in John Jefferson Davis, "A New Metaphysical Model for the Social Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as *Reciprocally Nested Hypostases,*" an enrichment paper composed for the faculty of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, Hamilton, Massachusetts, October 2018, 11–12.

for the active divine Trinity has singularity. The Trinity shares the exact same substance with a perfectly reciprocal state of consciousness, which is eternally experienced simultaneously, distinct but without separation, by the three persons of the one God.

On the basis of this foundational set of beliefs, we examine illustrations we use to explain God's triune nature. Consequently, in this book I am concentrating on evaluating the meanings inherent in both the images and also the explanations of these images that are used regularly by Christians who teach about God all over the world. After this introduction orienting you to the important issues underlying our topic, we will consider the Bible's answer to the challenge of whether our whole task is legitimate or not, before we explore images that are kinetic (moving), then those that are static (without movement), and then nonhuman and human. And we will try to draw conclusions all along the way.

Before we can do that, of course, I have to establish that the Bible, the written revelation about God's nature, really does assume that the Godhead is triune (along with being monotheistic). As we will see, this is not a given among every one of our neighbors, nor among everyone who claims to be Christian, but my authority here will be the Bible itself, God's inspired written record of God's revelation about God's own nature. I will also address objections to our entire task and summon up a defense for why I believe our task is legitimate.

Then, I will proceed to examine a variety of images being used to explain God's nature and—most importantly for our task—assess their value and potential danger and posit guidelines we should keep in mind when we use such illustrations. Also, since we are all living in visually oriented global societies, we will analyze the impact of our figurative language on the way we perceive God's revealed nature and convey that perception to others.

So, the goal of this book is to help us all use illustrating images correctly and with appropriate qualifications. Through them, we can convey truth about God while attempting to avoid the historical errors that have clouded and misrepresented God's nature and misled unwary seekers through the centuries.

OUR FOCUS IS LANGUAGE

To accomplish my goal, I am trying to write this book as plainly and as engagingly as possible so as not to frustrate multilanguage learners (like many of my students) who find so many textbooks on the Trinity confusing and

laden with an excess of technical language.[11] Terms like *perichōrēsis* (which initially might sound like some sort of exotic flower from the South Seas) or *aseity* (what is that, a health condition inflicted on those who don't drink enough water?) may be essential to enlightening discussions on the Trinity, but they are incomprehensible without clear definitions. The same problem goes for terms like *economic Trinity* (which suggests to contemporary readers that God is on some sort of strict budget).

However, when we discover, for example, that *perichōrēsis* is a Greek term from the word *peri* (meaning "round about")[12] and notice that it appears to be similar to several forms related to *korennumi* (meaning "satiate, fill one with a thing"),[13] we begin to understand that the word is being used to mean that all three persons in the Trinity surround and indwell one another completely. Yet each has a distinct identity, so that one person of the Trinity can incarnate as Jesus Christ, suffer, and die for us without the entire Trinity dying and the universe God sustains imploding or exploding in chaos.

Further, we can read the explanation of the renowned Cuban-born theologian Justo González, who informs us that "since *perichōrēsis* is very similar, though not the same, as a word that could be used for a choreo-graphic dance, sometimes the image is used of the Trinity as a choreography in which all three Persons act together, yet distinctly, each as it were dancing around the other two." Also, when we notice that *perichōrēsis* is often substi-tuted by *circumincession* (a term derived from the Latin meaning "interpen-etration of the three divine Persons of the Trinity"),[14] then we are no longer lost. Our understanding expands, and the word becomes useful. Distinct as they are, the three persons are really one harmonious God, not three gods working in harmony.

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11. Please see Jeanne C. DeFazio and William David Spencer, eds., *Empowering English Language Learners: Successful Strategies of Christian Educators* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2018) for helpful advice on teaching in our global world to students whose first language is not English. My chapter, "Intentional Teaching," lays out my own theory of education and includes appendices of teaching aids in theology I've developed to assist multicultural students for whom English is a second or third language.

12. BDAG, 797.

13. LSJ, 980.

14. Justo L González, *Essential Theological Terms* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 36. Van A. Harvey also explains *perichoresis* as "mutual interpenetration of the *persons* of the godhead, so that although each person is distinct in relation to the others, nevertheless, each participates fully in the *being* of the others. The being of the godhead is thus one and indivisible" (Van A. Harvey, *A Handbook of Theological Terms* [New York: Macmillan, 1964], 181).