

BIBLICAL TRINITARIANISM

Basic Definition = One God, Three Distinct Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Explanatory Definition = God is one, numerically singular divine essence, subsisting in three persons, distinguished¹ exclusively by their personal properties of *paternity*, *filiation*, and *spiration*; that is, the distinct manner or mode by which each Person shares co-equally, co-eternally, and co-extensively in the fullness of the singular divine essence.

Confessional Definition = There is but one [God] only, the living and true God. There be three persons in the Godhead, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one true, eternal God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory; although distinguished by their personal properties. It is proper to the Father to beget the Son, and to the Son to be begotten of the Father, and to the Holy Ghost to proceed from the Father and the Son from all eternity.

Recommended Reading = *The Trinity: An Introduction* (S. Swain); *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit* (Ma. Barrett); *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Vol. 4: The Triunity of God* (R. Muller); *Dictionary of Latin and Greek Theological Terms* (R. Muller); *Dogmatic Theology* (W.G.T. Shedd).... Turretin, Van Mastricht, Brakel, G. Vos, et al.

SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM

Wikipedia Definition = A Christian interpretation of the Trinity as consisting of three persons in a loving relationship, which reflects a model for human relationships. The teaching emphasizes that God is an inherently social being... [and] argues that the three persons are each distinct realities... Social Trinitarian thought argues that this one essence can be thought of as the loving relationship between Father, Son, and Spirit.

Explanatory Definition = God, as the archetype of human society and relationships, is one essence, consisting in a unified *relationship* (i.e. community, society, kingdom) between the three persons (Father, Son, Holy Spirit), each of whom possesses a distinct mind, will, and state of consciousness. [Confessional Definition = N/A]

Notable Adherents = Karl Rahner, Jurgen Moltmann, Miroslav Volf, EFS Movement, Ra. Smith (Cf. Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, Ch. 3)

Characteristic Tendencies

1. Ignore/Reject/Downplay the distinction between the Immanent/Ontological Trinity² and the Economic Trinity;³
2. Use the concept of *imago dei* to justify arbitrary inferences from created relationships to God's Triune being;
3. Characterize the orthodox Christian doctrine of monotheism as cold and impersonal.
4. Describe God in terms highly suggestive of tri-theism, such as kingdom, society, or community.
5. Redefine the term *person* as a distinct center of consciousness with its own mind, will, and (in some cases) attributes.
6. Make *theology* subservient to *sociology*, whether liberal or conservative. [Tri-Theism]

SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM WITHIN THE FEDERAL VISION

Rich Lusk (2003): "In fact, if we understand that the Triune God himself is the archetype of the covenant, we see that Adam must have existed in loving fellowship with his Creator from the beginning. The Trinity, not the Ancient Near Eastern suzerain treaties, must define our view of the covenant. Several theologians have recently argued that Father, Son, and Spirit are related covenantally not just in the economy of creation and redemption, but ontologically and eternally as well. [Footnote: Ralph Smith, *The Eternal Covenant* (Canon Press)] But if this original covenant was a non-meritorious relation of love and favor, the first manifestation of that covenant in the creation must have been as well. The covenant within the Trinity is the model for extra-Trinitarian covenants... The creation covenant is just the loving outreach and overflow of the inter-Trinitarian covenant." (AAT, 122)

2007 Federal Vision Joint Statement: "We affirm that the triune God is the archetype of all covenantal relations. All faithful theology and life is conducted in union with and imitation of the way God eternally is..." (Signed by Ralph A. Smith⁴)

Doug Wilson (2017): "I would still affirm everything I signed off on in the Federal Vision statement." (Blogpost, 1/17/17)

Canon Press ("Outfitters of the Reformation"): Published Ralph Smith's *The Eternal Covenant: How the Trinity Reshapes Covenant Theology* (2003) and *Paradox and Truth: Rethinking Van Til on the Trinity* (2003). [Also: *Shakespeare the Christian* by R. Smith]⁵

¹ Contra modalism, Biblical Trinitarianism affirms this personal *modal* distinction to be real or intrinsic, not merely conceptual or revelatory.

² The Immanent (or Ontological) Trinity refers to that which is true of God in Himself; that is, in His *ontological* being, without any reference to His purposes or actions in relation to creatures.

³ The Economic Trinity refers to that which is true of God in relation to His creatures, by way of His eternal decree as well as His works in time. This important distinction enables us to distinguish between Christ's humble subjection to the Father in the *economic* plan of redemption (Jn. 14:28; Php. 2:6-8) and His eternal, *ontological* co-equality with the Father in power and glory (Jn. 1:1).

⁴ Ralph A. Smith is a CREC minister who served for many years as a Japanese missionary pastor, authored two books on the Trinity (Canon Press), has spoken at many Reconstructionist and FV-friendly conferences, and is the founder of Berith.Org, home of the Covenant Worldview Institute.

⁵ In this lecture, we will analyze Ralph Smith's online writings from Berith.Org. In a future lecture, we will analyze *The Eternal Covenant*.

THE SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM OF RALPH A. SMITH⁶

- I. SMITH DOWNPLAYS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN THE ONTOLOGICAL AND ECONOMIC TRINITY, IN ORDER TO INTRODUCE A RADICALLY DIFFERENT UNDERSTANDING OF THE ONTOLOGICAL TRINITY.
- A. “The traditional language for distinguishing God in Himself and God as He works in history is ontological Trinity and economic Trinity. Obviously these two must be one... Thus, not only must we say that the ontological and economical Trinity are one, we must confess that it is beyond us to entirely distinguish between them.” (CO, 4)
 - B. “...the Bible has much more to say about the relationships between the Persons than traditional Trinitarian theology. The economic Trinity contains riches that have never been mined for the doctrine of the ontological Trinity.” (CO, 27)
- II. HAVING “MINED THE RICHES OF THE ECONOMIC TRINITY,” SMITH ARGUES THAT GOD’S *ESSENTIAL UNITY* MUST BE GROUNDED IN AN ONTOLOGICAL COVENANT OF LOVE BETWEEN THE PERSONS OF THE TRINITY.
- A. “What God does in time reveals who He is in eternity and His most characteristic act in establishing relationships with other persons in time is covenant making.” (CO, 3)
 - B. “Covenant in God is the source of the covenantal reality of the world.” (CO, 38)
 - C. “...the three persons are perfectly united in the love of the eternal Trinitarian covenant. The life of God is covenantal. God is three persons united in covenantal love.” (EC, 47)⁷
 - D. “The covenant of redemption, then, is seen to imply a covenant relationship among the persons of the Trinity because it would be odd to imagine a God who knows nothing of covenant in His own nature but who would, upon the presupposition of creation and man’s fall, suddenly decide to enter into a covenant to deal with the problems.” (EC, 47)⁸
- III. SMITH DEFINES THE TRINITARIAN COVENANT IN TERMS SUGGESTIVE OF ETERNAL SUBORDINATION.
- A. “Now, when the Bible speaks of a relationship in which there is a hierarchy, responsibility, commands and stipulations, and a promised blessing, the Bible calls that relationship a covenant.” (EC, 40)
 - B. “...the doctrine of God’s attributes must take into account that the Father loves the Son in a way that is different from the way the Son loves the Father...The Father loves the Son as a Father and so gives the Son commandments and a mission. The Son loves the Father as a Son and so delights to do His will and to fulfill the work He has been given. Faithfulness, righteousness, goodness, and other attributes similarly differ according to the nature of the relationship.” (CO, 44)⁹
- IV. SMITH DEFINES THE TRINITARIAN COVENANT IN TERMS SUGGESTIVE OF TRI-THEISM AND DIVINE COMPOSITION, AS IF GOD’S *ESSENTIAL UNITY* WERE GROUNDED IN A MERE ‘COMMITMENT OF LOVE’ WHICH JOINS THE THREE PERSONS OF GOD IN A COMMUNITY OF LIFE’ AS THE ‘ULTIMATE KINGDOM’: ‘A COVENANTAL SOCIETY OF LOVE’.
- A. “...a covenant is a commitment of love. Since it creates a relationship fundamentally different from the mutual profit-seeking relationship of a contract, it must be established in a different manner.” (CS, 5)¹⁰
 - B. “God is love because the Father, Son, and Spirit share an everlasting love for one another. Each of the three Persons of the Trinity wholly devotes Himself to bless and glorify the other. (CS, 6)
 - C. “The covenant among persons of the Trinity is a covenant of love in which each of the persons of the Trinity gives Himself wholly to the others, denies Himself to bless the others, and humbles himself to glorify the others.” (EC, 52)¹¹

⁶ Sources: (1) Ralph Smith, “Van Til, Karlberg, and Westminster” [VTK] (2) Ralph Smith, “A Covenantal Ontology of the Triune God” [CO] (3) Ralph Smith, “The Covenantal Structure of the Bible” [CS] (4) Ralph Smith, *The Eternal Covenant* [EC]. All four articles are available at Berith.Org.

⁷ “We can say that, at least, in God covenant and ontology intersect or share common ground.” (EC, 55-56)

⁸ “...how should we think of God as the unchangeable God, if intratrinitarian relationships have been fundamentally and essentially changed in the *pactum salutis*?” (CO, 23) “If creation itself is a covenantal act, then the only relationship God sustains to the whole created world is covenantal. How could that not reveal something about who He is?” (CO, 5)

⁹ “To define the covenant biblically, we also must take into account the fact that... no type of covenant is used to describe the relationship of God with His people with greater frequency or deeper emotion than the marriage covenant.” (EC, 51)

¹⁰ “To say that God is love... is to say that the Persons of the Trinity devote themselves to one another in the bonds of a covenant.” (VTK, p. 6) “He is Father, Son, and Spirit — the God for whom mutual giving in love defines His covenantal character.” (VTKW, 9)

¹¹ ““The self-denial, humility, seeking of the honor and glory of the other, commitment, and works that characterize biblical love are only some of the important aspects of the covenantal fellowship of Father, Son, and Spirit.” (EC, 46) “The forgiveness of man’s sin upon the basis of the death of God’s Son also brings to expression the self-denial and self-giving that are essential to intratrinitarian love.” (EC, 75) “Righteousness... means that each of the persons of the Trinity recognizes and protects the distinct properties of the other persons. Other ethical terms emphasize various aspects of the self-sacrificial, self-giving dedication of the Three for one another.” (CO, 20)

- D. “What we see in the covenant is both love and law. James Jordan’s definition of the covenant attempts to do justice to both dimensions, ‘the covenant is a personal-structural bond which joins the three persons of God in a community of life, and in which man was created to participate.’ The can be paraphrased in similar terms to stress that the covenant is a bond of love that structures the community life of the three persons of God.” (EC, 51-52)
- E. “When we speak of ‘righteousness,’ we are focusing on the commandments or stipulation of the covenant. Among the persons of the Trinity, this would mean that each of the persons of the Trinity acts so as to preserve the personal distinctions and boundaries of the persons; none seeks to rob the other of glory or position. ‘Love focuses attention on self-sacrificially seeking to glorify and bless the other... Love is the fulfilling of the whole covenant, the essence of the law.” (EC, 53)
- F. “God Himself in the fellowship of Trinitarian love is the ultimate kingdom, and the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity is the true covenant... Since the three Persons of the Trinity constitute a covenantal kingdom of love, the created world, too, is a covenantal kingdom over which God set Adam and Eve to rule.” (CS, 6)
- G. “The Triune God is a society in which each denies Himself to seek the good and blessing of the other... the One true God is a covenantal society of love.” (CO, 20)
- H. “Catherine M. LaCugna [RC feminist, social trinitarian theologian] is among those who claim that Augustine’s doctrine of the Trinity, as a theology of substance, emphasized the oneness of God to the detriment of God’s threeness... The Augustinian and Latin view does not deny that God is a God of communion and fellowship, but ‘speculates on trinitarian communion as an intradivine occurrence.’ Fellowship among the persons of the Trinity is ‘the unifying force that holds together the three coequal persons who know and love each other as peers.’ ... LaCugna argues that the Greek and Latin theologies offer ‘two quite different visions of personhood’ and that means they also offer different views of the Christian life and Christian society. When we answer the question, ‘Who is God?’ We have also answered the questions ‘Who are we?’ And ‘How shall we live?’ This is what makes the doctrine of the Trinity so important.” (EC, 53-54)

V. SMITH ASSERTS THAT THE ESSENTIAL DIVINE ATTRIBUTES OF THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT “DIFFER ACCORDING TO THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP”, THEREBY CREATING A QUADRINITY.

- A. “...the doctrine of God’s attributes must take into account that the Father loves the Son in a way that is different from the way the Son loves the Father... Faithfulness, righteousness, goodness, and other attributes similarly differ according to the nature of the relationship.” (CO, 44)
- B. “...why should it be thought to compromise God’s unity if the Father possess all the attributes in a particularly fatherly way so that paternity defines how God the Father expresses the attributes? If each person possesses all the attributes according to the distinction of His own person, then the attributes become the attributes of Persons, which is the way we would normally think of attribute... All the attributes of God belong to God in the unity of His being as well as in the three Persons... When we contemplate God in the absolute oneness of His being, it may be legitimate to say that the attributes of God all equal each other and are co-terminous with the being of God. But when we contemplate God in His threeness, each of the attributes comes to unique expression in the covenantal relationships of Father, Son and Spirit. Or, perhaps we should say that the Father, Son, and Spirit each possess the attributes in a manner that is appropriate to the Person.” (CO, 45)
- C. “...to regard each of the Persons of the Trinity as persons in the full sense of the word requires us to see each of them possessing all of the attributes in a unique manner. There are subtle but important differences in what it means for a father to be righteous and what it means for a son to be righteous for the simple reason that fathers and sons have different responsibilities in the relationship. Our doctrine of God’s attributes has to take those differences...” (CO, 45)

VI. SMITH ASSERTS THAT THE HOLY SPIRIT ETERNALLY PROCEEDS FROM THE FATHER TO THE SON, THEN FROM THE SON BACK TO THE FATHER; AND THAT THE SON IS ETERNALLY GENERATED FROM THE FATHER TO THE SPIRIT, THEN SENT BACK FROM THE SPIRIT TO THE FATHER, THEREBY CREATING A SEQUENTIAL, QUADRUPLE PROCESSION.

- A. “The Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father to the Son and then from the Son back to the Father. In this way, the communion of the Persons is complete... [The Spirit] proceeds as the gift of covenantal love. The dynamic of the Spirit’s procession from the Father to the Son and from the Son back to the Father is, therefore, a covenantal dynamic. God is eternally active, the Father always sending the Spirit of covenantal love to His Son and the Son always responding. The Spirit is always moving in covenantal procession.” (CO, 24-25)
- B. “...we need to add that the Son is also the gift of love from the Father to the Spirit. For just as the Father sent the Spirit into the world, He also sent the Son. If the one implies an eternal sending, why not the other?... It seems to me our doctrine of the Trinity would be more biblically rounded if we saw the Father not only sending the Spirit to the Son who sends the Spirit back in reciprocal love, but also understood the Father to send the Son to the Spirit, who sends the Son back in reciprocal love. The dynamic of the Trinity is the dynamic of covenantal love expressed in the mutual sending, receiving, and responding in reciprocal love, but also understood the Father to send the Son to the Spirit, who sends the Son back in reciprocal love. The dynamic of the Trinity is the dynamic of covenantal love expressed in the mutual sending, receiving, and responding in love with both Son and Spirit as both givers to and gifts of the Father.” (CO, 25-26)

VII. SMITH ASSERTS THAT THE FATHER, SON, AND HOLY SPIRIT ARE “ONE GREAT PERSON”!

- A. “...it seems to me that the mutual indwelling of the three Persons of the Trinity—their absolute ontological interpenetration—may be said to constitute them as a single Person, with a single consciousness. Of course, this does not in any way compromise the vitality of each Person... Please note that there is equivocation here on the word Person.” (CO, 40)
- B. “...these three great Persons are also one great Person.” (CO, 45)

VIII. SEEKING TO AVOID THE HERETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HIS STATED POSITION, SMITH REDEFINES THE TERM COVENANT TO MEAN A ‘NECESSARY...MUTUAL ONTOLOGICAL INDWELLING’ WHICH IMPLIES A ‘MUTUAL COMMITMENT’ BUT NOT A ‘VOLUNTARY AGREEMENT.’

- A. “Having said this, we must add that in God the mutual indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity is not covenantal in the sense of being an ‘agreement.’ If we begin by defining the covenant as an agreement, then thinking of a covenantal relationship among the persons may indeed seem odd, as if they existed separately and decided to become one. But ‘agreement’ is not a Biblical definition of covenant, especially as it applies to the Persons of the Trinity. I think we should say that in God, the covenant bond is the mutual ontological indwelling of the Persons of the Trinity. The mutual commitment of love and the fellowship the three have with one another express the covenant bond. This is the way God exists necessarily. It is not a voluntary agreement. The covenant among the Persons is ontological because it is of the essence of who God is and how He necessarily exists as Three Persons.” (CO, 41)¹²
- B. “The biblical language of the covenant and the most relevant examples of covenant relationships suggest that it is not adequate to depict the covenant among the persons of the Trinity as an agreement. The marriage relationship, used often as the picture of God’s relationship with Israel and the Church, is not a mere agreement for the sake of accomplishing a particular purpose. It is a relationship in which two dwell together as one, give themselves for one another’s blessing, and seek one another’s honor.” (EC, 58)

IX. SMITH’S STATED GOAL IN MODIFYING THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IS TO CREATE A CENTRAL DOGMA FOR THE CHRISTIAN WORLDVIEW THAT WILL BANISH THE COVENANT OF WORKS AND PROMOTE CHRISTIAN CULTURE.

- A. “For if there is a covenant relationship among the persons of the Trinity, it — not the covenant of works — ought to constitute the paradigmatic covenant and therefore supply not only the key notion of systematic as well as biblical theology, but also the essential link between these two disciplines. Indeed, it should be the very center of the Christian worldview.” (EC, 12-13)
- B. “By understanding that the covenant is the relationship of the persons of the Trinity, we also see its relationship to creation, salvation, and the biblical promise of the future, as well as to the whole Christian worldview... If the covenant is trinitarian, it is comprehensive.” (EC, 47)
- C. “Reformed theologians have not offered a distinctly Reformed doctrine of the Trinity in accord with their covenantal insights... Instead of three persons in covenant as the center of the Reformed worldview, the covenant of works became the center of a theological system that has never developed its worldview potential.” (EC, 61)

X. SMITH REJECTS THE TEACHING OF THE WESTMINSTER STANDARDS IN FAVOR OF 20TH CENTURY AUTHORS, SUCH AS HERMAN HOEKSEMA, ABRAHAM KUYPER, AND VARIOUS FEDERAL VISIONISTS.

- A. “The Westminster Confession is in need of revision.” (EC, 101)
- B. “Dutch theologians Abraham Kuyper and Herman Hoeksema, in contrast, with the Presbyterian branch of the Reformed tradition, view the covenant as more than a mere means¹³ and take that eternal covenant between the persons of the Trinity as the standard and archetype, the covenantal model.” (EC, 30)
- C. “Hoeksema... defines the covenant as ‘the bond of God with Himself,’ and he sees its essence as ‘the communion of friendship’ among the persons of the Trinity.” (EC, 46)
- D. “This essay was originally provoked by a comment made by James Jordan... I am indebted to Jim’s various publications and his emphasis on the Trinity for my own orientation to the subject. What I have written here is in some respects simply my reflection on his views.” (EC, 9) [Cites interactions with Jordan, Jeffrey Meyers, Peter Leithart, and Doug Jones.]

¹² “Having said that the ontology of the three Persons is covenantal, there is a misunderstanding that must be avoided. The statement that the three coming together in covenantal union constitute the one may seem to subordinate God’s oneness to His threeness. Oneness might seem to depend on threeness in a way that threeness does not depend upon oneness... It is because of the ontological oneness that the three Persons can mutually exhaust one another and represent one another with such fullness. The unity of God is the presupposition of the possibility of the kind of covenantal threeness God is, just as the three Persons must find the fullness of fellowship and love in the unity of the covenant. Unity and Diversity are thus equally ultimate — each presupposing and finding expression in the other.” (CO, 43)

¹³ “...the focus of the covenant of redemption is man, for it is a covenant to redeem man from sin. In this respect, traditional Reformed theology even at its theological zenith, as expounded by its most profound expositors, ascends no higher than soteriology.” (EC, 45)