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ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN ESSENTIALS SERIES

The volumes in this series have been adapted from a video seminary curriculum produced by Third Millennium Ministries. Because Third Millennium writes and produces this curriculum for a global, multilingual, evangelical audience, some aspects of this series may surprise readers. For example, we don't always follow Western pedagogical and andragogical traditions. We often organize and address subjects differently from more traditional texts. We also tend to prefer language that is easily translatable into languages that don't yet have robust theological vocabularies. As a result, we use fewer academic and theological terms than do traditional works on the same subjects.

Finally, while we don't promote ideas that contradict our doctrinal standards (the Westminster Confession of Faith, together with its Larger and Shorter Catechisms), we value and include the thoughts, insights, and wisdom the Holy Spirit has provided to those outside the Reformed tradition. We sincerely believe that Bible-believing Christians of every evangelical tradition are united by far, far more than they are divided by. For this reason, the interviews found in the sidebars throughout these volumes often come

from professors and pastors in traditions different from our own. We hope that readers will find in these interviews opportunities for valuing, admiring, and learning from our brothers and sisters in different traditions.

For more information on our video curriculum, please visit thirdmill.org.

Ra McLaughlin
General Editor

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INTRODUCTION: A NOTE TO THE READER

Every Christian realizes that Jesus, the Son of God, is central to our faith. Many of us know a lot about his life on earth from reading the Gospels, hearing sermons, attending Bible studies and Sunday school classes, and talking with other Christians. We're familiar with many of the things he said and did and especially with the fact that he died on the cross and rose again to save us.

What we don't always stop to think about, though, are the things Jesus said and did before his life on earth, or the things he's saying and doing now, or the things he'll say and do in the future. Moreover, we don't always think about these things in the context of the larger story the Bible tells about God's plan for creation. Who is the Son of God, and why did he choose to be born as Jesus? What was he accomplishing during his time on earth? How will his return finally bring God's plans for history to their final fulfillment? What does any of that have to do with our lives now?

In this book, we'll be looking at the big picture of who Jesus is. We'll especially be concerned with the various roles he performed and how they can help us to understand and apply the Bible's teachings about him. Our prayer is that as you learn more about Jesus,

your love and appreciation for him will increase and your life will become a clearer reflection of his.

Ra McLaughlin

PART 1

THE REDEEMER

There's an old story about a little boy who built a toy boat. He carefully painted the hull and made small sails for it. When the boat was ready, he sailed it in a stream. It floated easily for a time but then got swept away by the current. The boy searched for his lost boat but could not find it. Sometime later, he was surprised to see his boat in the window of a shop. He rushed inside and said, "My boat is in the window!" The store clerk replied, "I'm sorry, son, but you'll have to pay for it." The boy worked for weeks to save enough money to buy back his boat. As he left the store with the boat in his hands, he told it, "Little boat, now you're mine again. I made you, I searched for you, and I bought you back."

In many ways, the relationship between Jesus and his people is similar to the relationship between this little boy and his boat. The Son of God created us, but we strayed into sin and were lost. Even so, he never forgot us. He came to earth to seek and to save what was lost. And after he found us, he paid the ultimate price—the price of his own death—to redeem us from sin and to ensure our future blessing in the glorious new heavens and earth.

ETERNITY

Usually when Christians think and talk about Jesus, we focus on the life he lived on earth and the work he's doing in heaven right now. Sometimes we even consider the Bible's teaching about what Jesus will do in the future when he returns. These are all very important teachings, but the fact is that the second person of the Trinity, whom we know as Jesus Christ, is our eternal God. So, when we think about him from a theological perspective, it's often helpful to begin much farther back in history to see that he has been planning and working on our redemption since the very beginning—since before history began.

Theologians agree that God exists in the realm of eternity, but they aren't entirely agreed on the nature of this realm. Some suggest that time itself is an aspect of creation and not of eternity, so that it's impossible to speak of time before God's act of creation. For our purposes here, we'll focus on God's existence in eternity prior to his creation of the universe. In eternity prior to creation, only God existed; moreover, he existed in the Trinity as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It's within the context of the persons of the Trinity that the Son performed his eternal work as our Redeemer.

DIVINITY

Jesus's eternal existence as God is called his divinity or deity. Scripture doesn't reveal Jesus as a distinct person of the Trinity until the New Testament. Nevertheless, it teaches that Jesus has been God from all eternity. So, the things it says about his divinity in the New Testament were also true of him before the creation of the universe, just as they will continue to be true about him forever. As we read in Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Explicit Statements of Jesus's Divinity

Several passages explicitly teach that Jesus is divine by directly referring to him as God. For example, in John 20:28, the apostle Thomas called Jesus "my God." In Titus 2:13, Paul called Jesus "our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ." In 2 Peter 1:1, Peter called Jesus "our God and Savior Jesus Christ." And in 1 John 5:20, John called Jesus "the true God and eternal life."

Perhaps the best-known passage that explicitly attributes divinity to Jesus is John 1:1, which says, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." John asserted that "the Word was God" and had been since the beginning—that is, before the universe was created. Then, in John 1:14–18, he wrote that the Word he was talking about was Jesus, leaving no doubt that Jesus is God. Jesus always has been, and always will be, fully divine in every way.

Lord of the Old Testament

New Testament writers also identified Jesus as God by equating him with the Lord and God of the Old Testament. In the Old Testament, God revealed himself to his people by the name *Yahweh*. Many English Bibles translate *Yahweh* as "LORD," which simply means "ruler" or "master." A few translations, though, preserve God's name as either "Yahweh" or "Jehovah." In all events, when the New Testament writers identified Jesus with *Yahweh* in

the Old Testament, they made it clear that Jesus is God himself. For example, in the Old Testament, Malachi 3:1 and Isaiah 40:3 say that a prophet or messenger will go before Yahweh. Then, in the New Testament, Mark 1:2–3 says that these prophecies were fulfilled when John the Baptist prepared the way for Jesus. In other words, John the Baptist was the prophet or messenger who went before Yahweh, and Jesus is the Lord Yahweh himself. Paul drew a similar connection between Jesus and Yahweh in Philippians 2:11, where he mentioned the fundamental Christian proclamation that “Jesus Christ is Lord.”

Another common name for God in the Old Testament is the Hebrew word *Elohim*, which means “supreme God.” In Genesis 1:1, Moses used the name *Elohim* in the statement “In the beginning God [*Elohim*] created the heavens and the earth.” So when the apostle John equated Jesus with God “in the beginning” (John 1:1), he was saying that Jesus is *Elohim*, the one who created the heavens and the earth. Furthermore, in Moses’s second account of the creation of heaven and earth, beginning in Genesis 2:4, Moses used the name Yahweh. So, in John 1:3, when John said that all things came into being through Jesus, he identified Jesus with God the Creator, known as both *Elohim* and Yahweh in the Old Testament.

Divine Attributes

New Testament authors also confirmed Jesus’s divinity by ascribing divine attributes to him. These are attributes that only God can possess, so if Jesus possesses them, he must be God. For instance, Hebrews 1:3 refers to Jesus as “the Son” and says that he “is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.” Here, the Son is equated to God and his glory in ways that imply the Son’s divinity. Moreover, the Son wields God’s infinite creative and sustaining power. No finite being can possess infinite power; only the infinite God can. Therefore, the Son must be God himself.

Not surprisingly, the opening verses of John’s gospel also attribute divine attributes to Jesus. When John said that the Word existed

“in the beginning” (John 1:1), he meant that the Son has existed from all eternity before anything was created, just as Genesis 1:1 teaches that God has existed from all eternity before creation. In other words, the Son has existed as long as God has existed. He has existed with God the Father for all eternity. Since only God can possess the attribute of eternal existence, the Son must be God himself. Furthermore, because Jesus existed before creation, Jesus is uncreated. Since only God is uncreated (or “self-existent”), this is a second divine attribute John ascribed to Jesus, proving again that Jesus possesses full divinity.

TRINITY

The doctrine of the Trinity is vital to the Christian faith. On the one hand, the Trinity is one of those doctrines that teach us that God is far above all our abilities to understand him. It teaches us that God is both mysterious and wondrous, inspiring us to worship him. On the other hand, this doctrine sets Christianity apart from all other religions. While some religions see God simply as one person and others believe that there are many gods, the scriptural doctrine of the Trinity teaches us that God is three in one sense and one in another sense. Historically, this uniquely Christian doctrine has been at the very heart of our confession of Christ.

The term *Trinity* doesn’t appear in the Bible, but it expresses the biblical concept that God has three persons and one essence. The term *person* refers to a distinct, self-aware personality. Scripture teaches that the three persons of God are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The term *essence* refers to God’s fundamental nature or the substance of which he consists.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity teaches that one God eternally exists in a unity of being as three persons: God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. It took several centuries of wrestling with the Scriptures for

Christians to arrive at this understanding of God. The primary impetus for the development of this doctrine was early Christian worship of the risen and exalted Christ. The Scriptures clearly teach that Jesus is divine. They express this by saying that the Son is of the same nature as the Father. How then did Christians reconcile worship of Christ with the oneness of God? The key was a distinction between *person* and *nature*. Eventually Christians were led by Scripture to affirm that God the Father and God the Son are one in being, yet distinct in person. **Keith Johnson**

Ontological

Theologians have often described the Trinity from two perspectives. First, they've spoken of the ontological relationships between the members of the Trinity. The word *ontological* means "relating to being." So, when we consider the ontological relationships between the persons of the Trinity, we're concerned with how they're integrated with one another and with the fact that they share a single divine essence or nature. Because all three of God's persons share the same divine essence, they all possess the same divine attributes, such as infinity, eternality, and immutability. Paul talked about the ontological aspect of the Trinity in this way: Jesus Christ, "being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!" (Phil. 2:6–8).

This passage says many things about Jesus. But we want to focus on the statement "being in very nature God." In this phrase, Paul explicitly taught that the Son shares the divine nature or essence with God the Father. And other passages indicate that the same is true of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19; Acts 5:3–4; 2 Cor. 13:14; Heb. 9:14; 1 Peter 1:2). They are all the same divine being. As Jesus himself said in John 10:30, "I and the Father are one." Even the unbelievers who heard Jesus make this astonishing statement understood

that he was claiming to be God, which is why they tried to stone him for blasphemy.

Economic

The second perspective theologians have commonly taken to describe the Trinity can be called *economic*. The word *economic* means “relating to household management.” So, when we speak of the economic relationships within the Trinity, we’re interested in how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit relate to and interact with one another as distinct persons.

From an ontological perspective, the Son possesses the same divine essence as the Father and the Holy Spirit. But within their *economic* relationships, the Son submits to the will of the Father and has authority over the Holy Spirit. As Jesus said of the Father, “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me” (John 6:38) and “I do nothing on my own but speak just what the Father has taught me. . . . I always do what pleases him” (John 8:28–29). Within the economy of the Trinity, the Son always defers to the Father’s authority and will.

In a similar way, both the Father and the Son have authority over the Holy Spirit. The Son spoke of his authority over the Holy Spirit in John 15:26, where he said, “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father . . . he will testify about me.” Just as the Father has authority to send the Son, the Son has authority to send the Spirit.

Now, of course, there’s never any conflict between the persons of the Trinity. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit always agree. They are always of one mind. Even so, within the economy of their relationships, there is a clear order of rank, with the Father possessing the highest authority, and then the Son, and finally the Holy Spirit.

It’s impossible for us fully to understand the nature of the Trinity and the relationships within it. We know by faith that what Scripture reveals is true, even though many aspects of the Trinity are beyond our comprehension. Even so, we can take comfort and

encouragement in the reality that the second person of the Trinity is both ontologically coequal with the Father and the Spirit and economically in submission to the Father.

COUNSEL

The theological term *eternal counsel*, or *eternal decree*, refers to God's plans for the universe, which were set before his work of creation. God's eternal counsel is referred to in places like Acts 2:23, Romans 8:28–30, and 1 Peter 1:2. Different theological traditions have different beliefs about the nature and extent of God's plans. Some believe that God's eternal plan includes every detail of history. Others believe that God has fixed certain things and not others. Nevertheless, we all agree that what Christ accomplished is central to God's plan—that God ordained salvation through him and that Christ won't fail. As Paul wrote, God “chose us in [Christ] before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. . . . In him we were also chosen, having been predestined according to the plan of him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:4, 11). What God did in Christ wasn't an accident or a fix for an unforeseen problem; it was set by God's eternal decree.

Foreknowledge and Purpose

Now, as we think about God's eternal counsel regarding Christ, it's helpful for us to distinguish two aspects: foreknowledge and purpose. One passage in which both these aspects of God's eternal counsel are evident is Isaiah 46:10, where God said, “I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please.” Regarding his foreknowledge, God said that from the beginning, that is, before he created the world, he knew what was still to come. Regarding his purpose, he said that all his plans would be fulfilled.

Foreknowledge refers to God's knowledge, prior to creation, of events that would occur in the course of history. The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are all-knowing, and their knowledge extends even

into the future (Isa. 42:9; 45:11–13; Acts 15:17–18). God’s *purpose* for creating the universe was in order to display and increase his glory through his kingdom in Christ (Ps. 145; 1 Tim. 1:17; Heb. 1:1–13; 1 Peter 1:20–2:9; Rev. 1:5–6).

Covenant of Redemption

In recent centuries, some theologians have found it helpful to describe God’s eternal decree to increase his glory through his kingdom in Christ as a *covenant of redemption*. Scripture indicates that before the creation of the world, the persons of the Godhead entered into a solemn arrangement to secure redemption and to apply it to the fallen creation. In particular, the Son promised to become incarnate and to die in order to redeem fallen humanity from the consequences of sin. And the Father promised to accept the Son’s sacrifice in payment for the redemption of sinners. Some theologians also include the Holy Spirit’s promise to apply salvation to redeemed sinners.

The covenant of redemption explains what Jesus has already done and continues to do in his incarnation. The promises made in this covenant are mentioned in places like Psalm 110 and Ephesians 1:3–6, and they’re assumed in places like 1 Peter 1:20 and Revelation 13:8. As just one example, consider Jesus’s words in the gospel of John: “I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them

The covenant of redemption is an agreement in which the Father plans the work of salvation on behalf of his people and determines that he will provide for the Son a physical body in which the Son will come and be incarnate. The Son agrees to come to this earth, lay down his perfect life on the cross, and be a substitute for God’s people. This covenant also includes the sending forth of the Holy Spirit, who applies the work of Christ to God’s people. **Jeff Lowman**

up at the last day. For my Father's will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day" (John 6:38–40).

God's eternal counsel should be an incredible source of comfort for all believers. From eternity, God designed creation to display his glory and to be a suitable place for humanity to live under his benevolent reign in Christ. Nothing surprises God, and nothing can thwart this eternal design. God wasn't shocked by humanity's fall into sin, and our salvation isn't his last-minute attempt to fix some-

Redemption relates to an eternal purpose that was formed in God before the creation of the world. We cannot plumb the mysteries of this. God is infinite, and some things remain hidden from us, and God has not revealed them. But we want to understand everything that God *has* revealed about this, and Scripture indicates that the triune God formed a covenant within himself that would manifest his glory in eternity. As part of this, beings other than God would enjoy his glory, and it would be a never-ending increase of enjoyment. It appears from Scripture that God did this by taking sinful human beings who were deserving of punishment and redeeming them. So far as we can tell from Scripture, this covenant arrangement was made before the foundation of the world: the Father would elect a people, the Son would come to die and redeem the people, and the Holy Spirit would draw that people to God, removing the corruption of sin from them so that they would repent and embrace Christ. **Thomas J. Nettles**

thing that broke unexpectedly. On the contrary, everything happens according to his plan. As amazing as it seems, this same God—the Architect and Creator of the universe—became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. He entered creation in order to restore it, and us, according to his eternal purposes.

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

covenant of redemption

divine attributes

divinity

economic Trinity

Elohim

essence of God

eternal counsel

eternal decree

eternity

foreknowledge

ontological Trinity

persons of God

purpose

Trinity

Yahweh

REVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What does the Bible teach about Christ's divinity?
2. Explain the biblical concept of the Trinity. What do theologians mean by the *ontological* Trinity and the *economic* Trinity?
3. What is God's eternal counsel regarding Christ?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. How does knowing that Jesus is eternally God impact the way you read the Bible?
2. How does understanding the roles of each member of the Trinity help us in evangelism?
3. What comfort and encouragement do you find in God's eternal plan of salvation?

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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CHAPTER QUIZ

<https://thirdmill.org/quiz?JES1>