

Trinity in a Different Perspective

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Abstract: The traditional interpretation of the Trinity is as follows: There is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Each Person is fully God, but there is only one God. This seemingly contradictory statement has spurred heated debate among theologians since its inception in the 4th century centered on the following questions: If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons but each is fully God, why do we not say that there are three gods? How did God generate the Son and Holy Spirit eternally? Theologians have been trying to give self-consistent answers based on human analogies but no consensus has been reached yet.

In this paper we propose a new interpretation of the Trinity based on the following attributes of God: (1) God is the transcendent creator of the universe and has absolute sovereign power over and foreknowledge of the entire universe. (2) God created men in His image to be glorified by them. (3) God shows His infinite holiness, righteousness, and love to human being in the Bible. (4) The transcendent God presents Himself to our world in various forms without leaving His realm.

We explain how the transcendent God presented Himself in various forms to this world without leaving His realm using the 2D vs. 3D analogy. Jesus and Holy Spirit are God's distinct presentations to this world for the salvation of mankind. The concept of the Trinity emerges as men fall into sins and God interacts with men by presenting Himself as the Father Son and Holy Spirit for their salvation. According to our interpretation, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit coexist eternally in God's plan and work together as distinctive persons for our salvation but they are perfectly God as they are the direct representation of God to this world and so there is one God.

1. Introduction

The Traditional interpretation of the Trinity is as follows¹: There is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons; the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In other words, the Father is not the Son, the Son is not the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit is not the Father, and each person is fully

¹Matt Perman, "What is the Doctrine of the Trinity", <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/what-is-the-doctrine-of-the-trinity>

God, but there is only one God. This definition of the Trinity is confusing and seems to be contradictory. If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are distinct persons but each is fully God, why do we not say that there are three gods? How did God generate the Son and Holy Spirit? Even though the doctrine of the Trinity has been studied by many theologians since its inception in the mid fourth century, there is no agreement among theologians for explaining the doctrine self-consistently and thus the doctrine remains a mystery for most of Christians. In my conversation with Muslim students, I often encounter the question of the deity of Jesus and the Trinity. They argue that Jesus never claimed to be God but only a servant and messenger of God. They also criticize that the trinitarianism is simply a tritheism because a “fully divine person” must be a god. The Quran itself (5: 73) charges that believing the Trinity is blasphemy. But we, Christians, fail to provide them a clear answer and so we have hard time introducing the good news to them. The doctrine of the trinity is a stumbling block for constructive discussion with Muslims. This paper is aimed to give answers to the questions concerning the Trinity which may be understandable to laymen and Muslims by proposing a new interpretation based on God’s salvation of mankind and His transcendent attributes.

Before discussing the traditional understanding of the Trinity, let us briefly review the Biblical bases for the doctrine. In Gen. 1, God, His word, and Holy Spirit work together for creation. John 1:1-3 says that Jesus was with God as His word in the beginning and all things were made through him, Col. 1:16-17 says that Jesus was before all things and in Him all thing were created. In 1 Cor. 8:6, Paul said that 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. John 17:5 says that the Son had glory with the Father before the world existed. Heb. 9:14 says that the Holy Spirit is eternal and Gen. 1:2 says the Holy Spirit works for creation. On the other hand, John 3:16 and 1 John 4:14 say that the Father sent His son for our salvation and Phil. 2:5-8 says that Jesus gave up the equality of God and came down to the world for our salvation. John 14:26 says that the Father will send the Holy Spirit to the disciples. These Bible verses (and more) present that the Son and Holy Spirit have coexisted and have fellowshiped with the Father eternally as distinct persons and through them all things were created. On the other hand, numerous other Bible verses (e.g. Matt. 24:36, John 5:19, John 6:38, John 14:28, 1 John 4:9, 1 Cor. 15:24-28, Phil. 2:5-8, 1 Cor. 11:3, Acts 4:29-30, Acts 3:13, Col. 1:15) show that Jesus is inferior to God the father. These conflicting Bible verses have spurred heated debate among the theologians from the early church history about the relationship between the Son, the Holy Spirit and the Father. A brief review of church history regarding the debate about the Trinity is summarized from the references shown below.

1.1. Previous Studies for the Trinity

Justin Martyr (AD 100-165)² claimed that it is impossible for the Creator of the universe to make himself visible in a little spot on earth (the earth itself is less than a little spot of the universe), so any biblical appearance of God on earth was the *logos* or the pre-human Jesus. The creator God is the ultimate source of the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Origen (AD 184-253)² claimed that God the Father, who created the universe, is superior to every being that exists, the Son is second to the Father and was mysteriously “generated” by God before creation. The Holy Spirit is less than the Father and the Son, and dwells within the saints. In other

²Dale Tuggy, “History of Trinitarian Doctrine”, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/trinity-history.html>

words, the power of the Father is greater than that of the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the power of the Son is more than that of the Holy Spirit. Many scholars call this hierarchical Christian theology “subordinationist” or “Unitarian”, as the Son and Spirit are always subordinate to God the Father.

Tertullian (AD 155-220)² claims that at the beginning, God is alone. Then, when it is time to create, he brings the Son into existence, using a portion of his divine matter. Then the Son, using a portion of the divine matter shared with him, brings into existence the Spirit. The Son is not God himself, nor is he divine in the same sense that the Father is. Rather, the Son is “divine” in that he is made of a portion of the matter that the Father is composed of. This makes them “one substance”. Tertullian argues the above process does not introduce two more gods as there is one ultimate source of all, the Father. Thus, monotheism is upheld. Tertullian is the first to use the term “Trinity” which consists of three distinct persons with a common or shared “substance”.

Arius (AD 256-336)² denied the deity of the Son by claiming that He was created by God from nothing a finite time ago. Around 318–21, Alexander of Alexandria examined and opposed his teaching and excommunicated Arius. The incident triggered huge controversy between the supporters of Arius (called subordinationist) and of Alexander. As the dispute between the two groups reached the boiling point, Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea which decreed that the Father and Son were same substance (or essence) by siding with Alexander. Later, the council of Constantinople led by Alexandrian bishop Athanasius established the doctrine of Trinity based on the teaching of Tertullian.

After the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed the doctrine of the Trinity was generally accepted with few exceptions from the supporters of subordinationism.

Augustine (AD 354-430)³ considered himself a voice of the Church’s tradition by believing God as one divine essence. His approach to explain the doctrine of the Trinity was to use an analogy to the structure of the human mind, in other words a psychological analogy. He argued for the analogy of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as lover, beloved, and love itself. As we experience the Holy Spirit as the bond of love between believers, so he considered the Holy Spirit to be the bond of love between Father and Son within the Godhead. He also claimed that none of the persons in Trinity is inferior to the father and so they are eternally co-equal. He also advocated the procession of Holy Spirit from both the Father and the Son.

Thomas Aquinas (AD 1225-1274)⁴ is in line with St. Augustine by believing God as one essence and interpreting the Trinity with human psychological analogies. The basic concepts and structure of Thomas’s trinitarian doctrine is his understanding of the divine processions, relations, persons and personal properties. Thomas begins his account of the Trinity with a discussion of the triune processions (i.e., the Son’s eternal generation by the Father and the Spirit’s eternal procession from the Father and Son) and says that the divine persons are distinct from one another by “relations of origin.” Thomas explains that procession here is to be understood not as an outward act but rather as an inward act that “remains in the agent himself.” Thomas believes the procession of the Son occurs in the manner of an “intelligible action” where the concept of the thing known remains in the agent knowing (here, the Father), while the procession of the Spirit occurs in the manner of a “volitional action” where the object loved remains in the one willing and loving (in this case, two – both the Father and the Son). Next, Thomas defines the person as an “individual substance of a rational nature which is

²Dale Tuggy, “History of Trinitarian Doctrine”,

³Eugene Webb, “Augustine’s New Trinity: The Anxious Circle of Metaphor”<http://faculty.washington.edu/webb/R428/Augustine.html>

⁴Steven J. Duby, “Trinity and Economy in Thomas Aquinas”, <https://equip.sbts.edu/publications/journals/journal-of-theology/trinity-economy-thomas-aquinas/>

used to designate the Father, Son and Spirit. The persons of the Trinity are distinct by their relations toward one another. Another important feature of Thomas's doctrine of the Trinity is the concept of a "notion," which means an abstract representation of the distinct character of a divine person, by which the person can be readily identified by us.

Until mid-20th century, the doctrine of Trinity was considered to be philosophical and abstract discussions about the mystery of the triune God which have nothing to do with God's salvation and Christian life. In the late 20th century, the study of the doctrine of Trinity revived emphasizing God's salvation starting with Karl Barth and Karl Rahner.

Karl Barth (AD 1886-1968)⁵ observed that the use of the term "person" has always been a source of confusion when understanding the Trinity. Consequently, he prefers the term "mode" or "way of being" as a replacement. Barth is trying to emphasize the divine unity by making the God-head one personality which has a participation of the modes of being with the other modes. There is most certainly a distinction between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As God is in Himself Father from all eternity, He begets Himself as the Son from all eternity. As He is the Son from all eternity, He is begotten of Himself as the Father from all eternity. In this eternal begetting of Himself and being begotten of Himself, He posits Himself a third time as the Holy Spirit, that is, as the love which unites Him in Himself. Barth emphasized the significance of the Trinity as the key to a Christian understanding of God. He also claims that God's self-revelation to us is the root of the Doctrine of the Trinity. God moves out of God's hiddenness (veiling) in two movements, in the word/the Son (movement of "objective" Word or unveiling) and in the Spirit (movement of "subjective reception" or imparting). These movements are not merely "modes" of God's "economic" activity, but reflect true "modes of being and existence" within the eternal Godhead, in other words, "God for Us" is the same as "God in Godself". We can see here in Barth's own words that the incarnation is a work of the entire Trinity, but that it is only the mode of the Son, Jesus Christ, which becomes flesh, not the Father, and not the Spirit. The movement of the Holy Spirit (imparting) is necessary because human beings are incapable of hearing the Word of God. God must effect a personal (subjective) response to the Word in each individual.

Karl Rahner (1904-1984)⁶ wanted to restore the prominence of the Trinity in both doctrinal and practical Christian life. In order to achieve such a recovery; Rahner focused on salvation history believing that the doctrine of the Trinity should follow the order of salvation history. Rahner rejected the propriety of the psychological analogy by saying that the psychological theory of the Trinity neglects the experience of the Trinity in the economy of salvation in favor of a seemingly almost Gnostic speculation about what goes on in the inner life of God. Thus, Rahner distances himself from some of the classical Augustinian approach to understanding the Trinity. Rahner's treatise can be seen as an effort to connect the doctrine of the Trinity to humanity: "There *must* be a connection between Trinity and man. The Trinity is a mystery of salvation, which consists fundamentally in God's self-communication. The Father "self-communicates" himself through the Son and the Spirit. Indeed, the communication of the Spirit is not possible without the incarnation of the Son. He is emphatic that this work of self-communication is not merely information about the Father, but rather that which is communicated is the "essence" or "divinity" of God himself. In other words, Immanent Trinity is equal to Economic Trinity.

⁵David Monyak, "The Survey of Theology 2, Trinity", <http://www.stjohnadulthood.org/presentations/The02.PDF>

⁶David Lincicum, "Economy and Immanence: Karl Rahner's Doctrine of the Trinity", *EuroJTh*, (2005), 14:2, 111-118, https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ejt/14-2_111.pdf

A number of modern theologians^{7,8,9,10} have defended for God's being a plurality of persons noting that God is love (1 John 4:8). Craig¹⁰ describes it as follows: God is by definition the greatest conceivable being. As the greatest conceivable being, God must be perfect. Now a perfect being must be a loving being as love is a moral perfection. God therefore must be a perfectly loving being. Now it is of the very nature of love to give oneself away. Love reaches out to another person rather than centering wholly in oneself. So if God is perfectly loving by His very nature, He must be giving Himself in love to another. But who is that other? It cannot be any created person, since creation is a result of God's free will, not a result of His nature. It belongs to God's very essence to love, but it does not belong to His essence to create. So we can imagine a possible world in which God is perfectly loving and yet no created persons exist. So created persons cannot sufficiently explain whom God loves. Moreover, contemporary cosmology makes it plausible that created persons have not always existed. But God is eternally loving. So again created persons alone are insufficient to account for God's being perfectly loving. It therefore follows that the other to whom God's love is necessarily directed must be internal to God Himself. In other words, God is not a single, rather God is a plurality of persons, as the Christian doctrine of the Trinity affirms.

The theologians in the 21st century (e.g. Tuggy¹¹, Leftow¹², Rea¹³, Craig¹⁰, Ward¹⁴, Swinburne⁸ and etc.) continue to debate concerning the self-consistency of the Trinity by devising One-self theories (or Latin Trinity) and Three-self theories (or the Social Trinity) but they have not yet reached a consensus for a self-consistent interpretation of the Trinity.

1.2 Issues on the traditional understanding of the Trinity

Even though numerous theologians have attempted to devise self-consistent interpretations of the Trinity for more than 1600 years, confusion still exists regarding the doctrine. One of the sources of the confusion is that the Bible uses the expression, "father and son", for describing the relation between God and Jesus and theologians interpret the expression literally. In the Old Testament (OT) the people of Israel called themselves children of God and called God their father. They meant that God protected them like a father protecting his children but never meant that God begot them. The New Testament (NT) calls Jesus the Son of God and calls God His father who begot the Son. That does not mean that Jesus had a father and the father actually had sexual relation to beget the Son as human beings do. Rather it means to express Jesus's relation with God the Father in a way understandable to men. In other words, the expressions, father and son, are not eternal attributes of God but anthropomorphic expressions of the relation between God and Jesus. If Jesus is not the son of God, then what is the real relation between Jesus and God? We will give our explanation in section 2.4.

⁷Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, Intervarsity Press, 2012, p19

⁸Swinburne, Richard. "Response to Keith Ward Christ and the Cosmos." *Philosophia Christi* Vol. 18 no. 2 (2016): 297-305.

⁹Christopher Thomas Porter, "A Modern Look at Social Trinitarianism", *Quaerens Deum: The Liberty Undergraduate Journal for Philosophy of Religion*: Vol. 3 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

¹⁰William Lane Craig, "A Formulation and Defense of the Doctrine of the Trinity", <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/scholarly-writings/christian-doctrines/a-formulation-and-defense-of-the-doctrine-of-the-trinity/>

¹¹Dale Tuggy, "Trinity", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/>

¹²Leftow, "A Latin Trinity", *Faith and Philosophy*, 21(3) (2004): 304–33.

¹³Rea, M., 2003, "Relative Identity and the Doctrine of the Trinity", *Philosophia Christi*, 5(2): 431–45.

¹⁴Ward, Keith. "Reimagining the Trinity: On Not Three Gods", *Philosophia Christi* Vol 18 no. 2 (2016): 281-296

Next, what does it mean when the Bible says that God eternally exists as three distinct persons? God is a transcendent supernatural being who created the universe in which there are several hundred billions of galaxies with each galaxy having several hundred billions of stars. Hugh Ross¹⁵ says that as God created the eleven dimensional space and time (and our universe was a part of it initially), He is more than an eleven dimensional transcendent being (if He has dimension). We who live in the four dimensional world cannot fathom the eternal attributes of the transcendent God nor count Him as a person. If we believe God exists eternally as three distinct persons, we do consider God as a finite being which can be counted and disregard God's omnipresence. God is the transcendent being that human being cannot count. We can understand God's attributes partially only when He reveals Himself to us and only what He reveals is understandable to us¹⁶. What He reveals to us may not be the whole of His real eternal and immanent attribute. For example, Gen. 6:6 describes God regretting to have made men on the earth. The Biblical expression intends to depict God's indignation to human sins understandable to men. If we interpret the verse literally, we deny one of His fundamental attributes, immutability. Another example is Lev. 10:8 which describes God staying in the Holy of Holiest and speaking to Aron (Lev. 10:8). If we interpret the Bible verse literally, we should deny His omnipresence and believe God came down from His realm and stayed in the Holy of Holiest. God revealed Himself in the Holy of Holiest to make His holiness known to the Israelites. Thus, even though the Bible mentions the eternal coexistence of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as distinct persons, the Biblical expression may be intended merely to be understandable to human beings for God's eternal plan of human salvation through Jesus and the Holy Spirit rather than to reveal an eternal and immanent attribute of God.

Furthermore, if Jesus is a separate person in the Trinity, does it mean that the Son left God's realm and descended to the human world so that the Father was without the Son in God's realm during his incarnation? Likewise, if the Holy Spirit is another separate person in the Trinity, did the Holy Spirit leave God's realm at Pentecost to stay with the disciples? God appeared as a human voice communicable with Adam and Eve as well as Abraham, appeared to Moses as a burning bush, and etc. The OT never says that the various appearances of God are lower gods whom the almighty and transcendent God sent. Then, does OT mean that the transcendent God left his realm leaving the Son and Holy Spirit behind and appeared to Adam, Abraham, Moses and the Israelites in the various forms? It is impossible as Justin Martyr claimed. Thus, if we consider "Son" and "Father" expressed in the Bible as two distinct persons of God or as the eternal attribute of God, we may put the transcendent almighty God into a man-made small box.

Tertullian first used "sharing substance" (or consubstantial) and "divine matter" for explaining the generation of the Son and Holy Spirit by God. Most of the modern Trinitarians adopt the concept of "consubstantial" to explain the Trinity. According to Tertullian, as the Son and the Holy Spirit shared the divine matter of the Father they are divine and distinct persons but one God. A major problem with the "sharing divine matter" is that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are treated as finite beings who share a substance. Furthermore, theologians speculate, as Rahner mentioned, about what goes on in the inner life of the transcendent God before the creation using the analogy of human mind and body. The fundamental shortfall for theologians' interpretation of the Trinity is that they consider God as a finite four dimensional being like us and try to interpret the relation between God and Jesus with a human analogy. We need to reinterpret the relation between God, Jesus and Holy Spirit through a different

¹⁵Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos*, Chap. 9, NavPress, third edition, 2017

¹⁶R. C. Sproul, *Everyone's a Theologian*, Chap 9, 2014, published by Reformation Trust Publishing.

interpretive lense.

1.3 New approach

Karl Barth claimed that God's self-revelation to us should be the root of the Doctrine of the Trinity and Rahner believed that the doctrine of the Trinity should follow the order of salvation history. We believe that, in addition to God's revelation to us for our salvation, God's fundamental attributes revealed in the Bible that have no human analogy should be the root of the doctrine of the Trinity. We should not try to speculate about what goes on in the inner life of the transcendent God before the creation using the analogy of human mind and body.

We are going to show that we cannot understand the attributes of the transcendent God unless He reveals Himself to us. Even when He reveals Himself to us, He reveals only a tiny fraction of His eternal attributes, so we never know the full attributes of God. We will also show that the transcendent God can directly appear to human being in various forms without leaving His realm. Understanding this ability of the transcendent God is the key to understand the true meaning of the trinity.

2. New Perspective on the Trinity

2.1 God's attributes and His purpose for creating human being in His image

In order to explain the deity of Jesus and the concept of Trinity, we use the following fundamental attributes of God presented in the Bible: First, God is the creator of our four dimensional universe so He is the transcendent being of much higher dimension (if He has dimension) than our four dimensional physical world. He has absolute sovereign power over the universe. Everything in the universe was planned by Him and everything He planned is realized exactly without exception. Before creation, He clearly foresees the realization of everything He planned. The transcendent God can also express Himself to human beings in various forms without leaving His realm. Second, God created human beings in His image to be glorified by them. Third, God is infinitely Holy, Righteous, and has infinite love to men. These attributes are completely foreign to human being. Men can visualize God only through His attributes revealed to men and their visualizations are limited to the things experienced in this world.

Even though God created men in His image, Adam and Eve committed sins against God by disobeying His command. God commanded Adam that he was free to eat from any tree except from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God warned Adam that he would certainly die if he disobeyed God's command. After Adam and Eve committed sins, they (and the serpent) were cursed by God and kicked out from the Garden of Eden. Instead of killing them, God killed animals and gave their skins to Adam and Eve for their protection in the harsh environment outside the Garden. After they were kicked out, the Bible records the history of Adam's descendants committing sins, being punished, and some being saved until Jesus came to the world as the Son of God and opened a new era of salvation.

What was God's purpose when He created men in His image and allowed them to exercise their free will and to commit sins against God's command? God wanted to be glorified by those who choose to obey God's command with their will by overcoming Satan's temptations (Is. 43:7, Is. 48:9–11, 1 Cor. 10:31, Matt. 5:16). Someone may argue that God does not need men to be glorified as God does not lack anything. Surely, God does not depend solely on men for being glorified. He may have infinite number of other means to be glorified but God also chose men freely for the purpose as indicated in the Bible. But all the men created in God's image commit sins and fall short of God's purpose (Rom. 3:23). John Piper¹⁷ said "The great tragedy of the universe is that, while human beings were made

¹⁷John Piper, "Why did God Create the World?", (Sept. 2012), <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/why-did-god-create-the-world>.

to glorify God, we have all fallen short of this purpose and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man” (Rom 1:23)”.

Humanity’s falling into sins is a fatal blow to God’s grand plan to be glorified by men. Thus, the deliverance of men from their sins was as important as creating men in His image for God. Was God surprised by Adam’s committing sin against His command? As God has absolute sovereignty and foreknowledge over the whole universe, He foresaw Adam’s sin. He even had a plan for delivering men from their sins even before He created the universe. God’s plan for deliverance runs into a dilemma of potentially violating one or more of his attributes of holiness, righteousness, and love but the trinity is the solution for the dilemma.

2.2 The dilemma of a righteous King toward his law-braking son

In order to better understand God’s options regarding how to address human sin, I present the following story that I heard from a guest preacher.

In a kingdom, there was a righteous king. He made a very important law and declared to all over the kingdom that he will remove eyes from the first violator of the law as a punishment. The next morning, a police man arrested a young man who violated the law and brought him to the king. The king was shocked to find that the young man was his only son who the king loved so much and would inherit the kingdom. If the king takes out the two eyes from his son, then he will ruin his son’s life and his kingdom. If the king forgives his son, then he cannot govern the country righteously and loses his credibility as a righteous king. He cannot lose his only son as well as his credibility as a righteous king. How can he solve his dilemma? The king’s solution was to take out the right eye from his son and the left eye from himself. By doing so, the king showed his love toward his son and exercised his righteousness simultaneously.

Was there any other solution to the king? He might take out the right eye from his son and the left eye from a man on the street. But it is very unfair for the man on the street as he had to lose his left eye for doing nothing wrong. Even if the man on the street wanted to donate his left eye for the King’s son, his donation does not have any legal authority to save the eye of king’s son. As the king was the father of the son and the supreme leader who made and declared the law, only his left eye had legal authority to save his son’s left eye. But if the son refused to accept his father’s offer, the king had to execute the law as he declared and the son would lose his two eyes. Nobody could criticize the king as a ruthless king. If the son accepts his father’s offer with deep repentance, his left eye will be saved and everybody will say the king shows his love toward his son and executed the law righteously.

2.3 God’s options for human sins

When we commit sins, what are God’s options for us? As God is infinitely holy, he cannot accept any small sin that we commit. And as He is infinitely righteous, he should punish us for any sins we committed without any exception. His punishment is death. But as God has infinite love toward us, He cannot kill us for our sins. If God does not punish us for our sins because He is love, then He violates His attribute of righteousness. If He punishes us for our sins because He is righteous, He violates His attribute of love. What could be God’s solution for sinful men without violating His attribute of Holiness, Righteousness, and love? The only solution is that God himself pays the penalty of our sins as the righteous king did in the previous section. God, then, declares that whoever accepts God’s redemptive sacrifice with sincere repentance can be forgiven for his (or her) sins. God’s sacrifice establishes the ground for Him to forgive the sinners who accepts His redemptive sacrifice without violating His attribute of righteousness. He also establishes the ground to punish the people who refuse to accept His redemptive sacrifice without violating His attribute of love. As God is the creator of the

universe and everything in it and has complete sovereign power over the universe and human being, His sacrifice is effective to all human beings in the past, present, and future.

On the other hand, the Bible says that Jesus died on the cross to redeem our sins so whoever believes in Him obtains eternal life regardless of his (or her) previous sins and regardless of time and space. The Bible also says that Jesus will judge people on the last day and send unbelievers to hell. In order for Jesus' death to have such redemptive power, Jesus must be God himself.

Even though God sacrificed Himself for the salvation of men, men cannot accept His redemptive death without His help as they are spiritually dead. God needs to open our spiritual eyes for us to realize our sins and to accept His redemptive grace. God also needs to empower believers to live continuously as saved people and so glorify Him. The Bible says that Holy Spirit opens the spiritual eyes of unbelievers and empowers believers. Thus, the Holy Spirit must be God himself.

The next questions to be addressed are; how did God, who is the creator of the universe, sacrifice Himself for our salvation and how did He help us realize our sins and accept His redemptive grace.

2.4 Jesus and the Holy Spirit as God's revelations to four dimensional human beings

In this section, we are going to show that God's incarnation can be understood as a higher dimensional transcendent being revealing himself to a lower dimensional world without leaving His realm, not God the Father sending God the son to the world. I like to borrow the explanation of Hugh Ross¹⁵ for God's incarnation as follows. The following illustration never intends to give a full explanation of God's incarnation but merely to give a better mental picture of it.

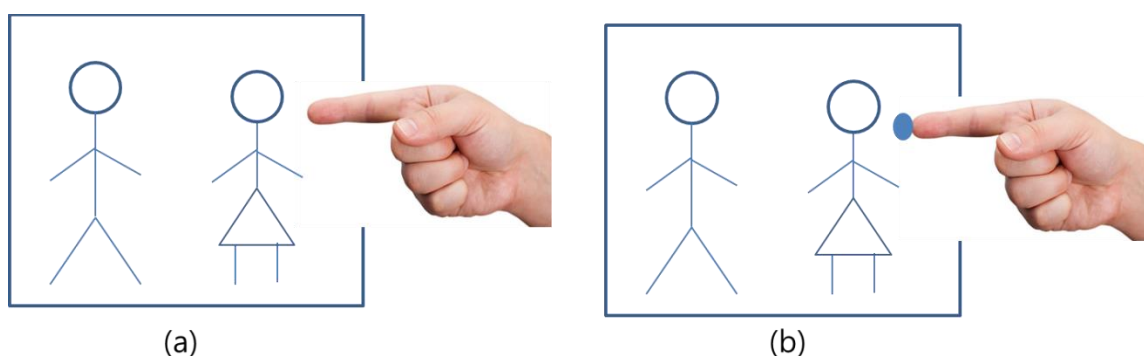


Figure 1. Two persons in a 2D world and a finger of a 3D person. (a) The finger does not touch the 2D plane. (b) The finger touches the plane.

We live in a world of three dimensional (3D) space (if we include time as a dimension, our universe is the 4D world. But in this discussion, we do not include time). Let's assume there is a world of 2D space (a flat plane). One boy stands on the left and a girl stands on the right in the 2D world, and a finger of a man of the 3D space points to the girl as shown in Fig 1. Note that the person in the 3D world is a transcendent being to the people in the 2D world. When the finger of the 3D person does not touch the 2D plane (Fig. 1(a)), the 2D girl cannot see the finger even though the finger is very close to her as the 2D world does not have depth. But the girl can see the boy even though the boy is farther than the finger from the girl. If the finger touches the plane, the tip of the finger that touches the plane can be seen by the two persons in the 2D world. But it is impossible for the two persons to figure out the whole of the 3D person. The 3D person can touch the 2D world with not only one finger but also

¹⁵Hugh Ross, *Beyond the Cosmos*,

two, three, or more fingers in different forms and different times. When the 2D persons see the finger tips, they see them as several distinct objects (or persons) at various times but they are all the fingertips of the 3D person, in other words they are the 3D person in essence.

Figure 1 gives us a good mental picture for God's incarnation to men if we assume that the 3D person is God, the 2D world is our world, the two persons in the 2D world are us, and the fingertip touched on the 2D plane is Jesus. Of course God does not have fingers and is much higher dimensional being (if He has a dimension) in space and time than our 4D world. We note that God's higher dimensionality is our analogy of God's incomprehensible transcendence and a God's finger touching our world is an analogy of God's presentation of Himself, as a theophany, to this world without leaving His realm. Various theophanies in OT can be considered as God's fingertips that touch on our world in various forms and for various purposes. In the OT, God appeared to men as human voice (Gen. 3:9, Gen. 12:1-9), burning bush (Ex. 3:1-17), column of cloud and fire (Ex 13:21), and etc. These theophanies exercised full authority of God and the persons who encountered the theophanies believed they met God. These theophanies suddenly appear to the people of Israel and disappear when the objectives of their appearances were accomplished. These sudden appearances and disappearances of the theophanies can easily be explained by the 2D vs. 3D analogy.

On the other hand in the NT, God's presentation of Himself to this world has a unique purpose of paying the penalty for human's sins by dying on the cross. For the purpose, God presented Himself as Jesus through the birth from the Virgin Mary. With the simple analogy of the 2D-3D, we cannot explain the God's incarnation in the same way of explaining the burning bush. But if we note that God is a much higher dimensional being than humans, we can analogize Jesus as the finger tip of the transcendent God touching our world. Thus, Jesus is fully God in the same way the theophanies of the OT are fully God. On the other hand, as Jesus was born from the Virgin Mary, he had a perfect human nature but without sins and was restricted voluntarily by the space and time of this world. When Jesus accomplished His objective of salvation, He ascended into heaven and disappeared from the sight of His disciples. His disappearance can be analogized as the detachment of God's fingertip from our world.

Holy Spirit can also be considered as God's fingertip touched on our world. But the analogy of the 2D vs. 3D cannot be applied directly to the Holy Spirit because the fingertip touched on the 2D space is restricted spatially but the Holy Spirit is not. However, when we consider again that God is a much higher dimensional being in space and time than us, we can still analogize the Holy Spirit to be God's fingertip touched to our world (in a different way from the fingertip analogy of Jesus) without being restricted by our space and time.

Figure 1 gives us clearer understanding of the revelation of God to men through Jesus and the Holy Spirit without leaving His realm or without sending them from His realm. When God revealed Himself to us as Jesus and Holy Spirit, the Bible expresses them as two distinct persons and the relation between God and Jesus as the Father and the Son.

We can extrapolate the analogy of 2D vs. 3D to our 4D world vs. God of much higher dimension (if God has dimension) and can learn the relationship between God and humans. First, God can reveal Himself in various forms to this world without leaving His realm. Second, if God does not reveal Himself there is no way humans can know God. Third, when God reveals Himself to humans, He reveals a small portion of Himself (a fingertip) understandable to humans such as words, human, fire, and etc. God reveals His attributes in the Bible that are necessary for the salvation of men from their sins and that are understandable to men. Thus, it is impossible for humans to know the whole of His immanent attribute from what God reveals to us in the Bible.

2.5 The inseparability of Jesus and the Holy Spirit for God's creation and redemptive work

Even if God paid the penalty for our sins through Jesus, men cannot recognize their sins and cannot

accept God's grace as they are spiritually dead. God needs to continuously awaken men to realize their sins and accept Jesus as their savior. God also needs to empower them to live continuously as saved persons and to glorify God in the world infected by Satan's power. For this purpose, God reveals Himself as the Holy Spirit and works for people without being restricted by space.

For God's creative work in Genesis 1, the Holy Spirit was actively involved by converting non-life material to life after the word (pre-incarnated Jesus) was declared. The Virgin Mary became pregnant by the power of Holy Spirit (Luke 1:35). Just after Jesus was baptized, the Holy Spirit descended on to Jesus and witnessed to the people that He is the Son of God (Matt. 3:16-17). Upon Jesus's command, the Holy Spirit changes the water (non-life material) to wine (life material) (John 2:1-10) and makes the dead person alive (John 11:1-44). During Jesus's mission, the Holy Spirit continued to empower Jesus and raised Him from the dead. Jesus's eleven disciples did not understand Jesus redemptive mission during their lives with Jesus but they suddenly understood when they received the Holy Spirit at the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-39). Paul changed drastically from a persecutor of Christians to a great disciple of Jesus when he encountered Jesus and received the Holy Spirit on the way to Damascus (Acts 9:1-22). The disciples were continuously empowered by the Holy Spirit to spread the good news all over the world. Many people who are spiritually dead accept Jesus after they experienced the Holy Spirit even now. Without the Holy Spirit, it is impossible for any to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and our savior.

When we are in the Heaven, we will be in a higher (but finite) dimensional world in which there is no decay and we will see Jesus on the right side of God's throne as God's image (or exact representation). The Holy Spirit will continue to work for those in the heaven by empowering them and by communicating to God and God will be glorified forever by the saved (Rev. 8:6). God's purpose for creating humans in His image and allowing them to exercise their free will is going to be accomplished in the Heaven through Jesus and Holy Spirit.

Thus, for God's creation, redemptive work, and consummating the redemption in Heaven, Jesus (the Word) and Holy Spirit are inseparable, indispensable and sufficient.

2.6 Jesus the word of God

When God created something each day in Gen. 1, He uttered words, "Let there be...". After the words, the things planned on that day were created. Ps. 33:6 says that by the word of God all things were made and John 1:1-14 says that the Word was with God in the beginning and through the Word all things were made and Jesus is the Word in flesh. Rev. 19:13 describes the returning Jesus as the Word of God. In this section we are going to discuss the implication of these Bible verses.

First, we discuss the meaning of the Word of God. Human beings use words to express their opinions to other people. When I speak to a person, I must use words that the person can understand and then my words present my opinion and my will to the person. Likewise God also expresses his will to humans by using words which are understandable to us. When God created the things on the earth, He did not need to utter words but only needed to simply blink His eyes (if He has eyes). The reason why God uttered words before creation in each day was that He wanted to let humans, whom He already planned to create in His image, know His creation and glorify Him later. God uses words to reveal his idea or will to men as men are the only creature to use words. God communicated with Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc. with His words to judge, promise, and deliver them. God's word is not a distinct person from God but the representation of His will and plan to human beings with whom He intends to communicate. By the analogy of 2D and 3D world, God's words uttered during creation and communicated with the people in OT are His fingertip touched on our world for His various purposes.

In the New Testament, John says that the Word was with God in the beginning, and the Word was God through whom all things were made. By comparing Gen. 1 and Ps. 33:6 with John 1, we can see

that the words God uttered before creation on each day is the same word in John 1. Later John says that the word became flesh (Jesus). Thus, Jesus was with God as His Word in the beginning (John 1:1) and through Him God created everything. Paul supports that the word in creation is Jesus in Col. 1:16 by saying that in Jesus all things were created. Paul also says in Col. 1:15 that Jesus is the image of the invisible God and Heb. 1:3 says that Jesus is the exact representation of God. The above Bible verses say that the word, Jesus, and the image (or exact representation) of God are the same and can be understood with the analogy of the 2D and 3D world. As God's word is not a distinct person from God, the above Bible verses show that pre-incarnated Jesus is not a distinct person from God.

2.7 The relationship between God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit

In section 2.6, we mentioned that the pre-incarnated Jesus was not a distinct person because he was the Word of God and God's word is not a distinct person from God. However, the following Bible verses imply that pre-incarnated Jesus was a distinct person from God. For example, John 3:16 says that Jesus is the only begotten Son and was given by the Father for salvation. In Col. 1:15-16 Paul says that Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation" and by Him all things were created. Gal. 4:4-5 also says that God sent His son for our salvation. In John 17:5 and 17:24 Jesus says that the Father glorified and loved Him before the foundation of the world. These Bible verses imply that Jesus coexisted eternally with God as the Son and as a distinct person who was sent by the Father. How can we resolve the seemingly contradictory teachings of the above Bible verses to the Word of God discussed in section 2.6?

Let's first discuss the Biblical expressions of God and Jesus as Father and Son. In the introduction, we claim that the expression of Father and Son should be considered in a different perspective as God is not a human being of having sexual relationship to have a baby. The people of Israel called God as their father and called them as His children. The Father and children (or son) are commonly used expressions to describe the relationship between God and the Israelite in the OT as God had taken care of the Israelite as His children throughout the history of Israel. Thus, it is not strange the incarnated Jesus called God His Father. In Acts 3:13, the disciples called Jesus the servant of God but Saul called Jesus the Son of God after he encountered resurrected Jesus in his vision on the road to Damascus (Act 9:20). Saul might be convinced that Jesus was the incarnation of God after the experience but might not want to call Jesus God because he was an OT scholar who strongly believed in one God. Calling Jesus the Son of God might be the best expression that Paul could use for an easy understanding by the ordinary people and the expression was used throughout all his epistles. After John (and other disciples) experienced numerous miracles performed by Jesus, witnessed His death and resurrection, and performed miracles in the name of Jesus, he probably was convinced that Jesus was the incarnation of God and so called Him the word of God or God (John 1:1, 1 John 5:20). John also called Jesus the Son of God as He was born from the Virgin Mary by the Holy Spirit. Thus, we believe that "the Son of God" is an anthropomorphic expression of God's incarnation, not the eternal attribute of God.

Col. 1:15-16 mentions "the firstborn of all creation" and John 3:16 says "only begotten Son". The two verses mean that God planned only Jesus as His word for creation and as the word in flesh for salvation before He created the universe. John 3:16 says that God gave His only Son and Gal. 4:4-5 also says that God sent His son for our salvation. The expression of "gave" and "sent" can be understood as God's action of touching this world with His finger rather than God's sending someone from His realm.

Next, how can we understand the eternal fellowship between Father and Son as distinct persons as shown in John 17:5 and 17:24? The answer resides in the attribute of the transcendent God; His absolute sovereignty and foreknowledge. God has the absolute sovereign power over the universe. Everything in the universe was planned by Him before the beginning and everything He planned has

been realized exactly without exception. He also clearly foresees the realization of everything He planned. As God planned salvation before creation, the Word, Holy Spirit, and the Word in flesh (the Son) were all in God's plan before the beginning (before time starts) to be presented to our lower dimensional world in different times and for different purposes. Because God can foresee clearly the future He plans, His plan is as vivid as the realization of His plan in the future. As God could clearly foresee the redemptive work of Jesus and Holy Spirit, it is logical to think that He glorified them in His plan for the fulfilment of His redemptive plan and loved them before the creation.

Our interpretation of the Trinity is summarized as follows: The Father and Son are the anthropomorphic expressions of God and His incarnation. The Son and Holy Spirit are analogized as God's finger tips touched on this world in different forms, in other words, they are God in essence but they work as distinct persons for our salvation. We also mentioned that the Son and Holy Spirit are indispensable and sufficient for our salvation and they were with God in His plan as distinct persons and God foresaw and enjoyed the fulfillment of His salvation plan by His Son and glorified Him before creation.

2.8 Comments on Inferiority of the Son to the Father

When the word became flesh (or when the Father sent His son to the world), God's fingertip (figurative meaning) touched on the surface of our world of lower dimension. The fingertip (Jesus) was bound to the law of the lower dimensional world by giving up the privilege of the higher dimensional world (Phil. 2:5-8). In other word, during Jesus' mission on this world, He was bound by the time and space of this world even though He was God in essence. That is why numerous Bible verses presented in the Introduction show the Son's inferiority to the Father during His mission in this world. However, we must note that His inferiority is not due to His lack of power but due to His voluntary choice. When Jesus was killed on the cross by the lower dimensional human beings, the severe pain was felt not only by the Son (fingertip) but also by the Father (whole body). That is why Jesus' death 2000 years ago has redemptive power to all human beings regardless of space and time and why Jesus can send unbelievers to the eternal hell without violating God's infinite love (Rev. 20:10-13).

3. Comments on the previous Interpretations of the Trinity

In this section, we are going to discuss how our interpretation of the Trinity is compared with other Trinity models.

3.1 Traditional Trinity

There are several differences between our and the traditional interpretation of the Trinity. Our interpretation is based on that God can present Himself to this world in various forms without leaving His realm and He planned the salvation through Jesus and Holy Spirit before the creation. Thus, God presented Himself to this world as the Son and Holy Spirit who work distinctively for our salvation and the Father coexisted eternally with the Son and Holy Spirit in God's plan. On the other hand, the traditional interpretation of the Trinity says that there is one God who eternally exists as three distinct Persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It also says that the Father sent the Son and Holy Spirit to this world for our salvation. We have difficulties to accept the traditional interpretation by the following reasons. First, if we believe that God exists eternally as three distinct persons, we do consider God as a finite being which can be counted and disregard God's omnipresence. Second, when the Father sent the Son to the cross, the Father was without the Son in His realm and was unaffected¹⁸

¹⁸Tom Nash: "The heresy of patripassianism", <https://www.catholic.com/qa/the-heresy-of-patripassianism>

while the Son was suffering on the cross. If the Son is such a distinct person and is fully God, it is hard to avoid three gods. Furthermore, if it is true that the Father was without the Son in God's realm when the Son was on the cross, then it should be also true that the Son was without the Father when God came down to Abraham in OT and the Son controlled the universe without the Father. These unreasonable interpretations are due to that theologians neglect God's transcendence (much higher dimensional being than human) and try to explain the Trinity based on human psychology or various human analogies.

Theologians such as Karl Barth and Karl Rahner claimed that God's redemptive work should be the root of the Trinity and said that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. We agree with them that God's redemptive work should be the root of the Trinity but disagree with their assertion that the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity. As Eastern theologians claimed¹⁹, there is no way for human being to know the inner life of the transcendent God before the creation, so we know only what God reveals to us, in other words, we know only the economic Trinity. We also note that there are many anthropomorphic expressions in the Bible that should not be interpreted literally as literal interpretation may result in disregarding God's fundamental attributes (for example, immutability, omnipresence, and etc.).

According to our interpretation, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit coexist eternally in God's plan and work together as distinctive persons for our salvation but they are perfectly God as the Son and Holy Spirit are the direct representation of God to this world (from the analogy of God's fingertips touching on this world) and so there is one God.

3.2 Modalism

As our Trinity model has one God who presents Himself to this lower dimensional world in different forms (Jesus and Holy Spirit), our model might be confused with the Modalism. Modalism²⁰ states that God is a single person who first manifested himself in the mode of the Father in OT, left His realm and came down to this world in the mode of the Son at the incarnation and in the mode of Holy Spirit at the ascension. These modes are consecutive and never simultaneous. On the other hand, our model indicates that the Son and Holy Spirit are the different representations of the transcendent God to the lower dimensional world simultaneously or in different times while the God is in His realm. Modalism requires the Father to come down from His realm directly to the world and becomes the Son and was killed on the cross. When Jesus suffered on the cross and died, it was actually the Father Himself suffered and died. During His death there was nobody to run the universe, a fatal flaw for the modalism. For our model, the Son is the representation of God in human world without God leaving His realm. When the Son (the fingertip) suffered on the cross, the Father (the whole body of the fingertip) also suffered (but not died).

3.3 Unitarianism

Next, let's discuss how our Trinity model is compared with the Unitarianism. The Unitarianism²¹ has two categories, one is anti-Trinitarians and the other is the Subordinationism. The anti-Trinitarians

¹⁹John S. Knox: "The Eastern Perspective on the Trinity" (July 2016), <https://www.ancient.eu/article/924/the-eastern-perspective-on-the-trinity/>

²⁰Matt Slick, "Modalism", (April, 2008), <https://carm.org/modalism>

²¹Dale Tuggy, "Unitarianism", Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/trinity/unitarianism.html>

believe that the Father alone is God and Jesus Christ had only a human nature but a savior inspired by God in his moral teachings. The Holy Spirit is a divine power of God, and not a divine person. They deny worshiping or praying to Jesus and Holy Spirit. The anti-Trinitarians clearly in opposition to the traditional Trinity and our Trinity model by claiming that Jesus is a human being.

The Subordinationism assumes that God the Son and God the Holy Spirit are not merely relationally subordinate but also subordinate to God the Father in their nature and being. The Subordinationism²¹ holds that the Son is divine but was created prior to the creation of the cosmos, therefore he is not ontologically equal to the Father. They held the Holy Spirit to be an agent subordinate to both the Father and Son. Our Trinity model says that the Son and the Holy Spirit are representation of God Himself in the world, so they are God in essence but their roles in salvation are distinct.

3.4 Islam

Muslims deny that Jesus is the incarnation of God by saying that it is impossible for God to become a man. On the other hand, they believe that Quran is the words of God expressed in Arabic. In section 2.4 we explain that God can present Himself to mankind in various forms without leaving His realm as, for example, words, burning bush, a human being, and etc. If Muslims believe it is impossible for God to present Himself as a man (Jesus), they should also believe it is impossible for God to speak to Muhammad in Arabic. Quran 5:72-75 denies the deity of Jesus and the Trinity, the central doctrine of Christianity, while Quran 10:37, 29:46, 3:33, and 3:84 endorse that Quran and Bible are all the revelation of God. By denying Jesus' deity and Trinity, the Quran 5:72-75 reveals internal contradiction with the Quran 10:37, 29:46, 3:33 and 3:84. Some Muslim scholars criticize trinitarianism as simple tritheism by claiming that a "fully divine person" must be a god. Numerous Christian theologians have proposed various explanations on why trinitarianism is not tritheism but no satisfactory explanation agreeable to everybody is proposed yet. We claim that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are God's presentations to human world in different forms (like God's finger tips in various forms) for human salvation but they are fully God as they are God's finger tips so there is one God.

Islam claims that there is one God and Muhammad is a prophet and the messenger of God. Muslims believe that if they do good work more than bad work, they can go to heaven. There are several problems with the Islamic view on their salvation. First, we are not sure which work is good work and which work is not. When I do a good work for my family or for my country, the same work can be bad to other family or other nations. We are not sure how God judges my work. Second, we are not sure whether our good work will overweigh our bad work before we die. We must struggle to accumulate good work throughout our lives but still will not be sure our accumulated work is good enough for God to give us tickets to heaven. Even at the end of life we still are not sure whether we can go to heaven or hell. That is why Muhammad was unsure of his salvation (Quran 46:9). Third, if God lets me go to heaven because my good work overweighs my bad work including stealing money from a bank, is stealing OK to God so that he allows me to go to heaven even though I did not pay the penalty for my stealing? If God did not incarnate to be Jesus and did not die on the cross for redeeming our sins and resurrect, He does not have any means to save men from their sins without violating His holiness, righteousness, and love. The Trinity of God uniquely gives us the assurance of salvation.

4. Conclusion

The cause of the confusion for the traditional understanding of the Trinity is originated from the fact that theologians interpret the anthropomorphic expressions of the Bible for the relation between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit literally and consider God as a finite being like us. Thus, theologians try to

understand the doctrine based on human psychology or various human analogies without considering transcendent attributes of God.

In this article we have proposed a new interpretation of the Trinity with the following attributes of God: First, God is the transcendent creator of the universe and has absolute sovereign power and foreknowledge over the entire universe. Second, God created men in His image to be glorified by them. Third, God shows His attributes of infinite holiness, righteousness, and His infinite love to human being in the Bible.

We explain using the analogy of 2D vs. 3D world that as God is the transcendent creator of much higher dimension than our four dimensional universe He can reveal Himself to human beings in various forms that are understandable to men, without leaving the God's realm. The concept of the Trinity emerges as men fall into sins and God interacts with men by presenting Himself as the Father Son and Holy Spirit for their salvation (economic Trinity). When men encounter Jesus and experience Holy Spirit, they regard them as distinct persons but they are God's fingertips, in other word, God Himself. As God planned and foresaw the salvation by the Son and Holy Spirit, the Father coexisted eternally with the Son and Holy Spirit in His plan and glorified the Son for his accomplishment of salvation before creation. When we are in the Heaven, we will be in a higher (but finite) dimensional world in which there is no decay and we will see Jesus on the right side of God's throne as God's image (or exact representation). The Holy Spirit will continue to work for those in the heaven by empowering them and by communicating to God. God will be glorified forever by the saved (Rev. 8:6). God's purpose for creating humans in His image and allowing them to exercise their free will is going to be accomplished in the Heaven through the Son and Holy Spirit.

