

# God's Triune Existence

## Basic Terminology

We often speak of God as "three-in-one." In doing so we must keep in mind that the "three" aspect of the Trinity is not speaking of the same thing as the "one" aspect. So we are not saying three *equals* one, a mathematical absurdity.

While this "three-in-one" idea is true in some sense, the phrase does create some confusion. It creates confusion regarding the "one." To what does the one refer? The three clearly refers to the number of *persons* in the Godhead. But to what does the one refer? The answer depends on who you ask. Some might say the one refers to the *being* of God as a whole and understand the phrase as "three persons comprising one God." Others might conclude the one refers to something about God's being, for example, his *nature*. To them the phrase means "three persons with one nature." These understandings are not the same. The first view sees the persons themselves "combining" to form the one divine being in its entirety. So each individual is in a sense a third of the whole. The second view sees that the three persons plus something outside of these three persons added to form the one divine being God. Is the "one part" God as a whole or is the "one part" another part of God's whole being?

This confusion is due partly to the use of the preposition "in." How is this word being used in this "three-in-one" phrase? To many it seems to have the idea of "make up" or "combine to be." That is, if you took the Father's as a person, the Son as a person, and the Spirit as a person and combined them together you would have the total being of God. In this case there is no clear distinction between what God is as three and what God is as one. So the "personal" aspects of God's being are not distinguished from the "natural" aspects of God's being.

Perhaps it would be better to speak of God as "three-having-one." In this sense the phrase means that the triune God is "three *persons* having one *nature*." But even this phrase could leave room for some confusion. If we are looking for a brief phrase to express this doctrine, then I think the best expression is "three-sharing-one." The Godhead is composed of "three *persons* sharing one *nature*." When thinking of the Trinity in this way, there is no attempt to say that three adds up to one or that the three somehow comprises the one. It becomes clear that these numbers refer to entirely different aspects of God's being. Regarding this "one and three" note what Boettner wrote.

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Much of the opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity has arisen because of a misunderstanding of what it really is. We do not assert that one God is three Gods, nor that one person is three persons, nor that three Gods are one God. *God is not three in the same sense in which He is one.* [emphasis added]<sup>1</sup>

Later, writing about the two different senses, Boettner wrote,

[The doctrine of the Trinity] asserts that God is one in one respect—in substance or essence—and that He is three in an entirely different respect—in personal distinctions.<sup>2</sup>

Recall that what Boettner and earlier creeds referred to as *substance* or *essence*, I am referring to as *nature*.

The Church has long recognized<sup>3</sup> a distinction between *person* and *nature* in the Godhead. The earliest creed, the Apostles' Creed, did not specifically mention this distinction, even though it did mention three persons. However, as noted before, the Nicene Creed and that produced by the council of Constantinople did make the distinction with regard to the Father and the Son. The Athanasian Creed of the sixth century focused on the all three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It asserted that they were all of one essence. "We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity; Neither confounding the Persons; nor dividing the Essence."<sup>4</sup> This creed clearly distinguishes between *person* and *nature*. Although there may be some differences in how we express the relationship, clearly those who framed the creeds made a distinction between what constitutes the threeness of God and oneness of God.

### The Word *Trinity*

Where do we start if we want to better understanding this doctrine of God's triunity? How can we come to understand this "three-sharing-one" concept when speaking of the Godhead? We must begin by defining some basic terms. Although these terms are not always found in Scripture, they can be useful by helping us formulate what God has revealed to us in his Word.

The place to begin is with the word *trinity*, a word never found in Scripture. Typically, this word may be defined as "in *Christian theology*, the union of the three divine persons (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, or Holy Ghost) in one Godhead."<sup>5</sup> This is a standard definition for *Trinity*. The word

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<sup>1</sup> Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, p. 106.

<sup>2</sup> Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, p. 125.

<sup>3</sup> For a brief history of the development of the doctrine of the Trinity see above and see "Early History of Theological Development" in *Biblical Doctrine*, MacArthur and Mayhue (eds.), p. 208-210.

<sup>4</sup> Cited from Wikipedia article "Athanasian Creed."

<sup>5</sup> Webster's New World Dictionary, p. 1557.

*trinity* itself is also used in other ways that are not relevant to this topic. We will restrict our use here to that found "in *Christian theology*."

While this definition is generally all right, it is not quite clear enough for our use here. Given that three persons are sharing one nature, we will use the following definition of *Trinity*. The *Trinity* consists of *three distinct persons sharing one divine nature*. This will serve as a basic, working definition. The fact this is a union is indicated by the idea that the three persons are sharing a single nature. The terms, *distinct persons*, *divine nature*, and *sharing*, will need definition and clarification. Briefly then, the doctrine of the trinity teaches that the Godhead is composed of three distinct persons (sometimes called *members*) who individually share a common divine nature. Thus, there is only one God. That is, there is only one being that has a divine nature. So the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God.<sup>6</sup> Each person is equally God. Yet still there is only one divine being, God.

As we continue our quest to understand what the Trinity involves, we must now consider the terms used in our definition. From this definition it is clear that the *three* refers to the number of *persons* in the Trinity and the *one* refers to the number of *natures*. The persons are *distinct* and the nature is *divine*. Furthermore, the persons are *sharing* the nature. These are important terms. How are they used? In what sense are they applicable to God (or for that matter to man too)?

There are other, related terms and ideas that also need clarification. We are *human beings*. God is a *divine being*. What does *being* signify? Also, we sometimes use the term *Godhead* when making reference to God. To what does this term refer?

### Some Technical Terms

As we consider "God's Triune Existence" our focus at this juncture will be on the persons and the nature of God as components of God's being. Thus *being*, *person*, and *nature* are important terms. So too is the term *material*. These are terms that may be used with a technical sense when thinking about how God exists as a triune being. We will get to these terms shortly.

However, before moving on in our investigation a comment is in order regarding some other terms used with reference to God's triune being. These terms include *essence*, *substance*, and *subsistence* as well as various

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<sup>6</sup> The Biblical designations *Father*, *Son*, and *Spirit* for the three persons in the Godhead are used throughout this work to identify and distinguish these three persons. However, as will be suggested later, these designations should be considered vocational and not ontological.

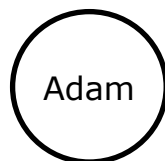
related Greek and Latin terms.<sup>7</sup> With reference to the Trinity, these words are used in a technical sense to describe aspects Trinity. Sometimes the word *essence*, or alternatively the word *substance*, is used as a technical term to refer to the oneness aspect of God's being as distinct from the threeness aspect. *Subsistence* is used to refer to the threeness.

I will not use the technical terms *essence*, *substance*, or *subsistence* to refer to aspects of God's being. I think they can be confusing. Therefore, except in cases where these terms are found in citations, I will avoid using them in a technical sense. As just noted, I will use the terms *being*, *person*, *nature*, and *material* to define and explain the existence of God as triune. The first three of these terms are directly pertinent to God's triune existence. The fourth is more directly related to God's ontological existence and will be considered under that heading.

### The Concept of a Personal Being

Fundamentally, anything that has existence or actuality on its own or by itself has what we may call *being*. And we can describe, at least to some extent, what that being is like. An inanimate object has being, but of course has no life. So a rock, a door, or a baseball bat each has being. Living objects also have being. That includes plant life and animal life as well as human beings.

Here the word *being* refers to the entirety of something that exists. So then, if we are thinking of the human being Adam, when referring to him as having being we are referring to everything that makes Adam who and what he is as a human being. Graphically (Figure 1) we could represent this as a circle. We are looking in an all-inclusive way.



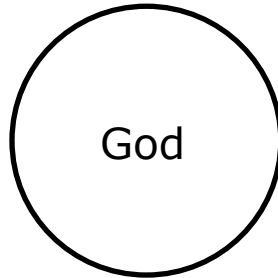
**Figure 1: The Being of Adam**

It viewing Adam from this perspective we are including all of the various characteristics of Adam that make him a distinct human being. For Adam this would include both physical and spiritual aspects of his being. We are focusing on him as a whole being.

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<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of these terms see Chapter 24 "Technical Terms for the Trinity" in Part 5 "Philosophical Conundrums" in Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, pp. 275-280.

We can do the same with reference to God, the divine being. God exists and as such has being. When I am referring to the being God or the being of God I am viewing God in his entirety, from a holistic perspective. Everything that makes God who and what God is is included in this idea of his being. As with Adam, graphically we could represent God from this perspective as a single circle.



**Figure 2: The Being of God**

Such a view does not discount that there are various aspects of God's being that can distinguished and considered. But from the perspective of being, we are looking at God as a whole.

If we understand that Adam or God have being, that knowledge in and of itself suggest characteristics that are true about them. For example, in some sense that a being exists suggests material comprising the being, whatever that material might be. For Adam, even though he is materially complex, this is reactively simple notion. But this is not the case for God. And in some sense being suggests "boundaries" for the being, perhaps in the sense of locale. Again, for Adam we can easily understand that Adam is here but not there. However, with God such a concept is more difficult.

Another characteristic of being involves living versus non-living beings. In thinking about created living beings it is important to distinguish plant life and animal life from that of man. The distinction lies in the fact that neither plants nor animals are *personal* beings whereas man is. So, a dog is a living being. But alas, a dog, as personable as it may sometimes appear, is a non-personal<sup>8</sup> being. Dogs do not appreciate a beautiful sunset nor gaze up into the nighttime sky with wonder. Dogs do not seek higher education nor sing songs of worship to their creator.<sup>9</sup> Dogs have no consciousness of God. But human beings do. With human beings we associate something which we refer to as *person*. That makes human beings personal beings.

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<sup>8</sup> Lower creatures, like dogs, may possess "soulsh" aspects distinct from their nature, but these aspects do not rise to the level of personhood.

<sup>9</sup> Ideas suggest in reading for March 24 in *Inspired Evidence*.

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So then there is a great divide between personal and non-personal living beings. And with regard to personal beings, it appears that there exists various "divides" or categories. It appears that there are three basic classes (as determined by their natures) of personal beings. God, men, and angels<sup>10</sup> are living *personal beings*. In God's case his being is self-existent. God is a divine personal being. In the case of men and angels, our personal being is due to God's creating. Men are human personal beings. Angels are angelic personal beings.

There are, of course, millions of human beings and, it would seem, also of angelic beings. But there is only one divine being. When we say that there is only one God, we mean that there is only one personal being that has a divine nature. There are many human beings, personal beings who possess a human nature. And there are many angelic beings. But there is only one divine personal being.

So then what is a *personal being*? A personal being is a being that is comprised of two basic components. Like any other living being, a personal being has a nature. So then, one component is the *nature*. But a personal being is further defined by also having what we may call *personhood*. By that we mean that for the being there is a *person* component included along with that *nature* component. A personal being exists when these two components, nature and person, are joined or united together in the one being. For personal beings, neither the person component nor the nature component has independent being. In this respect, for a personal being, a person does not exist or have being without a nature nor does a nature without a person.

Though these two components are joined in the one personal being, the two can be distinguished. In a sense, for a personal being there is an "I" aspect, the person, and there is a "my" aspect, the nature. As human beings we regularly make an intuitive distinction between our person and our nature. No thinking about that distinction is needed. Suppose, for example, a friend falls and breaks an arm. When I see him I might ask, "What happened?" His reply might include, "I slipped and broke my arm." Note the distinction he has made between his person ("I") and his nature ("my arm"). He, as do we all, speaks of his arm (a part of his body which is a part of his nature) as his personal possession. His arm belongs to him. He has made a distinction. In these situations we have all made similar statements about ourselves. As human beings, our nature is distinct from

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<sup>10</sup> The term *angel* is used herein in a generic sense to include all types of spirit beings. Thus, along with angels it includes cherubim, seraphim, and other spiritual personal beings mentioned in Scripture. Furthermore, that angels are persons would seem to be implied from the fact that currently they are higher in order than human beings (cf. Hebrews 2:7-9).

our person, yet we are one personal being<sup>11</sup>. This is similarly true for God, except that God is one tri-personal being.

So then, a personal being, as God, angel, or man, is a being comprised of two components, a person<sup>12</sup> (in God's case three persons) and a nature. It is true that we speak of both person and nature. However, it must be remembered that while we make a distinction between these components, they are ever joined or united to make a single personal being. We can independently analyze the functions of the person. We can independently analyze the functions of the nature. And we can independently analyze the relationship between them. But in a personal being these components always function in some relation to each other. In a sense, it is meaningless to speak of a person apart from his nature. For, while these two components are distinct, they are ever joined into a single being.<sup>13</sup> Regarding this distinction between person and nature, it should be noted that in the future for human beings it seems that it is our human nature that will be changed.<sup>14</sup> So then, while it is true that believers will get a new nature, we will remain the same person we have always been.

One thing that we should keep in mind is that human beings were created in God's image and likeness. This was intentional on God's part. God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness" (Gen 1:26). This indication of God's intent is significant. And I have no doubt that since this is what God intended to do that this is also what he accomplished. When God made man, man was an image of God. Furthermore, God's assessment after completing his work of creation, including man, was that what he had done was "very good." If God intended to make an image of himself in man, he did it very well. This means that by creating human beings as he did,

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<sup>11</sup> In the example the verb "slipped" applies to the entire being while the verb "broke" applies to the nature only.

<sup>12</sup> It will be assumed herein that the person part of all personal beings is the same. The factor that distinguishes one kind of personal being from another is the nature part. Speaking about the ways God is represented in Scripture, D. A. Carson writes "this infinite God is also presented as a personal being." (*Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility*, p. 214.) In an endnote on this statement (note 26, p. 256), Carson includes a statement by Helmut Thielicke in which Thielicke comments on this idea of person. Thielicke writes, "When we speak of God as a person, we do not mean this in some anthropomorphic sense. On the contrary: when we speak of the human person, we mean this in a theomorphic sense." (*Gotteslehre und Christologie*, p. 138.) What Thielicke is suggesting (and evidently Carson as well) is that human persons reflect the divine persons. See below in the discussion of the Hypostatic Union for the reason for coming to the understanding that a person is a person and that Jesus, as a fully human personal being, is a person is just like us human persons.

<sup>13</sup> It seems, for God, that it is to this indivisibility of the personal being that the idea of simplicity applies. Simplicity does not prevent the analysis of components of personal beings. But a personal being cannot be "carved up" and remain a personal being.

<sup>14</sup> Consider 1 Corinthians 15:42-44, 53.

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God provided a great deal of revelation about himself. When we look at the image, we can see certain truths about God. But again, as with any other special revelation, when we look at natural revelation we must be careful not to see more than has been revealed.

So then, that a human being is an image of God is significant not only for our understanding of who we are, but also, and perhaps more importantly, for our understanding of who God is. We are part of God's creation and therefore in some sense we are part of God's general or natural revelation of himself. "General revelation includes all that God has revealed in the world around us, including man."<sup>15</sup> Poythress, speaking about three aspects of God's revelation, notes, "God's revelation includes ... revelation in the very nature of man, created in the image of God."<sup>16</sup> As we look at human beings, even in their present, fallen condition, we can marvel at the God who could create such beings. But also, by God's intention, we should expect to see in this image of himself clues to what he must be like.

Regarding man's relationship to God's image, particularly as a person, Berkhof writes,

Since man is created in the image of God, we learn to understand something of the personal life of God from the contemplation of personality as we know it in man. ... We should not say that that man is personal, while God is super-personal ..., for what is super-personal is not personal; but rather, that what appears as imperfect in man, exists in infinite perfection in God. The one outstanding difference between the two is that man is uni-personal, while God is tri-personal.<sup>17</sup>

I would add that the primary difference between God versus man is the difference due to the nature of the beings. God's nature is divine. Man's nature is human. From the person perspective, the divine persons benefit from their divine nature. The human persons are limited by having a merely human nature.

Thus, given that human beings are made in God's image, the close relationship between God's existence and that of man may not be surprising. The similarity in the personal being God and a personal being man stems from the fact that humans were created in the image and likeness of God. And in some sense this similarity may have been necessary. Since in God's plan one of the persons in the Godhead, the Son, would add a human nature to his person, this close correlation between divine and human may have been necessary. We will reflect on this point further as part of our consideration of the Hypostatic Union.

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<sup>15</sup> Ryrie, *Basic Theology*, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Poythress, *The Mystery of the Trinity*, p. 16.

<sup>17</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 1939, 1941, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan, p. 84. [Under "The Personality of God and the Trinity"]



## The Material of God's Being

We have said that a personal being is a being that is comprised of two basic components: person and nature. However, before considering these two components of God's being in more detail, a word is in order regarding the "material" of God's personal being. Earlier I mentioned the term *material* along with *being*, *person*, and *nature*. And with reference to the understanding of the word *being*, I mentioned that there was an implication that the being is comprised of some "material." Technically, the material of God's being is more relevant to his ontological existence. Thus, the material of God's being will be covered later. At this point, since we are dealing with basic terminology, we will only consider what is meant by this term *material*.

With reference to God, I will use the term *material* to refer to that of which the being of God is comprised.<sup>18</sup> So here *material* simply refers to "that from which something is comprised." If anything has being, then it is comprised of something.<sup>19</sup> God has being. Therefore, God is comprised of something. God's being is comprised of uncreated, non-physical<sup>20</sup> material. Furthermore, if a being has distinguishable person and nature components, then these components themselves are comprised of some material.

Importantly, I do not intend to imply that in God's case this is material in the sense that we find it in our universe, material on the periodic chart.<sup>21</sup> God has always existed. So too the material of which the divine being is made has always existed, of whatever sort that material is. As noted, we will consider later what that material might be.

## The Roles of Nature and Person

Having said that God is a divine personal being and we are human personal beings, we now come to the place where it will be helpful to more carefully distinguish the person component of the being from the nature component of the being.

In this regard, perhaps we can learn from the Hypostatic Union. If the Hypostatic Union teaches us anything about person and nature, it teaches

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<sup>18</sup> I am using the word "comprised" rather than "made" because the word "made" suggests a maker and God has no maker. For anything other than God we could say "the material from which something is made."

<sup>19</sup> I do not think it possible to conceive of something that has being but is made of nothing.

<sup>20</sup> Physical material is material we find on the periodic chart.

<sup>21</sup> I realize that in the created universe there is a sort of equivalence between "material" and energy in the sense that  $E = mc^2$  (energy equals mass times the speed of light squared). That being said, I do not think that God is composed of pure energy.

that person and nature are completely distinct.<sup>22</sup> The person of the Son existed from eternity. Not so his adopted human nature. Mary produced the human nature of the God-Man. She did not produce his person. The Son, independently from the Father and Spirit, added to his already existing person a human nature that was completely distinct from his already existing divine nature. So then, from thinking about the Hypostatic Union we can see that not only is it possible for a personal being to have multiple persons as in the Trinity, it is also possible for a personal being to have multiple natures, as with the Son. We must conclude, therefore, that person and nature are distinct entities.

Furthermore, it seems evident that because in the Trinity three distinct persons share one divine nature the three "person" parts are distinct from the one "nature" part. So then, given that a personal being has a person component and a nature component, how do these two components function and how do they relate to each other? What is the role of the nature? What is the role of the person?

Erickson wrote, "The fourth-century thinkers spoke of one ousia and three hypostases. The problem is determining what these two terms mean, or more broadly, what the difference is between the nature or locus of God's oneness and that of his threeness."<sup>23</sup> Clearly in one sense God is one and in another sense God is three. Where the one, the nature part, ends and the three, the person parts, begin we may never know definitively. But it seems there are some things we are able to know. And such knowledge helps us to understand, at least conceptually, the idea of God's triunity.

In the chapter "The Unipersonality of Christ" Berkhof considers the distinction between nature and person. He first provides "definitions" for these two terms. "The term 'nature' denotes the sum-total of all the essential qualities of a thing, that which makes it what it is. ... The term 'person' denotes a complete substance endowed with reason, and, consequently, a responsible subject of its own actions."<sup>24</sup> He then adds, "Personality is not an essential and integral part of a nature, but is, as it were, the terminus to which it tends. A person is a nature with something added, namely, independent subsistence, individuality."<sup>25</sup> Even though

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<sup>22</sup> Regarding two natures and one person Poythress writes, "[Christ] is fully human, with a full and complete human nature. He is also fully divine, with a full and complete divine nature. He is God and man. This joining of two natures in one person is a deep mystery." (*The Mystery of the Trinity*, p. 11.) The only adjustment I would make, perhaps for clarification, would be to say "by one person" rather than "in one person." I think that change makes it clearer that the two natures are kept distinct and that each is accessible by the person having those natures. Poythress is correct; this is a "deep mystery."

<sup>23</sup> Millard Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, p. 363.

<sup>24</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systemetic Theology*, p. 321.

<sup>25</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systemetic Theology*, p. 321.

Berkhof writes that "a person is a nature with something added" and "personality is ... the terminus to which [the nature] tends," I think he would agree that person, in a more narrow sense, and nature really are distinct in some sense. At this point when Berkhof refers to "person" it seems he is thinking of the being *as a whole*, as "a nature with something added." In the end, for Berkhof it seems that the *nature* of a being provides the qualities that make it what it is and that the *person* of the being endows that nature with individuality, providing reason and making the being responsible. We must keep in mind that in personal beings person and nature are ever united in the being. Here we might call Berkhof's "something added" the "person" component of the being. For the Godhead the "person" components and the "nature" component jointly together comprise the entire personal being we call God.

How then should we understand these two concepts: person and nature? On the one hand, if the nature makes the being "what it is," then a living, personal being with a divine nature is a divine being. One with an angelic nature is an angelic being. A human being is a living, personal being with a human nature. In some sense the *nature* determines what the person having that nature is like and what the being is capable of doing. The nature establishes certain attributes and abilities<sup>26</sup> of the personal being.

On the other hand, the person is the part of the being that *individualizes* the nature of the personal being. It too has attributes and abilities. In some sense the person gives individuality and life to the nature. It animates the nature.<sup>27</sup> The person provides reason and makes choices. And, as suggested earlier, even though we may not suspect this, apparently the personal part of all personal beings is alike regardless of the nature being animated.<sup>28</sup> In a personal being we might say that the person part *gives individuality* or *personhood* to the nature. Person and nature are completely distinct entities. That being said, it is important to keep in mind that *a personal being does not exist unless both a person and a nature are joined together*, the person giving individuality to the nature.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> When discussing the characteristics of personal beings, I will use the word *attribute* to refer to how the being exists ("God is") and *ability* to refer to what the being is able to do ("God can"). For example, God is good versus God can know.

<sup>27</sup> Consider John 5:26 and the phrase "life in himself."

<sup>28</sup> I will consider this inference when we discuss the Hypostatic Union whereby the person of the Son started giving individuality to both a divine nature and a human nature.

<sup>29</sup> In a crude analogy, perhaps think of a smart phone. A smart phone is composed of hardware (nature) and software (person). On the one hand, the hardware provides the ability but sets the bounds on what the phone can do. The hardware can be instructed by the software to perform many functions. But it cannot be instructed to do something it is incapable of doing. On the other hand, the software is in some sense in control of the hardware. It determines at any given time what functions are being carried out. The hardware responds to the commands coming from the software.

In considering this person-nature distinction, it should be obvious that some aspects of the being are related to the nature and some to the person. Which characteristics belong to the person and which belong to the nature may not always be evident. In many cases it is difficult to know whether particular attributes or abilities of the being belong to the person or belong to the nature, or perhaps to both as the person individualizes the nature. But in some cases, it may be evident with which category a particular attribute or ability is associated. For example, in human beings, the physical body is part of the nature (the "my" part) and self-awareness is part of the person (the "I" part). Similarly, in the Godhead, each person is self-conscious of his own distinct existence as a person. And each person recognizes that by nature, he has power.

In the Godhead, since three distinct persons are sharing one divine nature we would expect that some aspects of God's being are held independently by the distinct persons while other aspects are shared commonly as part of their nature. Boettner writes, "'Substance' or 'essence' [herein designated *nature*] is that which the different members of the Godhead have in common, that in which the attributes and powers of Deity inhere; 'person' is that in which they differ."<sup>30</sup> So aspects of the divine being that are shared must belong to the nature while those that are not shared but held commonly (and equally) by each person must belong to the persons, to the distinct individualizations of the divine nature.

Interestingly, as Berkhof develops the subject of God's attributes he divides them into two basic categories: incommunicable and communicable. In the chapter "The Incommunicable Attributes" Berkhof refers to "God as the Absolute Being"<sup>31</sup>; and in the chapter "The Communicable Attributes" he refers to "God as a Personal Spirit"<sup>32</sup>. So in some sense it seems that Berkhof is associating some of God's characteristics with his nature and others with his persons. Later, when we classify God's attributes and abilities we will make a similar distinction.

### A Clarification

Historically there has been an understanding that subsistence is to be distinguished from essence. There are three distinct subsistences which together are incorporated in the one essence. Before considering the "nature" and the "person" aspects of the Godhead, a further comment is in order regarding historical terminology and understanding. Historically the concepts of nature and person have been considered using terms like "essence" and "subsistence" respectively. These terms, which we are not

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<sup>30</sup> Boettner, *Studies in Theology*, p. 106.

<sup>31</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 57.

<sup>32</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 64.

using, were mentioned earlier when we consider technical terms. But there is some correspondence between these words and the words *nature* and *person*. A couple of citations from Berkhof will provide examples of their use and help us see how they are being “translated” herein. These are in a section of his *Systematic Theology* entitled “Statement of the Doctrine of the Trinity.”

Under a subsection entitled “In this one Divine Being there are three Persons or individual subsistences, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,” Berkhof writes,

[Regarding three persons or subsistences,] Thus Calvin says: “By person, then, I mean subsistence in the Divine essence.—a subsistence which, while related to the other two, is distinguished from them by incommunicable properties.” [Institutes, I, XIII, 6] This is perfectly permissible and may ward off misunderstanding, but should not cause us to lose sight of the fact that the self-distinctions in the Divine Being imply an “I” and “Thou” and “He,” in the Being of God, which assumes personal relationship to one another.<sup>33</sup>

It is clear that generally the idea of “subsistence” is the same as that of “person” as used herein. Berkhof cites Calvin. “By person, then, I mean subsistence in the Divine essence.”

Under a subsection entitled “The whole undivided essence of God belongs equally to each of the three persons” Berkhof writes,

This means that the divine essence is not divided among the three persons, but is wholly with all its perfection in each one of the persons, so that they have a numerical unity of essence. ... From this it follows that the divine essence is not an independent existence alongside of the three persons. ... Another conclusion which follows from the preceding is that there can be no subordination *as to essential being* of the one person of the Godhead to the other, and therefore no difference in personal dignity.<sup>34</sup>

And, it seems that the term *essence* has been used somewhat in the sense of God's nature that is equally and fully shared by the three persons. However, when Berkhof writes, “the divine essence is not an independent existence alongside of the three persons,” he appears to say that the essence (herein, nature)<sup>35</sup> is not a distinct component from the persons. However, as noted above, in light of the Hypostatic Union's distinction between person and nature, I think it best to understand the nature as a distinct component shared equally by the three distinct persons.

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<sup>33</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 87-88.

<sup>34</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 88.

<sup>35</sup> As has been noted, to me it seems clearer to think of “essence” as that of which God's being is made and “nature” as that component which the three persons share making them divine.

For Berkhof the idea of essence also seems to include the "material," i.e., the stuff, of which the being of God is made *and* in which the Godhead's attributes and abilities inhere. He says this essence is "not divided" but "is wholly with all its perfections in each one of the persons." So for him this "essence," held in common by the three persons, includes two ideas: one related to "material" and the other to "attributes and abilities." I think it better to make a clear distinction between God's nature, i.e., that which gives the abilities and attributes, and his "essence", i.e., that from which the being of God is made.<sup>36</sup>

### The Nature

What is involved in a personal being's nature? Asked differently, what does the nature provide to a personal being? For our purposes, we only consider *nature* as applied to personal beings. If we think in a simplistic way of a "personal being" as a person individualizing a nature, then we might say that the nature supplies the non-personal aspects of a personal being. But that statement in itself is not very helpful. Just what does this involved?

Basically, it is the nature that gives the distinctive attributes or characteristics to a personal being. So in that sense, it is the nature that determines the *kind*<sup>37</sup> of the personal being or for that matter of any living being, even of plants. Human beings have human natures. God has a divine nature. Interestingly the word *nature*, Greek *phusis*, is used in this sense of "kind" by James. In addressing the inability to tame the tongue he wrote, "Every *kind* of beast and bird, of reptile and sea creature, can be tamed and has been tamed by *mankind*, [but not the tongue]" (Jas 3:7). Here *phusis*, translated as "kind," is used first with reference to various lower creatures and then of human beings. It is in this same sense that the Godhead is of its own kind, having the nature of deity. And in God's case there is only one being of that kind.

The nature determines what the person having that nature is able to do. So on the one hand, the nature enables the person to act in a particular way, to do particular things. Humans can procreate. God can create by simply speaking. Basically, along with its attributes, the nature provides

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<sup>36</sup> As noted when considering the technical terms used to describe the Trinity, the material of the being of God is not directly relevant to the understanding of God's triunity. Regarding this subject see below in the section "The Being of God" where "The Godhead is Spirit" is considered.

<sup>37</sup> I am using the word *kind* in the sense in which we find it in Genesis 1 where God created plants and animals according to their kinds. Each type of plant and animal God created is unique, having its own distinct kind or nature according to which it would reproduce. In Romans 2:27 Paul uses the word "nature" (Greek, *phusis*) to refer to an aspect of the physical body of a man. Human males are "by nature" not circumcised (see KJV's translation).

abilities and the person uses them. But on the other hand, the nature limits the person. A person cannot do anything that his nature will not allow. Angels cannot procreate. Even God is limited by his nature. We know, for example, that God is not able to lie (Heb 6:18). This is not a case where God simply chooses not to lie. He cannot lie. It does not accord with his nature to do so. It is simply impossible for a person in the Godhead to lie. As Paul writes to Titus, he is the God "who never lies" (1:2).

Does Scripture speak of God's nature? It seems that it does. With reference to the divine nature, consider how Paul used the word *phusis* in Galatians 4:8. He compared the true God with "those that by nature are not gods." Those "gods" to whom the Galatian believers had been enslaved before coming to be saved were not truly divine. Peter makes reference to a divine nature. He wrote, "[Because of God's work in and for us we] may become partakers of the<sup>38</sup> divine nature" (2Pet 1:4). Here Peter states that because of our salvation we who have human natures will come to share some things in common<sup>39</sup> with God, the one who possesses a divine nature.

In the case of created personal beings, each distinct person has his own distinct nature. But this is not true in the case of God whose nature is shared. In the Godhead, the three distinct persons share equally the one divine nature. Created beings are unipersonal. God is a tri-personal being.

Thus, as we see, for personal beings there are different kinds of natures. These natures correspond to the three kinds of personal beings we know, assuming we generalize for spiritual beings (angels, seraphim, cherubim, etc.). We know of personal beings that are divine, human, and angelic. Each kind of being functions as it does because of the nature possessed by the persons individualizing that nature. Angels can do what angels are able to do by nature. Humans can do what humans are able to do by nature. So too, God can do what God is able to do by nature. Perhaps it should be noted that these analogies between humans and God<sup>40</sup> exist because God made humans beings like himself.

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<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that there is no article in the Greek text. But the point here is that the noun *nature* is modified by the adjective *divine*. It is a "divine nature" about which Peter writes.

<sup>39</sup> The word translated *partakers* is the Greek noun *koinōnos* having the idea of being a partner or associate. The word relates to a holding of things in common. The idea is not that we actually acquire part of God's nature but that we come to have something in common with him as an associate. What is true of him becomes true of us as well. For example, a day is coming when we too will not be able to lie.

<sup>40</sup> Though not explicitly stated in Scripture, it seems apparent that angelic beings as personal beings also share a likeness with God. Scripture recognizes a "higher-lower" relationship (Hebrews 2:6-9) between men and angels. So it may be true that this likeness is not to the same degree, but at least to the extent that angels are also personal beings, there is some degree of similarity.

When we consider God's ontological existence we will consider aspects that seem to be associated with the nature component of the divine personal being. These natural aspects involve various abilities and attributes. Abilities for God relate to power, knowledge, understanding, desire, and consciousness. Attributes include the fact that God is self-sufficient, dependable, unchangeable, good, and true. The nature provides these characteristics to the three persons who are giving individuality to that one divine nature. Note too that for the Godhead, since the three persons share a single nature, they equally share, or have identically, all of the various aspects provided by that nature. So it should be no surprise that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are co-equal in any aspect they have from their shared nature. Thus, each is equally able to do the same things, each equally possess the same desires, and each is equally aware of their divinity.

### The Person

As noted, a personal being, as God, an angel, or a man, is a being comprised of two components, person and nature. Having considered the nature aspect of God, we now move to the person aspect. In some sense the person gives individuality, including life, to the nature. As mentioned above, in the Godhead there are three distinct persons separately giving individuality to the one divine nature. How this functions is a great mystery. God is the only being like this. Given that each of these three persons is ontologically like the other two, to consider one person is to consider the other two as well. At the "person" level what is true of one of these persons is true of the other two also. They are equals in every respect. This equivalence also applies to relationships among the three persons.<sup>41</sup>

God is a personal being, really tri-personal. Although Scripture never speaks of the Father, Son, or Spirit using the word *person*, it is clear from Scripture that God is such a being. Berkhof, in his *Systematic Theology*, begins the chapter on God's communicable or "personal" attributes arguing that God is a personal being.

The term "person" is not applied to God in the Bible, though there are words ... that come very close to expressing the idea. At the same time Scripture testifies to the personality of God in more than one way. The presence of God, as described by Old and New Testament writers, is clearly a personal presence. An the anthropomorphic and anthropopathic representations of God in Scripture, while they must be interpreted so as not to militate against the pure spirituality and holiness of God, can hardly be justified, except on the assumption that the Being to whom they apply is a real person, with

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<sup>41</sup> I believe that this would not be the case if the doctrines of eternal begetting of the Son and eternal proceeding of the Spirit are true. These doctrines involve asymmetric relationships among the persons in the Godhead.



## God's Triune Existence

personal attributes, even though it be without human limitations. God is represented throughout as a personal God, with whom men can and may converse, whom they can trust, who sustains them in their trials, and fills their hearts with the joy of deliverance and victory.<sup>42</sup>

As Berkhof indicates, what we read about God in Scripture does not make sense if God is not a personal being. As human beings who are ourselves personal beings we can only related to God as a personal being, though he is a divine being.

Considering the designation Yahweh used as a name for God, Frame writes,

Yahweh is the name of a person. ... Each of us relates to him as one person to another. ... Scripture rarely if ever used the word *person* to describe God, or even to refer to the Father, the Son, or the Holy Spirit. But, like *Trinity*, *person* is an extrabiblical word that is very nearly unavoidable for us. It is the word in our vocabulary that applies to beings who speak, act intentionally, and so on.<sup>43</sup>

As seen with the nature component, there are some questions that must be addressed with reference to the person components of God. What aspects of a personal being does the person supply? Simplistically, the person supplies the personal aspects of a personal being. In some way unknown to us, a person "individualizes" a nature. Since this also involves giving life, we could say that the person "enlivens" the nature. It is at this "person" level that we as personal beings interact with other personal beings. Grudem writes, "[God] is also personal: he interacts with us as a person, and we can relate to him as persons."<sup>44</sup>

When we consider God's ontological existence we will consider aspects that seem to be associated with the person component of the divine being. As with the nature, the personal aspects involve both abilities and attributes. Each of the three persons can independently communicate, think, emote, determine, and act. And each of the persons is alive and in possession of self-consciousness. All of these aspects are held equally, but separately. Furthermore, because no two persons exactly have the same experiences or make the same determinations, we may say that each of the three persons has his own "personality." One writer notes, "Persons are marked by

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<sup>42</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 1939, 1941, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., Grand Rapids, Michigan. P. 65.

<sup>43</sup> Frame, *The Doctrine of God*, p. 25.

<sup>44</sup> Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 167. Grudem here speaks of God in the singular. But, when speaking of person we should think in the plural. As the Godhead, they interact with us and we interact with them.

personality, consisting of qualities of self-consciousness and self-determination."<sup>45</sup>

## Summary

Here are the basic terms considered as they relate to this subject of God's triunity.

- Personal Being – A personal being is a being that is comprised of two basic components that are joined together: person and nature. As such these components are comprised of some material.
- Material – Material refers to that of which something is comprised. That material may be physical or non-physical material.
- Nature – The nature is that component of a personal being which establishes its kind. As such it provides the personal being with natural attributes and abilities.
- Person – The person is that component of a personal being which gives it individuality or personhood and life. As such it endows the personal being with personal attributes and abilities.
- Trinity – The Trinity consists of three distinct persons sharing one divine nature.

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<sup>45</sup> Robert Gromacki, *The Virgin Birth*, p. 107.