

The Trinitarian Ground of Knowledge

By James D. Nickel

I have spent the last 40 years devoting my thinking, my research, and my albeit imperfect living to this truth of Scripture:

Proverbs 9:10, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding” (cf. Proverbs 1:7, Psalm 111:10, Job 28:28).

God has directed my research in the discipline of mathematics to focus on its substructure. Understanding the ground of operational science is a natural offshoot this emphasis since mathematics is the unique language of this science.

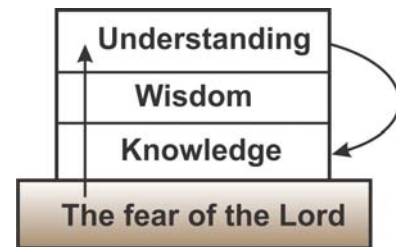
I am convinced that the Bible’s revelation of the doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine hammered out by the early church and articulated by its foundational creeds (i.e., the Apostles’ Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Nicene Creed, and the Chalcedonian Formula), is the ground and the only true starting point for understanding every aspect of reality, every facet of knowledge, and every branch of ethics.

It is imperative that we embrace a reasonable understanding of the nature of the Triune God, agreeably mysterious but not illogical. But, an understanding of doctrine is not enough. To know God is to participate in union with Him, in worshipful relationship. We relate to the being of God (ontology) by relating to Him, by participating in the relationship of love between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.

My life long journey to develop a fuller understanding of the Trinity eventually led me to the rich, passionate thinking of the Scottish theologian Thomas F. Torrance (1913-2007). Grounding his thinking in Scripture and patristics,¹ Torrance believed that it was essential to know, in our experience, and understand, with our reason, the onto-relational Trinity.² In the next paragraphs, I will briefly explore how we can couple the nature of the Triune God with science and mathematics.

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth (Genesis 1:1).

The Hebrew for God is *Elohim*, a plural noun.³ This plurality is exemplified in the phrase “Let Us make” (Genesis 1:26). In the next verse, we see the Spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters (cf. Genesis 1:2). Then, Elohim created all things by the speaking forth of His Word, by the breath of His mouth (Genesis 1:3ff; Psalm 33:6).



¹ Torrance is indebted to the thoughts of the church fathers, especially the pre-Augustine fathers who penned the Nicene Creed.

² See *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being, Three Persons* (London: T & T Clark, 1996) and *The Trinitarian Faith* (London: T & T Clark, 1991). Torrance is challenging to read. Stick with it, though, the rewards are life transforming.

³ The plural form of this word may be regarded (1) as intensive to indicate God’s fullness of power, (2) as majestic to indicate God as One Being above all, or (3) as an allusion to the plurality in the being of God Himself.

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In the first three verses of the Bible, the act of creation is circumscribed in plurality: God, Spirit, and Word. In the New Testament, we discover *Elohim* in the fullness of plurality in unity; *Elohim* is *Trinity*, One in Three and Three in One: *Father, Son, and Spirit*.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth (John 1:1-3, 14).

For by Him [Christ, the *logos* of God – JN] all things were created, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities— all things have been created through Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together (Colossians 1:16-17).

God's speech in Genesis 1 is the Word, the *logos* (in Greek, λογος) of God, the Lord Jesus Christ. *Logos* means reason so the person of Christ is the reason, the source of the rationality that pervades the universe in its many forms. Since *logos* is centered in the person of Christ, all reason, to be true reason, must also be grounded in Christ. Since Christ reveals the Father (John 14:9), and the Spirit of God reveals Christ (John 16:14), to say that Christ is the ground of rationality is also to say that the Father and the Spirit are the ground of rationality.

God's triune nature is a joyful and self-giving mutual indwelling and interpenetration, indeed, a dance of three persons who share the same being, or the same essence. God is three persons in one being.⁴ God, Father, Son, and Spirit, is *being in communion, being in relationship*.

A post-Nicene church father, Augustine of Hippo (354-430) said that "we think God's thoughts after Him" when we study Scripture. Since the words of Scripture bears witness to

Christ the Word envelops both Scripture and Creation.

Christ, the Word or Voice of God, studying Scripture is a way to relate to Him who is life eternal (John 5:39, John 17:3). In Genesis 1, we see the Father speaking creation into existence. The Father's Word, Jesus (John 1:1-3), is an expression of the Father's thoughts. Creation is the consequence of the Father's thoughts, or His plans, plans that came to fruition through His Word and by the Holy Spirit.

The astronomer Johannes Kepler (1572-1630) encountered the Living God when he explored the mathematical *relations* of God's harmonious creation. After developing the law of the elliptical motion of the

⁴ Using Greek words developed by the church fathers of Cappadocia (4th century AD), God is three *hypostaseis* in one *ousia* (in the Greek, *treis hypostaseis en mia ousia*). They used the Greek word *perichoresis*, from *perichoreo*, meaning "to encompass," as a way to grasp the nature of this mutual indwelling (cf. John 14:10, 20). The dance metaphor comes from the Greek word *perichoreuo*, meaning "to dance around."

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planets around the sun, he fell to his knees and exclaimed, “My God! I am thinking Thy thoughts after Thee!”⁵

Albert Einstein (1879-1955) believed that the deeper one penetrates into nature’s rational order, the greater one’s respect for God. Although not a believer in the onto-relational Trinity of Christian orthodoxy, Einstein followed the thought of Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879), a believer, who said that in science, relation is the most important thing to know.⁶ With this input from Maxwell, Einstein echoed Kepler’s thoughts by saying, “What we [physicists] strive for ... is just to draw His lines after Him.”⁷

There is a perichoretic structure, a dance, in creation. This dance is the unity behind the diversity of the cosmos, the rational ground of all that exists. This unity exists because all things cohere in Jesus Christ, the Word of the Father, God the Son made flesh (John 1:14), who reveals to us the perichoretic nature, the dance of the dynamism of His relationship to His Father in the Holy Spirit. One aspect of the perichoretic structure of creation is number⁸ and the study and development of number is called mathematics.

Human mind and culture have developed a formal system of thought for recognizing, classifying, and exploiting patterns. We call it mathematics.

Ian Stewart, *Nature's Numbers*, p. 1

A Christo-centric Trinitarian is one who worships the Triune God in Spirit and Truth. This God is the ground of reality, the ground of the rationality, the ground of the dance of the cosmos. If this God is not onto-relational, if this God is not being in relation, then we have no basis for thinking there can be any unity, any relationship, in the multi-layered structure of the universe.

As we depend on the illumination of the Holy Spirit while listening to the Word of the Father in Scripture, we will build a solid foundation for worship, a foundation that *justifies* the authenticity of human personality, the richness of human relationships, the nature of dignity and freedom, the laws of logic, the laws of science, the laws of mathematics, the flow of history, the nature of beauty, and the standards of ethics, indeed, every aspect of life.

⁵ Cited in Colin Humphreys, “Can Science and Christianity Both Be True?” in R. J. Berry (ed.), *Real Science, Real Faith* (Eastbourne: Monarch, 1991), p. 116. Kepler exulted, with pleasure, in the works of God (Psalm 111:2). In 1604, Kepler wrote, “I may say with truth that whenever I consider in my thoughts the beautiful order, how one thing issues out of and is derived from another, then it is as though I had read a divine text, written into the world itself, not with letters but rather with essential objects, saying: Man, stretch they reason hither, so that thou mayest comprehend these things.” Cited in Max Caspar, *Kepler* (New York: Dover Publications, [1959] 1993), p. 11.

⁶ Maxwell also developed a fresh and exhilarating relational way of understanding and doing mathematics (in the form of partial differential equations). He called what he was doing “embodied mathematics.” When he designed the famous Cavendish Laboratory in Cambridge University in 1874, he ordered this Latin inscription to be placed over the entryway: *Magna opera Domini exquisita in omnes voluntates ejus*. The works of the Lord are great, studied by all who delight in them (Psalm 111:2).

⁷ Cited in Thomas F. Torrance, *Theological and Natural Science* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2002), p. 25.

⁸ Number is the rational order of things that makes the universe accessible to quantification by counting/measuring or to expressions using determinate or fixed quantities.