

Cross-Examination: Socinus and the Doctrine of the Trinity

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Faustus Socinus published his *Tract concerning God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit* 425 years ago. Galileo had just discovered the pendulum, Shakespeare was a few years from his first play, and Elizabeth I was Queen of England. It would feel a bit like taking unfair advantage to critique a work of theology published so long ago, were it not for a surprising fact: the arguments of anti-Trinitarians have changed very little in that time. Contemporary anti-Trinitarians use most (not quite all) of Socinus's arguments, and indeed many of the most important arguments that they use have precedent in Socinus's work. I am not asserting that Socinus is the origin of these arguments, at least some of which anti-Trinitarians were using over a century earlier.¹ What is clear, though, is that contemporary anti-Trinitarian theology has its own stream of tradition, of which Socinus was a significant and highly representative figure.

The religion best known for strident opposition to the doctrine of the Trinity is the Jehovah's Witnesses, a sect that emerged from the anti-Trinitarian wing of the Adventist movement in the late nineteenth century. Some of their arguments against the Trinity echo arguments used hundreds of years earlier by Socinus.² The theology of Jehovah's Witnesses differs in some ways from that of Socinus. Most notably for our purposes, Socinus was a Unitarian, whereas Jehovah's Witnesses

are basically Arian in their theology.³ The basic difference between their views is that Unitarians⁴ deny that Christ preexisted his human life as a heavenly being, whereas Arians affirm this much about Christ, though denying that the preexistent Christ was God.

In this article I wish to draw special attention to the work of a scholar in another anti-Trinitarian offshoot of Adventism, the Church of God General Conference (also known as Church of God, Abrahamic Faith).⁵ Anthony Buzzard is an English scholar with Master's degrees in languages and theology. For over a quarter-century Buzzard has been the leading theologian of this little denomination, teaching at what is now the Atlanta Bible College. His book, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound*, is one of the better attempts in recent memory to refute the Trinity.⁶

Buzzard is a modern-day Socinus. The biblical texts on which he leans most heavily in his critique of Trinitarianism are the same as those cited in Socinus's tract. Most of Socinus's arguments are laid out explicitly in Buzzard's book. Buzzard apparently never mentions Socinus in his book, although he devotes a chapter to the history of anti-Trinitarianism,⁷ suggesting again that the argumentative strategies they have in common are simply elements of a long-flowing stream of anti-Trinitarian tradition.

Although Socinus offers a battery of arguments against the Trinity, I will focus on the following claims, which are crucial to establish his Unitarian doctrine:

1. The Trinity is both unbiblical and unreasonable.
2. The Holy Spirit is not a divine person, but the power of God.
3. The Father alone is God in the absolute sense.
4. Christ is God in a derivative sense.
5. Christ did not exist before his conception as a human being.⁸

I will examine Socinus's arguments for each of these claims in turn.

General Objections to the Trinity

As do all anti-Trinitarians, Socinus regards the doctrine of the Trinity as both unbiblical—since the Bible contains no reference to the doctrine—and unreasonable. He contends that the distinction between one divine essence and three divine persons “is never found in the Holy Scriptures, and clearly is at odds with most certain reason and truth.” Critics of the doctrine routinely make the observation that it cannot be found in the Bible. Anthony Buzzard, for example, writes: “There is no passage of Scripture which asserts that God is three. No authentic verse claims that the One God is three persons, three spirits, three divine, infinite minds, or three anything. No verse or word of the Bible can be shown to carry the meaning ‘God in three Persons.’”⁹

The Bible does not spell out the doctrine of the Trinity in so many words. Nor does it articulate a distinction between essence and person. Trinitarians have always acknowledged that the terminology and conceptual distinctions of the doctrine are post-biblical theological formulations.¹⁰ More than a century before Socinus, Calvin discussed the use of extrabiblical terminology with regards to the Trinity at length in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. The following comment typifies his response:

Arius says that Christ is God, but mutters that he was made and had a beginning. He says that Christ is one with the Father, but secretly whispers in the ears of his own partisans that He is united to the Father like other believers, although by a singular privilege. Say “consubstantial” and you will tear off the mask of this turncoat, and yet you add nothing to Scripture.¹¹

The fact is that the early church developed the doctrine of the Trin-

ity as a way of systematically articulating what the Bible clearly teaches about the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The doctrine safeguards the following elements of the biblical revelation¹²:

1. There is one God, the LORD (Deut. 4:35, 39; 6:4; 32:39; Is. 43:10; 44:6-8; 45:21; Mark 12:29; Rom. 16:27; Gal. 3:20; 1 Tim. 1:17; James 2:19; Jude 25).
2. The Father is this God, the LORD (John 17:3; 1 Cor. 8:6a; Eph. 4:6; 1 Thess. 1:9-10).
3. The Son is this God, the LORD (John 1:1; 20:28; Rom. 10:9-13; 1 Cor. 8:6b; Phil. 2:9-11; Eph. 4:5; Tit. 2:13; Heb. 1:8-12; 2 Pet. 1:1).
4. The Holy Spirit is this God, the LORD (Acts 5:3-4, 9; 2 Cor. 3:16-18; Eph. 4:4).
5. The Father is not the Son (Matt. 3:17; John 8:16-18; 16:27-28; 1 John 4:10; 2 John 3).
6. The Father is not the Holy Spirit (John 14:15; 15:26).
7. The Son is not the Holy Spirit (John 14:16; 15:26; 16:7, 13-14).

Correlating these teachings in a way that is faithful to the biblical context, other than through something along the lines of the doctrine of the Trinity, is difficult if not impossible. Frankly, most orthodox Christian theologians would happily dispense with the technical language of person and essence, of consubstantiality and Trinity, if only everyone professing to believe in the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit did so in a way that was faithful to these explicit biblical teachings. As Calvin pointed out, what drove the church to use such language was the distortion of those biblical truths by false teachers.

Socinus's problem with Trinitarianism is ultimately not its use of extrabiblical terms and concepts but the theological position that Trinitarianism uses those terms and concepts to articulate. In his estimation, that position—specifically its distinction between persons and essences—is philosophically untenable: “For it is absolutely certain that there are not fewer individual essences than there are persons, since a person is nothing other than an individual intelligent essence.” Socinus considers this point about persons and essences (or persons and beings) to be as important as it is certain, later repeating: “Clearly, it is necessary that there are no fewer individual essences than there are persons.” More bluntly, Socinus declares: “To be One and Three are mutually exclusive.”

Everyone familiar with the subject will recognize these types of criticisms as a staple of anti-Trinitarianism. There are at least two problems with all such criticisms.

First, these rational objections to the Trinity rest on presuppositions about what is or is not ontologically possible for the infinite, transcendent Creator. Just how does Socinus know that the metaphysical generalization that “a person is nothing other than an individual intelligent essence” applies to God?

Second, the philosophical objection to the distinction between person and essence ignores the fact that Trinitarian theologians have regularly stipulated that they are using the term person analogically. That is, Trinitarian theology refers to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as “three persons” in a special, limited use of the term person to denote what distinguishes one from the other two. To put the matter another way, to say that the Father and the Son are two persons is a way of saying that the Father is not the Son (see point #5 above).

Classic Christian theism openly acknowledges that descriptions or definitions of God's attributes and being unavoidably involve analogical use of language. We have difficulty conceiving of knowledge apart from perception or the acquisition of information, yet we affirm that God has all “knowledge”—and that he does not need to acquire or learn anything. We speak of God's “love” even though love for human beings is bound

up changeable emotions whereas we know God's love is not changeable or variable. (Classic theism denies that God even has "emotions"; modern evangelical theologians who affirm that God has emotions are careful to qualify that those emotions are in important ways unlike human emotions.) Christian theism affirms that God is omnipresent while hastening to explain that God is not physically located or present in all places—leaving even the most sophisticated theologians stretching to explain what this "presence" means. The difficulty in Trinitarian theology of comprehending what it means to affirm the unity of the divine essence or being while affirming that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three persons in the one God is not qualitatively different from these other difficulties.

An obvious retort is that there is no need for such difficulties if the Bible does not teach such paradoxical claims in the first place. This is precisely where the issue must be decided. If the Bible teaches that God is love and yet not subject to changeable emotions, or that God has all knowledge but never learns anything, or that God is omnipresent but physically located nowhere, we must change our assumptions about what is metaphysically possible to fit what God has revealed about himself. The same principle applies to the doctrine of the Trinity: If it teaches that there is one God, that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are each this God, and yet distinguishes among these three in a personal way, then we must abandon the assumption that a single divine being (God) could only be a unitarian (one-person) being.

That's a big *IF* in the view of Socinus and other anti-Trinitarians, of course. We will therefore need to consider their specific biblical objections and countermeasures to the doctrine.

The Holy Spirit

Anti-Trinitarians generally devote most of their efforts to debunking the belief that Jesus Christ is God, and likewise Trinitarians generally devote most of their efforts in responding to anti-Trinitarians to

defending the deity of Christ. This focus on the person of Christ is perfectly understandable because the New Testament focuses on Christ from cover to cover and because the notion of a man actually being God incarnate is so provocative. Nevertheless, we would do well to give more attention than is customary in these discussions to the third person of the Trinity. If the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is a person distinct from the Father, Unitarianism in all its forms is false. From a Unitarian perspective, if there are two persons in God, there might as well be three; the merits of Unitarianism (as well as its definition) depend on its apparent simplicity in affirming that God is a single person. The question of the Holy Spirit is in at least one respect simpler to address than that of the Son, because in the case of the Holy Spirit none of the paradoxes arise that result from the incarnation of the Son as a finite human.

Furthermore, it turns out that anti-Trinitarians have a hard time giving a coherent account of the Holy Spirit. If the Holy Spirit is not a divine person, then, who or what is it? Anti-Trinitarians have four choices. (a) The Holy Spirit is a reality and is God. On this view, the Holy Spirit is simply another name or title for God (i.e., the Father). (b) The Holy Spirit is a reality and is not God. On this view the Holy Spirit is something real that exists, whether personal or impersonal, but that is ontologically distinct from and other than God. (c) The Holy Spirit is a reality that is part of God. Those who favor this view regard the Holy Spirit as a force or energy that emanates from God's very being. (d) The Holy Spirit is an abstraction pertaining to God. On this view the Holy Spirit is not something that exists but is a way of describing some characteristic or activity of God (as when we speak of the justice or providence of God). Anti-Trinitarians have tried all four of these views; indeed, in some cases an anti-Trinitarian will actually resort to more than one of these explanations. However, they are mutually exclusive; if one of them is true, the other three cannot be true. Worse still, all four of these views have problems.

According to Socinus, the Holy Spirit "is never distinctly and literally (as it were) called God in Scripture."¹³ His careful qualifications ("distinctly and literally") reflect awareness that in fact the Holy Spirit

is sometimes called God (e.g., Acts 5:3-4). Furthermore, Socinus argues that since the Holy Spirit is called the Spirit of God, “it follows that . . . the Holy Spirit is [not] that one God.” There is an obvious reason, not mentioned in Socinus’s work, why he would not favor the explanation that the Holy Spirit is simply another name for God the Father: the New Testament, especially in John 14-16, clearly distinguishes the Holy Spirit from the Father who sends him (John 14:15; 15:26).¹⁴ These statements are just as problematic for the remaining three views, however, because the Johannine texts indicate some kind of personal distinction between the Father and the Holy Spirit. Although the Arians typically solved this problem by regarding the Holy Spirit as a created being, few if any anti-Trinitarians take this approach today.

According to Socinus, “The Holy Spirit is the power and efficacy of God.” We are used to hearing from various anti-Trinitarians today that the Holy Spirit is a force that emanates from God,¹⁵ and the description “the power and efficacy of God” could be taken that way. However, Socinus argues that the power of God is no more a person than the goodness, justice, or mercy of God—otherwise there would have to be many more than three persons in God. This argument appears to treat “the power of God” abstractly, as God’s ability to do things. Such an interpretation also fits better Socinus’s use of “efficacy” as another synonym for the Holy Spirit. It appears, then, that Socinus took the fourth view, regarding the Holy Spirit as an abstraction referring to God’s power or ability.

The New Testament is replete with passages that are extremely difficult if not impossible to reconcile in a plausible way with Socinus’s view of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit has a name (Matt. 28:19). He is “another Advocate” (John 14:16),¹⁶ that is, someone who would come to support and strengthen believers after the Son is no longer physically present with them (cf. 1 John 2:1).¹⁷ The Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son, in Jesus’ name, to speak to and teach the disciples, convict people of sin, and bear witness to and glorify Christ (John 14:26; 15:26-27; 16:7-13). People can lie to him—although it’s not recommended! (Acts 5:3-4)—and he can make decisions or judgments (Acts 15:28).

He intercedes with the Father on our behalf, just as Christ does (Rom. 8:26).¹⁸ We read throughout the New Testament about the Holy Spirit speaking (John 16:13; Acts 1:16; 8:29; 10:19; 11:12; 13:2; 16:6; 20:23; 21:11; 28:25-27; 1 Tim. 4:1; Heb. 3:7-11; 10:15-17; 1 Pet. 1:11; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). In one especially vivid narrative text, the Holy Spirit is quoted as speaking of himself in the first person—"the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart *for me* Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (Acts 13:2, emphasis added). So pervasive is this sort of language regarding the Holy Spirit in the Book of Acts that one biblical scholar has written a full monograph exploring the "character" of the Holy Spirit in the book's narrative.¹⁹

The notion that the Holy Spirit is a mere abstraction may well be the Achilles' heel of Socinus's argument against the doctrine of the Trinity.

Absolute and Derivative Senses of "God"

If there is one interpretive claim that is central to Socinus's case against the doctrine of the Trinity, it is his contention that Scripture calls Christ "God" only in a derivative sense. He begins his critique of the Trinity by asserting that the term *God* can mean either "him who rules over and is in charge of all things, both in heaven and on earth, and who is the author and source of all things," or "him who has some highest rulership or might or power from the one God himself, or is a partaker in some other way of the divinity of this one God."²⁰ For the sake of convenience, I will refer to the former definition as the *absolute* sense and the latter definition as the *derivative* sense. Socinus allows that Scripture calls Christ "God" but only in the derivative sense of someone whose position or power derives from God.

Much of Socinus's case against the Trinity consists in a development and defense of this crucial claim. He argues, on the one hand, that the Father alone is God in the absolute sense, and on the other hand,

that the Son is God only in a derivative sense.

Socinus considers John 17:3 to be proof that the Father alone, in contradistinction from Jesus Christ, is God in the absolute sense: “And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.” He points out that the attempt of older writers to reinterpret John 17:3 to refer to the Father and Jesus Christ as the one true God is exegetically untenable and had been abandoned “by nearly all Trinitarians.” Anthony Buzzard, who makes the same point, cites John 17:3 more than any other biblical text (some 25 different pages throughout his book).²¹ Modern anti-Trinitarians clearly think that John 17:3 delivers a *coup de grâce* to the belief that Jesus Christ is God, and therefore to the doctrine of the Trinity. But does it?

In fact, what John 17:3 actually says is perfectly consistent with the doctrine of the Trinity. Trinitarianism *affirms* that the Father is the only true God. After all, if there is only one true God, and the Father is that God, then the Father must be the only true God. It is also consistent with the Trinity to affirm that the Father sent Jesus Christ. So what’s the problem? Anti-Trinitarians think that the sentence creates a disjunction between “the only true God” and “Jesus Christ,” implying that Jesus Christ is *not* the only true God. But this is not quite correct. John 17:3 does distinguish between the Father (“you”) and “Jesus Christ,” and in this same statement identifies the Father as “the only true God,” but this does not necessarily imply a denial that Jesus Christ is also true God.

To understand why, consider a couple of other biblical texts using the word “only” (Greek *monos*). After the Flood, according to Genesis, “Only Noah was left, and those that were with him in the ark” (Gen. 7:23). The Septuagint translation uses the word *monos*, as in John 17:3. From a woodenly simplistic grammatical analysis, it may appear that “those who were with him in the ark” are distinguished from the “only” one who “was left” (the verb is in the singular form, indicating literally that only one person was left). But such an inference is clearly contrary to the intent of the statement as a whole in context. The statement singles out Noah as the one who “alone” was left alive after the Flood, yet its intended meaning is clearly not to exclude “those that were with him

in the ark” as also having survived. The same idiomatic way of speaking occurs in the passage about the woman caught in adultery, which says that Jesus “was left alone [*monos*], and [*kai*] the woman who was in the midst” (John 8:9, my translation).²² The point is that one must consider what is actually being said in context and not treat the apparent grammatical disjunction in a woodenly literal way.

The same caution also applies to John 17:3. The verse affirms that eternal life consists in knowing the Father and Jesus Christ. Now this is a startling statement if Christ is just a creature, no matter how great. Eternal life is all about knowing God—that is, about having a relationship with him in which we know him personally, in which we enjoy life with him forever. John 17:3 expands this observation to say that eternal life consists in knowing both the Father and Jesus Christ. In this context, Christ’s reference to his Father as “the only true God” does not exclude himself from that status. Rather, Christ is honoring the Father as God while trusting the Father to exalt him at the proper time. Thus, Jesus immediately goes on to affirm that he had devoted his time on earth to glorifying the Father (v. 4) and to ask the Father in turn to glorify him (v. 5).

That John 17:3 is not denying that Jesus Christ is God is clear from the fact that the same Gospel refers to Christ three times as God (John 1:1, 18; 20:28).²³ It won’t do to claim that these verses are referring to Christ as God in a secondary or derivative sense. John 1:1 indicates that Christ existed before creation as the divine Word who was himself God; it doesn’t make sense to assert that someone’s deity is derived if he has had it forever. (Socinus’s attempts to deny the preexistence of Christ fail, as I shall argue later in this article.) Thomas’s confession of Jesus as “my Lord and my God” (John 20:28) is an unreserved, unqualified expression of devotion. If John 17:3 did mean that the Father was the only true God to the exclusion of Jesus Christ, then it would not make any sense for John in other passages to affirm that Christ is God. If there is only one true God, and Jesus is not that God, then he is not truly God at all. Yet John explicitly calls Jesus “God,” and does so in contexts that make it clear that he is God no less than the Father.

Socinus thinks that a disjunction between the Father as the “one God” and Jesus Christ as the “one Lord” in Paul’s writings (especially 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 4:6) also excludes Jesus from the category of being the absolute God.²⁴ The problem with this argument is that it implies that the Father is not the “one Lord.” Yet biblically, the “one Lord” is Yahweh or Jehovah, the LORD of the Old Testament. What Paul is doing in these verses is drawing on the language of the *Shema*, the most basic confession of Judaism, “The LORD our God, the LORD is one” (Deut. 6:4 NASB), and identifying both the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ as this divine God and Lord.²⁵ Like the other New Testament writers, Paul usually used the divine title “God” for the Father and the divine title “Lord” for Jesus Christ. Usually—but not always: he calls Christ “God over all” (Rom. 9:5) and “our great God and Savior” (Titus 2:13).²⁶ It is simply not plausible to interpret these passages as meaning that Jesus Christ is a divine being but not the highest, absolute God.

Thus, Trinitarians are not bothered by the fact, pointed out by Socinus, that the unqualified title *God* in the New Testament almost always refers to the Father.²⁷ Indeed, this is how orthodox Christians also typically speak. When a Trinitarian says “God” without qualification, he typically means the Father, and when he says “the Lord” without qualification, he most often means the Son—yet he has no trouble saying, as appropriate, that the Father is Lord or that Jesus Christ is God.²⁸

Socinus’s main proof text for his claim that Christ was God only in a derivative sense is John 10:34-36.

Jesus answered, “Is it not written in your law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If those to whom the word of God came were called ‘gods’—and the scripture cannot be annulled—can you say that the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world is blaspheming because I said, ‘I am God’s Son’?”

This is the first biblical text to which Socinus gives more than a passing reference. Modern anti-Trinitarians also tend to lean very heavily on this passage.²⁹

In current biblical scholarship, this is one of the most controversial passages in the New Testament—and not because of its supposed difficulty for Trinitarian theology. Scholars debate the identity of those “to whom the Word of God came” (v. 35)—were they the Israelites at Mount Sinai, corrupt judges during the period of the monarchy, or angelic beings given oversight of the nations (to mention just the most common explanations)? What was the meaning of the line “I said, you are gods” in the context of the Psalm that Christ quoted (Ps. 82:6)? What was the point Jesus was making in commenting that “the scripture cannot be annulled”? Just what sort of argument form is Christ using here?³⁰

I cannot hope to address, let alone settle, all these questions here, so I will have to be content with making a few brief, simple observations. First, we have good reason to think that in context Christ was indeed claiming to be God. He had just asserted that he was the good shepherd who gives eternal life to his “sheep” and that “no one will snatch them out of my hand” (v. 28). He then says the same thing about the Father: “no one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand” (v. 29). These parallel statements allude to Old Testament texts in which the Lord God speaks of his divine power over life and death: “See now that I, even I, am he; there is no god besides me. I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and no one can deliver from my hand” (Deut. 32:39). “I am God, and also henceforth I am He; there is no one who can deliver from my hand” (Is. 43:13). Jesus is thus claiming an exclusively divine power in words clearly alluding to two of the strongest monotheistic statements of the Old Testament. He then follows up this claim with the famous saying, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). In this context, Jesus’ claim to be “one” with the Father appears very likely to be an allusion to the classic monotheistic statement of the Old Testament, the *Shema* (Deut. 6:4), in effect including himself with the Father in the oneness of God. This makes it quite understandable that his Jewish opponents would seek to stone him for blasphemy because they understood him to be making himself out to be God (John 10:33).

Second, whatever the exact nature of Christ’s response, it did not alleviate the Jews’ impression that he was claiming to be God. After

Christ finished his response by saying, “the Father is in me and I am in the Father,” the Jewish authorities “tried again to arrest him” (vv. 38-39). Evidently, Jesus’ answer did not convince them that he was not blaspheming. If Jesus was not claiming divine equality or identity, it would have been easy enough to have said something like, “I’m not God; I’m just his Son, one of his creatures.” He never did so.

Third, Jesus’ argument from Psalm 82 is not that he is God in a derivative sense. Such an interpretation assumes that Jesus was saying that he was a “God” (or “god”) in the same sense as those called “gods” in Psalm 82. If that were the point, it is peculiar that he did not say so (“If they can be called gods, then I can be called a god, too”). Indeed, Jesus did not call himself God, but rather, by referring to himself as “one” with the Father, implied that he was God’s Son in some unique sense. This is made clear once again when Jesus speaks of himself as “the one whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world” (John 10:36). Whatever the precise nuance of Christ’s argument was, he was clearly placing himself in a category of one—not arguing that he belonged in the same category as the so-called “gods” of Psalm 82. Jesus was not, as his critics claimed, a man who was “making himself” God; he was God’s Son whom the Father had sent to be a man.

No Preexistent Son

While some opponents of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, affirm that Jesus Christ existed prior to his human conception and birth in heaven as a divine being of some kind, Socinus rejected the idea of the Son’s preexistence. Socinus offered two kinds of explanations for texts that seemed to speak of Christ as existing before his human life.

First, Socinus argues that texts speaking of Christ’s role in creation actually refer to his role in the *new* creation. For example, Paul’s statement that God “created all things through Jesus Christ” (Eph. 3:9 NKJV)³¹ does not refer to the creation of all things in the beginning of

time, but to the new creation effected by Christ in redemption (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). It is exceedingly difficult to make this explanation work for *all* of the relevant passages that speak of Christ's role in creation (John 1:3, 10; 1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16; Heb. 1:2, 10-12).³² The passages in John and Hebrews credit Christ with the work of creation "in the beginning" (John 1:1-3; Heb. 1:10), clearly referring to the beginning of Genesis 1:1.

Second, Socinus explains some of the New Testament texts—particularly those in the Gospel of John—that appear to speak of Christ coming into the world from heaven as referring to a heavenly visit by Christ during his human life. The description of Jesus as "the one who descended from heaven" (John 3:13) is understood to refer to Christ's descent back to earth after his brief visit to heaven (similarly John 6:62). For those who cannot accept this supposedly obvious explanation, Socinus allows another: this "ascent into heaven" may be figurative language "meaning the penetration (as it were) into the knowledge of divine things." This latter interpretation is the one that Buzzard favors. He dismisses in passing the idea of a visit by Jesus to heaven since "the Gospels nowhere record such an event." Instead, he takes the view that the language about Jesus ascending into heaven "is a figurative description of Jesus' unique perception of God's saving plan."³³

Both of these explanations strain the Johannine texts to the breaking point. "Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going to God" (John 13:3). "I came from the Father and have come into the world; again, I am leaving the world and am going to the Father" (John 16:28). "So now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed" (John 17:5). Those who deny that John taught the preexistence of Christ must engage in the most implausible exegetical contortions to circumvent the obvious implication of these texts. Buzzard can only complain that some English versions wrongly translate "going *back*" in John 13:3 and 16:28—a debatable complaint, though the idea of Christ's preexistence is plain enough without the word "back," as the NRSV quoted above demonstrates.³⁴ That the

Son existed before becoming a man is evident not only from these passages in John, but from texts scattered throughout the New Testament (Matt. 9:13; 20:28; 23:34, 37; Mark 2:17; 10:45; Luke 4:43; 5:32; 12:49, 51; 13:34; 19:10; Rom. 8:3; 1 Cor. 10:4, 9; Gal. 4:4-6; Phil. 2:6-7; Jude 5).³⁵

Conclusion

What makes Unitarianism attractive is its apparent simplicity: God is one person; Jesus was a man, though a perfect one through whom God makes himself known; the Holy Spirit is just a way of speaking of God's immanent activity, his energy or power acting in the world. In order to defend such a seemingly simple doctrine, though, Unitarians proffer convoluted interpretations of numerous biblical passages. Professing to eschew all unbiblical distinctions, in fact they trade the theological distinctions of orthodox theology (one Divine Being, three divine Persons) for their own unorthodox distinctions (such as absolute versus derivative deity), resulting in a doctrine that is not faithful to the teaching of Scripture. The doctrine of the Trinity, as difficult as it is for our finite minds to comprehend, is still the best theological framework for maintaining a faithful witness to the biblical revelation of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Notes

1. At least a few of Socinus's arguments appeared in a book by Servetus that scholars have only recently translated into English: *The Restoration of Christianity: An English Translation of Christianismi restitutio, 1553* by Michael Servetus (1511-1553), trans. Christopher A. Hoffman and Marian Hillar (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007).
2. The most sophisticated defense of Jehovah's Witness beliefs on the subject, ironically, was produced by a man who has since left the Jehovah's Witnesses, though he remains an anti-Trinitarian: Greg Stafford, *Jehovah's Witnesses Defended: An Answer to Scholars and Critics*, 2d ed. (Huntington Beach, Calif.: Elihu Books, 2000). (A third edition has been delayed,

perhaps because of Stafford's defection.)

3. That is, Jehovah's Witnesses hold to the same basic views on God and Christ as did the Arians. The Arians seem to have held that the Holy Spirit was a created being, not a force emanating from God, as the Jehovah's Witnesses and most other anti-Trinitarians today maintain.
4. My focus here is on classic Unitarianism, which was originally a far more conservative movement—affirming the inspiration and authority of the Bible, accepting the Virgin Birth and Resurrection, and the like—than the Unitarian-Universalist Association, a denomination so liberal that now only a minority of its members even professes to be Christians. Socinianism did differ in some ways from the English and American movement called Unitarianism, but its view of God is fairly described as Unitarian.
5. See the web site shared by the denomination and by the Atlanta Bible College, <http://www.abc-coggc.org/>.
6. Anthony F. Buzzard and Charles F. Hunting, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: Christianity's Self-Inflicted Wound* (Lanham, MD, New York, and Oxford: International Scholars Publications, 1998).
7. Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 243-69.
8. Socinus also argues that Christ does not have a divine nature; that he receives divine worship but only as a human; and that the title "Son of God" applies to Jesus as an exalted man, not as a divine person incarnated. A definitive critique of Socinus would need to address these arguments, although they are actually supplementary to his primary arguments for Unitarianism.
9. Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 4.
10. See the classic statement by B. B. Warfield, "Trinity," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939 reprint of 1915 ed.), 5:3012.
11. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles; Library of Christian Classics 20-21 (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 127 (1.13.5).
12. The biblical citations given here are representative, not exhaustive.
13. So also Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 234.
14. Oneness Pentecostalism, which rejects the Trinity in favor of a Pentecostal variety of monarchianism, is problematic at this point, since it affirms that Jesus is the Father and the Holy Spirit—as well as the Son!
15. Cf. Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 226, describing the Holy Spirit as God's "energy."

16. All biblical quotations are from the NRSV except as otherwise noted. The word *paraklētos* commonly referred to someone who stood by a person in trouble—for example, someone accused, or alone—to provide support or defense.
17. The most popular argument in contemporary evangelicalism for the personhood of the Holy Spirit may be one of the weakest arguments, namely, the appeal to masculine pronouns in John 14-16 in reference to the Holy Spirit (*ekeinos*, John 14:26; 15:26; 16:8, 13, 14; *auton*, John 16:7), despite the fact that “Spirit” (*pneuma*) is grammatically neuter. As Dan Wallace has shown, the pronouns in question are masculine because their antecedent is *paraklētos* (“Helper”), a masculine noun: Daniel B. Wallace, “Greek Grammar and the Personality of the Holy Spirit,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* (2003): 97-125. That having been said, these texts are still strong evidence for the personhood of the Holy Spirit, since he is given the personal designation *paraklētos* and is described as performing personal functions (speaking, hearing, glorifying, teaching, etc.).
18. On the person of the Holy Spirit in Paul, see especially Gordon D. Fee, *God’s Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994).
19. William H. Shepherd, *The Narrative Function of the Holy Spirit as a Character in Luke-Acts*, SBLDS 147 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994).
20. Similarly Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 124-25.
21. See especially *ibid.*, 38-40. Sidney Hatch comments in his Foreword, “If there is a key text to the book, it is John 17:3” (xiii).
22. I agree with the consensus of biblical scholars that the passage (John 7:53-8:11) is not part of the original Gospel of John, but it does show how Greek writers of the period used such language.
23. On these verses, see Robert M. Bowman, Jr., and J. Ed Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place: The Case for the Deity of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2007), 138-44, 325-30, and other works cited there.
24. Likewise Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 94-100, 157, 161, 177-78, 182, 274, 283, 311, 313, 315, 333. 1 Corinthians 8:6 is one of the most frequently cited verses in Buzzard’s book. Servetus had also cited 1 Corinthians 8:6 and Ephesians 4:6 to the same effect (Servetus, *Restoration of Christianity*, 39, 46).
25. See Bowman and Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 163-66.
26. See *ibid.*, 146-48, 150-54, 332-34.
27. Cf. Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 124 n. 14, 126.
28. Socinus claims that when Christ is called God, “then the name of God does not func-

tion as a subject but as a predicate”; that is, that Scripture never says that God said or did something that refers “to Christ as distinct from the Father.” However, Acts 20:28 appears to be an exception to this sweeping claim; see Bowman and Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 144-46.

29. E.g., Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 45-46, 87, 125, 220, 291-92, 309. See earlier Servetus, *Restoration of Christianity*, 20, 23-24.
30. Besides the commentaries on John, see Richard Jungkuntz, “An Approach to the Exegesis of John 10:34-36,” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 35 (1964): 556-65; Jerome H. Neyrey, “‘I Said: You Are Gods’: Psalm 82:6 and John 10,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 108 (1989): 647-63; W. Gary Phillips, “An Apologetic Study of John 10:34-36,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146 (1989): 405-19. Anthony Tyrrell Hanson, *The Prophetic Gospel: A Study of John and the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 135-49.
31. Ironically, almost all modern translations omit the words “through Jesus Christ,” which text-critical scholars regard as a later expansion of the original wording of the text.
32. Some biblical scholars today do argue for a new-creation role of Christ in 1 Cor. 8:6b, but such an interpretation finds few if any supporters for the other relevant texts.
33. Buzzard and Hunting, *Doctrine of the Trinity*, 205, 206; see further, 206-9.
34. *Ibid.*, 328. According to the United Bible Societies’ Greek-English Dictionary, the Greek verb *hupagei* (used in John 13:3) sometimes means “go home; go back, return,” a meaning that clearly fits the context in John 13:3.
35. See Bowman and Komoszewski, *Putting Jesus in His Place*, 81-101.