ON CLASSICAL
TRINITARIANISM

RETRIEVING THE NICENE
DOCTRINE OF THE TRIUNE GOD

FOREWORD BY J. TODD BILLINGS

MATTHEW BARRETT, ED.

ivp | InterVarsity Press
ivpress.com

CONTENTS

IVP | InterVarsity Press

INTRODUCTION

THE PROSPECT AND PROMISE OF CLASSICAL TRINITARIAN THEOLOGY

MATTHEW BARRETT

DEFENDING NICENE TRINITARIANISM is like finding your way back to land on the waves of a storm. Such an illustration is fitting in our century, situated as we are on this side of modern theology. However, the illustration itself originates from church fathers who first defended Nicene trinitarianism on those stormy seas between Nicaea of AD 325 and Constantinople of 381. In the wake of Arianism, the task was as frustrating as it was dangerous, since the church fathers did not always know the outcome. Such uncertainly led to moments (sometimes even decades) of pronounced despondency.

For example, Basil of Caesarea once wrote a letter to Athanasius expressing his despair. No stranger to exile, Athanasius knew the feeling. The letter is revealing because it was written either in AD 371 or 372. Even by the 370s Basil still struggled to muster hope as he evaluated the current state of trinitarianism.

In the darkness of the subordinationist storm, like a sailor lost at sea, Basil called on Athanasius to be his captain. Perhaps Athanasius could acquire the Lord's attention and summon the eternally begotten Son himself to calm this raging wind and sea so that the church might find its way back to the land of the Trinity.

> When I turn my gaze on the world, and perceive the difficulties by which every effort after good is obstructed, like those of a man walking in fetters, I am brought to despair of myself. But then I direct my gaze in the direction of your reverence; I remember that our Lord has appointed you to be physician of the diseases in the Churches; and I recover my spirits, and rise from the depression of despair to the hope of better things. As your wisdom well knows, the whole Church is undone. And you see everything in all directions in your mind's eye like a man looking from some

xviiiIntroduction

tall watch tower, as when at sea many ships sailing together are all dashed one against the other by the violence of the waves, and shipwreck arises in some cases from the sea being furiously agitated from without, in others from the disorder of the sailors hindering and crowding one another. . . . What capable pilot can be found in such a storm? Who is worthy to rouse the Lord to rebuke the wind and the sea? Who but he who from his boyhood fought a good fight on behalf of true religion?[1]

Basil called on Athanasius to steer the ship home, but Athanasius died on the raging ecclesiastical seas that tormented Basil not long after Basil wrote this letter. Athanasius did not live long enough to see Constantinople, though we can imagine his pleasure at its resiliency and eventual triumph. After decades of exegetical labor, Athanasius would have been relieved if he had lived long enough to read the creed's reaffirmation and expansion of Nicaea:

> We believe in one God, the Father All Governing, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.
>
> And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father, through whom all things came into being; who for us men and because of our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became human. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried and rose on the third day, according to the Scriptures; and ascended to heaven, and sits on the right hand of the Father, and will come again with glory to judge the living and the dead. His kingdom shall have no end.
>
> And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and Son, who spoke through the prophets; and in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church. We confess one baptism for the remission of sins. We look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of AD 381—what we now call the Nicene Creed—distinguishes the Son from the Father, as well as the Spirit from the Father and the Son, according to eternal relations of origin. The creed also explicates the essential unity of Father, Son, and Spirit—a unity fortified by the patristic doctrine of divine simplicity—and by means of those same eternal relations of origin. For example, that epic line—"begotten from the Father before all time, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not created, of the same essence as the Father"—is forever ingrained in the grammar of Christianity.

With the Creed's *principia theologiae* in place, the Nicene fathers could justify the entire sweep of Christian theology thereafter—from creation to incarnation, from redemption to inspiration, from baptism to resurrection. Furthermore, the Creed has a current to it, a compelling rhythm from start

---

[1]Letter LXXXII, *To Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, in NPNF[2] 8:172-73.

InterVarsity Press

to finish that captures that foundational distinction between the Creator and the creature, namely, participation in the likeness of God, and with it, the *analogia entis* (analogy of being), both of which pervade patristic literature East and West. In addition, the momentum of the creed from the Trinity to redemption to the eschaton aligns with the telos of classical trinitarian theism: the church looks forward to the world that is without end because then she will contemplate the holy Trinity in the beatific vision, the ultimate source of her everlasting happiness.

Over time the creed defined the life and soul of the church, serving as both an entry point to the Christian life as well as a door to usher the Christian into the afterlife. According to John Leith, the creed was "very early employed as a baptismal creed and was used in the liturgy of the Eucharist from the sixth century."[2] Yet how can a new convert be baptized in the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit if the trinitarian persons lack consubstantiality? How can the church assemble for worship should the Son or the Spirit belong to a dissimilar or inferior nature or will or glory than the Father? Constantinople advanced Nicaea by certain edits and additions (such as the procession of the Spirit), and with time the creed's adamant assertion of consubstantiality between the persons became integral to the liturgy of the church, certifying true worship.

Moreover, theologians East and West understood what precommitments were instrumental to professing the creed according to its patristic intentions. Some of these precommitments were *hermeneutical*. For example, the polemics between the church fathers and the Arians demonstrated that the former exemplified a partitive exegetical instinct that prohibited them from collapsing the form of God with the form of a servant (Philippians 2:6-7). Some of these precommitments were *metaphysical*. For example, the patristic defense of the Son's generation required a differentiation between the divine being's pure actuality and the creaturely being's passive potency, otherwise the church fathers could not describe the Son's generation as eternal, immutable, and impassible. Some of these precommitments were *theological*. For example, to confess the *homoousios* doctrine the church fathers required a robust understanding of divine simplicity, otherwise their belief in the Son's eternal generation from the Father's essence lacked credibility. Some of these precommitments were *canonical*. For example, to trace Scripture's variegated ways of appropriating attributes and works to persons of the Trinity, the church fathers understood they must assume the whole canon's equally adamant commitment to the inseparability of the divine persons. *Opera Trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*. The external works of the Trinity are undivided.

However, we should not assume each of these precommitments operated in isolation, as if they were segregated from each other and affirmed at random. For example,

---

[2]John H. Leith, "The Constantinopolitan Creed (381)," in *Creeds of the Churches*, ed. John H. Leith, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1982), 32.

tracing the Trinity across the economy of salvation was an unreasonable exegetical endeavor apart from inseparable operations, an equally instrumental biblical belief. However, such a canonical trajectory was not viable apart from the metaphysical muscle of divine simplicity. For unless the persons are inseparable in essence, will, and glory—each person subsisting in the same simple divine essence—an indivisible operation is inconceivable. The unity of their operation is untenable apart from the singularity of their will. The hermeneutical, metaphysical, theological, and canonical precommitments of a pro-Nicene trinitarianism may have created many strands, but together they formed a rope that could weather the storm. The timing was exceptional as well. Who can forget that nemeses of Nicaea cast subordinationism under different precommitments drawn from the same disciplines (Eunomius is a case in point).[3] Confessing the Nicene Creed did not function according to *any* set of precommitments, but the church fathers endowed churches with those precommitments necessary to interpret and propagate the creed's content in a way most faithful to the scriptural witness.

In the centuries that followed, the church East and West perpetuated that integrated method. "After Chalcedon [AD 451]," says John Leith, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed "became the most universally accepted of all the creeds."[4] The catholicity of the creed did not mean, however, static reception. Developments occurred to be sure. Scholastic theologians, for instance, cultivated a more elaborate grammar that exposited Nicaea and its precommitments, advancing their reception of Nicene trinitarianism with new challenges in plain view (e.g., Islam, univocity of being, nominalism).[5] Even with the advent of a century as divisive as the sixteenth century, the debates that set Roman Catholics and Protestants apart were *not* disputations over the classical trinitarian theism of Nicaea. As is plain in their confessions and catechisms, for example, Protestants considered an adherence to the classical trinitarian theism of Nicaea, along with its accompanying precommitments, essential to deflating accusations of novelty and heresy. As for their orthodox merits, Protestants claimed they had every right to citizenship in the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church.

With time the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries gave rise to a Protestant Scholasticism that codified the catholic faith in their schools. Catechisms, confessions, and entire systems of theology were written to that end.[6] That process, however, required a renewed focus on Nicaea and its supplementary precommitments. Such a focus did not need to occupy the minds of first-generation Protestants concerned primarily

---

[3]E.g., Basil of Caesarea, *Against Eunomius*, The Fathers of the Church 122 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

[4]Leith, "The Constantinopolitan Creed (381)," 32.

[5]See Rik Van Nieuwenhove's tour through medieval trinitarian theology: *An Introduction to Medieval Theology*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

[6]See Richard Muller, *Post-Reformation Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *The Triunity of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2003).

with polemics surrounding soteriology and ecclesiology but now became relevant for subsequent generations as disputations over theology proper resurfaced. For example, the rise of Socinianism proved an expedient motivation for such rehabilitated attention to classical trinitarian theism. The same may be said of the political and ecclesiastical context that moved Reformed, Lutheran, Anglican, and Baptist churches to distinguish themselves on ecclesiastical disagreements but unite themselves around the foundational commitment of classical trinitarian theism.

Despite over a millennium of growing consensus around classical trinitarian theism's core tenets, the pain in Basil's voice as he summoned Athanasius returned in the wake of a new storm: modernism.

Revisionism

Classical Christianity operated from an Augustinian and Anselmian standpoint: *fides quaerens intellectum.*[7] With the birth of the Enlightenment, however, such a starting point could no longer be assumed, nor was it appreciated. Anselm's approach to faith and reason—*credo ut intelligam*—was overturned.[8] Granted, representatives were diverse, and some representatives were more optimistic than others about their ability to reconcile Christianity and modernist principles. But the modernist project overall epitomized a sweeping change in outlook. In its most aggressive forms, modernism was galvanized by a hermeneutic of skepticism as forms of rationalism fueled naturalistic instincts, instincts framed by a persistent commitment to historicism. Engineered by unprecedented optimism in humankind, *anthropocentrism* infused the intellectual project. Out of these many defining qualities, some historians consider anthropocentrism "the single, overriding or underlying acid of modernity" because it located the "human at the center of knowledge."[9] But whatever its dominant trait, modernism was a self-conscious *revision* of Christianity according to Enlightenment principles to one degree or another. Immersed into waters designed to transform Christian theology according to modernist resolutions, modern theology emerged from such a baptism with vigor.

Modern theology's revisionism did not bode well for historic beliefs of the church like the classical trinitarian theism of Nicaea. Theologian Stephen Holmes has contrasted the patristic "strictures" that defined the classical trinitarian theism of the pro-Nicene heritage with a wide range of modern theologians well into the contemporary period. His investigation is a telescopic lens that unveils the methods and outcomes of theologians as diverse as Georg W. F. Hegel, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Isaak Dorner, Albrecht Ritschl, Adolf von Harnack, Karl Barth, Karl Rahner, John Zizioulas, Wolfhart Pannenberg, Jürgen Moltmann, as well as more recent theologians such as Robert Jenson, Leonardo Boff,

---

[7]"Faith seeking understanding."

[8]"I believe so that I may understand."

[9]The qualities I list are elaborated on by Roger Olson, *The Journey of Modern Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 26.

Miroslav Volf, Cornelius Plantinga, and Richard Swinburne. Far from a mere historical survey, Holmes offers a sobering warning. By the conclusion of their projects, modern theologians were convinced they had ushered in a *revival* of trinitarianism, but Holmes asks what their revisionism has to do with revival at all.

> In our accounts of a Trinitarian revival, we wanted little or nothing to do with such strictures. As a result, we set out on our own to offer a different, and we believed better, doctrine. We returned to the Scriptures, but we chose (with Tertullian's Praxeas, Noetus of Smyrna, and Samuel Clarke) to focus exclusively on the New Testament texts, instead of listening to the whole of Scripture with Tertullian, Hippolytus, and Daniel Waterland. We thought about God's relationship with the creation in the economy, but we chose (with the Valentinians, Arius, and Hegel) to believe that the Son must be the mode of mediation of the Father's presence to creation, instead of following Irenaeus and Athanasius in proposing God's ability to mediate his own presence. We tried to understand the divine unity, but we chose (with Eunomius and Socinus) to believe that we could reason adequately about the divine essence, instead of following Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, and John Calvin in asserting divine unknowability. We addressed divine simplicity, and chose (with Socinus and John Biddle) to discard it, rather than following Basil and the rest in affirming it as the heart of Trinitarian doctrine. We

> thought about Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, but chose (with Sabellius, Arius, and Eunomius) to affirm the true personality of each, rather than following Augustine and John of Damascus in believing in one divine personality.
>
> We called what we were doing a "Trinitarian revival"; future historians might want to ask us why.[10]

Modern theology's revival has forfeited many of classical trinitarian theism's precommitments, precommitments necessary to maintain Nicaea's full integrity. To parse Holmes's observations and elaborate on each, consider what has been contorted:

1. *A lopsided canon*: we have fixated on some portions of Scripture while neglecting others, failing to understand that the revelation of the Trinity is a progressive revelation to be interpreted as a whole and with unflinching canonical continuity.

2. *A Trinity (and Jesus) engulfed by the economy*: as if the Son of God must be inferior in some way to mediate between the Creator and his creation; as if the Creator cannot communicate with the creature or redeem the creature and remain free of domestication apart from a second, subordinate God.

3. *A comprehensible trinitarian unity*: by setting aside *analogia entis*—analogy of being—which requires an incomprehensible deity, we approach the divine essence as if we can reason to it by means of a univocity we experience between human persons in society.

---

[10]Stephen R. Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity: The Doctrine of God in Scripture, History and Modernity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2012), 200.

4. *An impatience with simplicity*: declaring simplicity illogical to our finite, complex minds, we dispense with a belief that alone can explain the unity and consubstantiality between Father, Son, and Spirit. We are now left with a God made up of parts, a compositional Trinity.

5. *A turn toward social personalities*: as if the one essence no longer has three modes of subsistence, as if the persons are not subsisting relations of the simple essence, but possess their own wills and centers of consciousness, each an individual personality in societal cooperation with the others.[11]

These five points could be multiplied, but they are sufficient to convey the discontinuity and incompatibility of modern trinitarian theism with classical trinitarian theism. Holmes's conclusion—"We called what we were doing a 'Trinitarian revival'; future historians might want to ask us why"— carries warrant. Announcing a renaissance, modern theologians appeared at the trinitarian banquet ready to showcase the rebirth of true trinitarianism. On closer examination, however, the Trinity of Nicaea was absent, which has thrown into question the claim of "revival" itself. Could it be that the Trinity at the feast bore far closer resemblance to modernist than Nicene precommitments? Roman Catholic theologians have made the same observation. Consider Lewis Ayres and his book *Nicaea and Its Legacy*. His main concern is "not that modern Trinitarianism has engaged with pro-Nicene theology badly, but that it has barely engaged with it at all. As a result the legacy of Nicaea remains paradoxically the unnoticed ghost at the modern Trinitarian feast."[12]

Both Holmes and Ayres direct their criticisms of modern theology to its offspring as well: the rise of social trinitarianism in the twentieth century. The turn toward social trinitarianism was made possible by the substitution of alternative rules. The pro-Nicene tradition distinguished between God *ad intra* and God *ad extra* to discern the nuances between who God is in and of himself and how God works toward the created order. East and West parsed *theologia* and *oikonomia,* refusing to conflate God *a se* and his works in the economy of creation and salvation. Such distinctions "kept the ancients from collapsing God *pro nobis* (God acting on our behalf, including the fact that creatures exist and, in particular, are in need of grace due to sin and its consequences) into God *in se* (God as he is in himself transcending creatures)."[13]

However, in the twentieth century Karl Rahner changed trinitarian grammar by substituting immanent and economic for *theologia* and *oikonomia*. That substitution allowed Rahner to disparage the Trinity of scholasticism with its *ad intra–ad extra* distinction, claiming the scholastics incarcerated the Trinity, isolating it from humanity. To liberate the Trinity from its quarantine in the heavenlies, Rahner proposed a new paradigm

---

[11]Holmes is not trying to represent every modern theologian but merely expose the most radical outcomes..

[12]Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 7.

[13]Richard Barcellos, chapter 13 in this book.

far more compatible with the modernist priority of theistic mutuality: "The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."[14] While debate exists over Rahner's intentions and how literally to take his rule, Rahner could be quite lucid: "No adequate distinction can be made between the doctrine of the Trinity and the doctrine of the economy of salvation."[15] By collapsing the immanent and economic, Rahner (however unwittingly) extended an invitation to redefine the immanent by means of the economic. A new generation of theologians were born, resolved to take up that solicitation. Following through on the prospect of Rahner's Rule, some even concluded that the economic *constitutes* the immanent, including that most influential Lutheran theologian, Robert Jenson.

To avoid such a conflation, Thomas Joseph White has proposed we dispense with immanent and economic. In contrast to Rahner's rule, White puts forward several theses that provide an alternative rule for our trinitarian hermeneutic:

1. "We encounter the mystery of God's internal processions of Word and Spirit only ever in the economy in virtue of the missions, and the missions are the processions with the addition of an added effect.

2. Therefore we can understand the economic activity of the Trinity only in light of the eternal communion of persons in the Trinity in their transcendence and unity of action.

3. Furthermore, the three persons of God act as one in virtue of their shared nature and life as God but also act as persons, and we need not posit any opposition of these two ideas.

4. Therefore we can say that all activity of the here persons reflects Trinitarian action in both a personal, communal way, and in a natural way divine action.

5. Finally, if Christ acts, he does so only ever as both God and man, by two natures, operations, and wills: divine and human. Consequently, his human decisions and actions in concrete history manifest and express his divine will but are not identical per se with his natural will as God."[16]

These five theses for trinitarian hermeneutics have become so pertinent because the past half century has experienced the rise of social trinitarianism, which has flourished under Rahner's new rule. Social trinitarianism may not be uniform due to its many representatives, some more radical than others.[17] However, its substitution of pro-Nicene precommitments is conspicuous. At its core, social trinitarianism is a redefinition of the persons. Classical trinitarian theism across the Great Tradition defined the persons as "nothing but the divine essence . . . subsisting in an especial manner"

---

[14]Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (New York: Crossroad, 1997), 18, 22. For an accessible treatment of these quotations from Rahner, see my book, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2021), 74-77.

[15]Rahner, *The Trinity,* 24.

[16]Thomas Joseph White, *The Trinity* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), 572-74.

[17]I explain as much in *Simply Trinity,* chapter 3.

(John Owen).[18] That definition proved to be a fortification, allowing the tradition to describe the economy without forfeiting the inseparable operation of the persons, an indivisibility that presumed not only a simple essence but a single will.

With different (even opposing) priorities than classical trinitarian theism, social trinitarianism's most vocal and radical representatives (e.g., Jürgen Moltmann) diverted course by recasting the persons as individuals, each with their own center of consciousness, each with their own will. Three centers of consciousness and three wills in the Trinity resulted in a new dynamic, a *societal* dynamic in which the persons became a community of mutuality (usually with an emphasis on societal love by means of perichoresis).[19] The plurality of consciousness and will inaugurated a paradigm change that shifted attention from simplicity and eternal relations of origin to social relationships within a collaborative community, each individual personality unified by voluntary cooperation and reciprocity.[20] Such a move would have been unimaginable to classical trinitarians, as demonstrated in Maximus the Confessor's consistent denial

of three wills in the Trinity during the Monothelite controversy in the seventh century. To a theologian like Maximus, three wills is synonymous with three gods, a point he repeats to support dyothelitism in his theology of the incarnation, only to be ratified by the sixth ecumenical council (third council of Constantinople).[21]

With no little coincidence and no lack of intentionality, this social Trinity became the paradigm for social activity in this world. Again, its most radical representatives were transparent with their motives, made explicit by their deliberate use of a social Trinity for a new and improved social paradigm, especially in the realms of politics and gender.[22] Even if others were less aggressive with their definition of social trinitarianism, this door now opened an opportunity to apply a social trinitarian paradigm to other societal agendas such as ecclesiology (e.g., Miroslav Volf versus John Zizioulas) and liberation theology (e.g., Leonardo Boff). For example, a theologian like Volf may claim to be more modest in his social trinitarianism than his *Doctorvater* (Moltmann), but in the end he remains a dedicated social trinitarian and one that has

---

[18]John Owen, *A Brief Vindication,* in *The Works of John Owen,* ed. William H. Goold, vol. 2 (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1965), 407.

[19]However, some social trinitarians claimed their position was not new but originated in the East (e.g., Cappadocians) with its emphasis on the persons (as opposed to the West with its emphasis on simplicity). However, Ayres believes such a reading is most modern, a type of anachronistic eisegesis that deserves the severest rebuke (*Nicaea and Its Legacy,* 245). Ayres, among others, has demonstrated that the doctrine of divine simplicity is no Western invention, but a doctrine shared by East and West alike. A God without parts was a basic building block in the construction of the classical trinitarian theism of Nicaea. Ayres goes further, claiming simplicity is even a "point of departure" in the East, as evidenced by Gregory of Nazianzus's *Orations.*

[20]E.g., Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2014), 17-18, 139-49, 160 (see especially his definition of the Trinity on viii).

[21]Maximus the Confessor, *The Disputation with Pyrrhus* (Waymart, PA: St. Tikhon's Monastery Press, 2014), 25 (p. 63) and 106 (p. 88); *Maximus the Confessor and His Companions: Documents from Exile* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 101.

[22]E.g., Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinity and the Kingdom*, 198-217.

utilized his social trinitarianism as a model for his ecclesiology. However, Holmes confronts Volf, calling Volf's trinitarianism a true departure from Nicene commitments and a self-conscious redefinition of classical trinitarian theism to align with his social priorities in the church and society: "Volf's doctrine of the Trinity in *After Our Likeness* is explicitly a deviation from the received ecumenical doctrine. Simply, Volf is choosing to adjust the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity because he does not like the ecclesiological (and social and political) implications of the received doctrine." In a word, says Holmes, the trinitarianism of Volf is "radical," fatal to classical trinitarian theism, even if Volf himself will not concede as much.[23]

To some the revisionism of the last century may appear a minor infraction, but consider the paradigm shift from the perspectives of the pro-Nicene fathers. For example, with social trinitarianism's turn toward three centers of consciousness and will, the doctrine of inseparable operations was no longer considered tenable by many, nor its underlying commitment to divine simplicity.[24] However, as Lewis Ayres observes, inseparable operations was considered one nonnegotiable requirement for pro-Nicene fidelity. Imagine, then, the reaction of the church fathers if they had lived to see social trinitarianism. In a sobering assessment, Ayres paints an inevitable scene: "Inseparable operation does not mean that the three persons are understood as merely co-operating in a given project. . . . If we were to imagine God as three potentially separable agents or three 'centres of consciousness' the contents of whose 'minds' were distinct, pro-Nicenes would see us as drawing inappropriate analogies between God and created realities and in *serious heresy*."[25]

Is Ayres overreacting? Not any more so than the church fathers who understood that any division between the persons threatened the simplicity of the Trinity as well as each person's consubstantiality. The church fathers were not unfamiliar with "inappropriate analogies between God and created realities," as their extensive engagement with Eunomius demonstrates. Holmes draws the same conclusion as Ayres, convinced the church fathers would level only the most serious accusation: "I see the twentieth-century renewal of Trinitarian theology as depending in large parts on concepts and ideas that cannot be found in patristic, medieval, or Reformation accounts of the doctrine of the Trinity. In some cases, indeed, they are points explicitly and energetically repudiated as erroneous—even occasionally as *formally heretical*—by the earlier tradition."[26]

EVANGELICALS JOIN THE REVISIONIST PROJECT

Social trinitarianism has proved to be without prejudice, influencing every corner of Christianity, leaving its mark on each

---

[23]Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), especially 216-17; Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 27n94, 28.

[24]See Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2021).

[25]Emphasis added. Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy,* 296-96.

[26]Holmes, *Quest for the Trinity*, 2. Emphasis added.

tradition, not only Roman Catholicism but Protestantism as well. The twentieth century has also proven ironic for Protestant evangelicals, for example. On the one hand, evangelicals have prided themselves on their defense of biblical authority against modern theology's assault. On the other hand, evangelicals have been swept up by the excitement over trinitarian "revival," but they have absorbed the revisionist impulse of modern theology in the process.

Evangelicals have exhibited their proclivities toward modern theology's revisionism by riding the social trinitarian enterprise of the last century. Some evangelicals may not (or have yet to) apply their social trinitarianism to their social activism. But others have done so with expediency. Regardless, the core commitment of social trinitarianism has been embraced with enthusiasm: multiple wills and multiple centers of consciousness define the trinitarian persons (e.g., Cornelius Plantinga, William Lane Craig, J. P. Moreland).[27]

Furthermore, evangelicals have learned their doctrine of the Trinity from theologians such as Wayne Grudem and Bruce Ware, who teach the eternal functional subordination of the Son (EFS).[28] The influence of EFS has been extensive, making its way into free churches and nondenominational institutions as well as denominations and their universities, seminaries, and churches. In the process, Grudem and Ware have told evangelicals that EFS is both biblical and orthodox. With time, however, historians and theologians alike now judge EFS to be neither.[29] The reasons are many, but consider a few.

First, by redefining the Trinity as a "society" of "socially related" persons, each defined by separate and exclusive "roles" of authority and submission, EFS is far more indebted to the rules, precommitments, and grammar of modern social trinitarianism than Nicene orthodoxy. EFS only further substantiates its debt to the social trinitarian instinct when its advocates consider the Trinity's societal roles of hierarchy the prototype for their social agenda, namely, hierarchy in gender roles. The Son's submission to the Father is their prototype and mandate for the wife's submission

---

[27]Cornelius Plantinga Jr., "Social Trinity and Tritheism," in *Trinity, Incarnation, and Atonement: Philosophical and Theological Essays*, ed. Ronald J. Feenstra and Cornelius Plantinga Jr. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1989), 21-47; J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 583-93; William Lane Craig, "Toward a Tenable Social Trinitarianism," in *Philosophical and Theological Essays on the Trinity*, ed. Thomas McCall and Michael Rae (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 89-99.

[28]The literature is large, but consider these examples: Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005); Ware, "Equal in Essence, Distinct in Roles: Eternal Functional Authority and Submission Among the Essentially Equal Divine Persons of the Godhead," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, ed. Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2012), 13-37; Ware, "Does Affirming an Eternal Authority-Submission Relationship in the Trinity Entail a Denial of *Homoousios*?," in *One God in Three Persons: Unity of Essence, Distinction of Persons*, ed. Bruce Ware and John Starke (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015), 237-48; Ware, "Unity and Distinction of the Trinitarian Persons," in *Trinitarian Theology: Theological Models and Doctrinal Applications*, ed. Keith S. Whitfield (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2019), 17-62; Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2021); Grudem, "Biblical Evidence for the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father," in *The New Evangelical Subordinationism?*, 223-61.

[29]The following is indebted to the points I make in *Simply Trinity*, chapter 8. Other fine critiques include Glenn Butner Jr., *The Son Who Learned Obedience: A Theological Case Against the Eternal Submission of the Son* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2018); Michael Bird and Scott Harrower, eds., *Trinity Without Hierarchy: Reclaiming Nicene Orthodoxy in Evangelical Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2019).

to her husband and a woman's subordination to men in the church and society.

Second, if social trinitarians have occupied themselves with answering the charge of tritheism due to their suspicion toward simplicity and turn toward three centers of consciousness and will, so must EFS answer similar charges when its advocates assign exclusive motives to the persons as well as voluntary, person-defining roles of authority and submission. They will deny the charge, but the insertion of authority and submission *ad intra* requires multiple wills, a charge that is only authenticated further when EFS criticizes the pro-Nicene affirmation of inseparable operations (which depends on one will) as insufficient.

Third, the claim that persons *ad intra* can be ontologically equal but functionally subordinate is novel and risks the inferiority they think they avoid. EFS defines the Father as Father because he has "primacy," "priority," and "ultimate authority," possessing a greater glory than the Son. If the one, simple essence has three modes of subsistence, and if each person is a subsistence of the one, simple essence, then EFS must explain how functional subordination does not carry over into the essence itself.

Fourth, in the spirit of Rahner's Rule, EFS has collapsed the immanent and economic in a way that is unacceptable even to modern theologians: by means of functional hierarchy in the Trinity. Equipped by biblicism, EFS reads texts on the humiliation of the Son as if what occurs for the purpose of the economy defines the Trinity *ad intra,* resulting in a Son who is Son because he is submissive to his Father in eternity. Operating by modern theology's conflation of immanent and economic, EFS fails to acknowledge those partitive exegetical distinctions inherent to Scripture itself (form of God and form of servant; Philippians 2:6-7). As a result, EFS projects what occurs in the missions into the processions, a move most acceptable to modern trinitarian theology.

Fifth, by consequence, the scandal of the incarnation is lost. If the obedience of the Son is an *ad intra* submission from eternity, then we cannot explain the contrast of Hebrews 5:8: "*Although* he was a son, he *learned* obedience through what he suffered" (ESV).[30] EFS fails to see why the Son must assume a human nature and human will to submit to the Father, which only confirms its inability to escape the accusation of multiple wills in the Godhead.

One might object that EFS has reformed itself with its newfound acceptance of eternal generation. Yet even EFS's recent decision to accept eternal generation rather than reject eternal generation like it had in the past is a decision stained by subordinationism. When pressed to reconsider its suspicion toward eternal generation (and with it, the Nicene Creed), Grudem and Ware used their new affirmation of eternal generation to sanction the primacy, priority, and ultimate authority and glory of the Father over the Son all the more. Here is a true indicator that they do not understand the original Nicene definition of eternal generation.[31] In

---

[30]Emphasis added.
[31]Ware, "Unity and Distinction of the Trinitarian Persons," 34-36.

the hands of EFS, the Son's eternal functional subordination to the Father is now located "within" and must "flow from" the Son's eternal generation from the Father.[32] Has EFS forgotten that the Son is eternally begotten from the Father's *essence*? How then can subordination be segregated to the person alone when the person is a subsistence of the divine essence itself?[33] Claim as they do that the Son's subordination is functional not ontological, it is *ad intra* nonetheless, even person defining. Without submission there is no Son.[34] For the Nicene fathers, by contrast, eternal generation was never used as a medium for hierarchy of any kind, but the Nicene Creed presented eternal generation to substantiate the equality and consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. EFS and Nicaea are two different, even antithetical, spirits. Only one can be orthodox. The other is something new altogether, an innovation only conceivable on this side of modern theology. The initial problem with EFS has not been remedied but has escalated with EFS's attempt to confiscate Nicene vocabulary by means of a subordinationist hermeneutic the Fathers would

have recognized and associated with the opponents of Nicaea.

Previously I said that a truly informed understanding of classical trinitarian theism is no mere affirmation of the Nicene Creed but also an understanding of its precommitments (simplicity, inseparable operations, pure actuality, etc.), many of which are metaphysical and thereby fortify the trinitarian claims of the creeds. Those precommitments span into the perfections of God because classical trinitarian theism is a cohesive presentation of theology proper. Likewise, the same could be said of modern theology's paradigm for God, a theistic mutualism that has influenced wide swaths of Protestantism.[35] For this reason, the evangelical tendency to drift into the waters of modern theology does not begin or end with social trinitarianism but extends to the rest of the doctrine of God as well. To begin with, evangelicals have been influenced by the influx of theistic mutualism (whether they are entirely aware or not), a trademark of modern theology.[36] Operating with a univocal outlook on God and the world, the theistic mutualist believes the world is affected by God *and*

---

[32]Ware, "Unity and Distinction of the Trinitarian Persons," 23-26.

[33]For excellent treatments of this issue at large, see James Dolezal, "Trinity, Simplicity and the Status of God's Personal Relations," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 16, no. 1 (2014): 79-98; Thomas Joseph White, "Divine Simplicity and the Holy Trinity," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 18, no. 1 (2016): 66-94.

[34]Besides, the classical trinitarian theism of Nicaea only admitted one personal property. However, EFS says that the Nicene affirmation is insufficient and therefore a limitation. Two personal properties must define the Son: eternal generation is inadequate of itself to distinguish the Son as Son, but must be accompanied by a second property, namely, functional subordination. Call it functional however much they want, the persons of the Trinity are only persons of the Trinity if there is functional hierarchy *ad intra*.

[35]Theistic mutualism has not only affected a wide range of Protestant traditions but enveloped the disciplines as well, not limiting itself to theology but extending itself to philosophy. For examples of the theistic mutualist instinct among philosophers, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1980); Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism,* rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993); Richard Swinburne, *The Christian God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994); William Lane Craig, *God Over All: Divine Aseity and the Challenge of Platonism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

[36]For an extended definition of theistic mutualism, see James Dolezal, *All That Is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Challenge of Classical Christian Theism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 71-73, 92-95.

God is affected by the world. God is not the unmoved mover of classical theism, but a mover who is himself moved. He changes the created order, but the created order also changes him. For some, such change comes upon God from external subjects; for others, such change in God is willed by God himself. But either way, God changes.

Granted, various forms of theistic mutualism exist, some more extreme than others. Some will altogether reject classical theism's belief in a God who is *actus purus* and *a se*. Instead, God's being is in the process of becoming and he needs the world to be complete. Other theistic mutualists do not condition God's existence and sufficiency on creation. Nevertheless, God must change in some way to ensure his personal involvement with humankind in history. He must be moved by the creature's actions in some way, otherwise he cannot experience the mutuality necessary for real relationships with those he has made. However radical the theistic mutualist may be on the spectrum—a spectrum that ranges from process theism to open theism to the various theistic mutualisms within evangelicalism—they all share a common commitment to a God who changes by virtue of his relationship with creatures.[37] Therefore, many if not most of classical theism's commitments—pure actuality, absolute aseity, immutability, impassibility, timeless eternity, simplicity, and so on—are incompatible with their interdependent God of reciprocity. For such classical commitments mean God cannot be affected by that which he has created. Persuaded by such incompatibility, evangelicals have been practitioners of revisionism. As a result, classical theism has come under fire by evangelicals in almost every way possible until a version of its commitments are ameliorated to the priorities of their theistic mutualism. Examples are legion, but consider three.

1. *Immutability and impassibility*. Devoted to what he calls an evangelical reformulation, Bruce Ware believes in an ontological immutability as long as it is accompanied by a relational mutability. Ware rejects open theism's argument for change in God's nature, but he also rejects classical theism's absolute immutability, convinced God at least changes in his relationships with humanity.[38] Rob Lister applies Ware's paradigm to divine impassibility with a similar outcome: God does not experience passions in an involuntary way, as if the creature can force passions onto God's nature. However, God can experience emotional change within if he is the one to will such emotional change. Therefore, Lister can call God both impassible and impassioned—something classical theism considered oxymoronic—which becomes expedient for a God who desires to

---

[37]To see an example, read the various revisions of impassibility in *Divine Impassibility: Four Views of God's Emotions and Suffering*, ed. Robert J. Matz and A. Chadwick Thornhill (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2019).

[38]Bruce A. Ware, "An Evangelical Reformulation of the Doctrine of the Immutability of God," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (December 1986): 431-46; Ware, *God's Lesser Glory: The Diminished God of Open Theism* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2000), 73; Ware, *God's Greater Glory: The Exalted God of Scripture and the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2004), 35-60. For a critique of Ware, see Ronni Kurtz, *No Shadow of Turning: Divine Immutability and the Economy of Redemption,* Reformed Exegetical and Doctrinal Studies (Ross-shire: Mentor, 2022).

reciprocate in his relationship with creatures of passions.[39]

2. *Simplicity.* John Feinberg, William Lane Craig, and J. P. Moreland reject divine simplicity, convinced God is compounded by parts, as evidenced by the real distinction between God's essence and attributes as well as the real distinction between one attribute and all other attributes. Transparent about their biblicist hermeneutic, they conclude that Scripture names different parts in God. Likewise, so should we lest we neglect God's composite nature and create a featureless, detached deity by consequence.[40] Likewise, consider John Frame. If simplicity means God's essence is his attributes so that his attributes are not really separate from one another, then simplicity is nonsensible. Frame will only assert simplicity if it means God is the sum of his attributes, a collective of attributes in which each one is really different from every other one. Such a revision does not trouble Frame because he unwittingly defaults to a univocity of being in God and the creature. Creaturely language in Scripture may be literally mapped onto God's being.[41]

3. *Timeless eternity.* William Lane Craig believes God was timeless, but once God created the world, he could be timeless no more. With the creation of the natural order and time itself, God entered time and now experiences a succession of moments as he encounters real relations in response to humanity. For Craig, God changed from a timeless being to a temporal being to guarantee a mutuality between himself and the creature.[42] Theologians who claim a Reformed identity, such as John Frame, say that God transcends time according to his "atemporal, changeless existence." However, God has a "changing existence in time" as well. Positing two existences in God, Frame uses the biblical concept of covenant to argue for a temporalist God who exists in time. As history changes with time, so does God: "He really is *in* time, changing as others change."[43] Or as Frame says in his *Systematic Theology*, "But the historical process does change, and as an agent in history, God himself changes. On Monday, he wants something to happen, and on Tuesday something else. He is grieved one day, pleased the next." And to be clear, Frame is not somehow masking such a brazen statement about God within anthropomorphic language: "In my view, anthropomorphic is too weak a description of these [biblical] narratives. In these accounts, God is not merely like an agent in time. He really is in time, changing as others change." Frame

---

[39]See Rob Lister's argument across his book, *God Is Impassible and Impassioned: Toward a Theology of Divine Emotion* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012).

[40]John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), 329; William Lane Craig and J. P. Moreland, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 524.

[41]John Frame, *The Doctrine of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2002), 208-29.

[42]William Lane Craig, "Timelessness and Omnitemporality," in *God and Time: Four Views*, ed. Gregory E. Ganssle (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001), 131-32.

[43]Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 571.

anticipates that one might assume, even still, that God's first (atemporal, immutable) existence has "real" precedence over his second (temporal, mutable) existence, but he is quick to point out one would be wrong. "And we should not say that his atemporal, changeless existence is more real than his changing existence in time, as the term anthropomorphic suggests. Both are real."[44] Still others, like John Feinberg, do not even entertain a timeless eternity for God. God always has been temporal and always will be.[45]

K. Scott Oliphint also claims the Reformed label but appeals to creation and covenant to say God adds attributes to himself. "God freely determined to take on attributes, characteristics, and properties that he did not have, and would not have, without creation." These attributes "cannot be of the essence of who he is," he qualifies. Nonetheless, they do belong "surely to himself." "In condescending to relate to Adam and Eve, he is, like them (not essentially, but covenantally), restricted in his knowledge of where they might be hiding in that garden."[46] Just as the Son can remain eternal while taking on temporal properties in the incarnation, so God can be eternal while taking on temporal properties by way of his immanence.[47] Whether creation, incarnation, or covenant, something new

occurs so that God can acquire temporal, even creaturely properties. If not, then how can he experience a mutual relationship with humans according to creaturely, covenantal characteristics?

The point here is not to provide a critique; many good critiques have already been accomplished by others. Rather, the point is to come to terms with a basic observation of theological history: whatever one makes of these evangelical approaches to God, they are at odds with, even destructive to classical trinitarian theism. James Dolezal issues a bold but necessary and long-overdue observation: "Theistic mutualism, when consistently developed, is like an acid that cannot but burn through a whole host of divine attributes traditionally confessed of God. When its work is done, the result looks rather unlike a variation or refinement of the classical model and much more like a demolition and wholesale replacement."[48] If Dolezal is right, then *revisionism* may not be a strong enough word; *replacement* is more fitting.

Evangelicals should know better. At the start of the twenty-first century evangelicals who became open theist understood classical trinitarian theism to be a unit, a cohesive fabric—unwind one strand, and the rest comes undone. So, when they could no longer believe in one facet (e.g., omniscience), they rejected classical theism as a whole. They knew that their criticism of one feature stemmed from

---

[44]John Frame, *Systematic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2013), 377.
[45]Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 233-67.
[46]K. Scott Oliphint, *God with Us: Divine Condescension and the Attributes of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 110-11.
[47]For a critique, see Richard Barcellos, *Trinity and Creation: A Scriptural and Confessional Account* (Eugene, OR: Resource, 2020).
[48]Dolezal, *All That Is in God*, 35.

their disdain for the entire system. Therefore, they wrote books such as *The Most Moved Mover* because they understood that if they attacked *actus purus*, then all else crumbled in the process, from simplicity to impassibility to omniscience itself.[49]

However, many evangelicals who repudiated their fellow evangelicals for converting to open theism have failed to understand the same, which has led open theists to criticize evangelicals for living under the illusion that they can retain or revise aspects of classical theism while operating by mutualist rules. The classical theist and the open theist may completely disagree on theology proper, but they both agree that evangelicals who try to live in the middle are bewitched by an illusion. A glance at some of the most popular responses to open theism by evangelicals reveal an inability to commit in either direction.[50] However, a criticism of open theism that is accompanied by a contempt for classical theism is, in the end, a default commitment to remain within modern theology's mutualist paradigm. One does not have to reach the most radical conclusions of open or process theisms to exist within their mutualist arena and operate according to the rules of their mutualist game. Such is the outcome of an atomized theology proper whose methodology defaults to the individual's potpourri, resulting in as many amalgamations of theology proper as there are evangelicals. As a result of evangelical revisionism students of theology

have been given the impression that to be evangelical is to seriously modify or even replace classical theism, as if "evangelical" and "classical" are antithetical.

At what point does the rebuke issued by the church fathers (voiced previously by Holmes and Ayres) apply to evangelicals? Our constant penchant for revisionism, even replacement, has so eroded the substratum of an orthodox theology proper that the spirit of lament voiced by Basil of Caesarea can be heard once again. The question now is whether renewal is in our future.

The Beauty of Renewal: A Return to Mystery

With such alarming accounts of aberration in plain view, this book attempts to move Christians forward, beyond our recent past to a better future. This book is not a devoted, all-encompassing attempt to represent or critique modern theology at large, its social trinitarian offspring, representatives of EFS, or any number of revisionists. While some of these aberrations may be addressed when relevant, this book is something else by design: an invitation, even an opportunity, to introduce Christians today to the prospect and promise of classical trinitarian theism from a historical and theological vantage point. This book, therefore, is a means to that end, providing readers with momentum as they embark on the renewal of Nicaea and its necessary precommitments.

---

[49]Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2019). Also see Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, and David Basinger, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1994); John Sanders, *The God Who Risks: A Theology of Divine Providence*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007).

[50]John M. Frame, *No Other God: A Response to Open Theism* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2001); Ware, *God's Lesser Glory*.

That word *introduce* is strategic—this book is by no means an exhaustive representation of classical trinitarian theism. No chapter pretends to be comprehensive either, but each is a brief entryway, opening the door to show the reader yet another vista that deserves to be reclaimed and explored further by the next generation of theologians. The vistas will be many, beginning with the theology of the Nicene Creed and its historical reception across the Great Tradition (part one). Impossible as it is to be comprehensive, these chapters only aim to present a sufficient sample for the reader to latch on to the methodological precommitments of Nicene exegesis and its accompanying metaphysic. Other vistas will summon the reader into the domain of dogmatics, allowing theologians today to display the many ways classical theism serves as the infrastructure for Nicene trinitarianism (part two). Still other vistas will require the application of classical trinitarian theism to recent revisionism, distinguishing the legacy of Nicaea from its counterfeits (part three).

The contributors have been selected from across Christendom—Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. That strategy does not attempt—like some versions of ecumenism—to overlook differences on matters of soteriology or ecclesiology. But the breadth of contributors from across Christendom is strategic, communicating the weightiness of the pro-Nicene consensus. To depart from the classical trinitarian theism of Nicaea is to depart from a catholicity nothing less than essential to the orthodoxy of the church catholic (universal).

C. S. Lewis once advocated the classical Christian heritage to his modern students when he admonished them to "keep the clean sea breeze of the centuries blowing through our minds."[51] In that same spirit, this book invites the reader to stand in Lewis's classroom with open windows, taking in the breeze of a Nicene wind that possesses the power to foster renewal once more. Our hope—indeed, our ambition—is that the reader wearied by the revisionism of the last century will be brought back to life by discovering an ancient way of reading the holy Scriptures, a way that leads the church out of the storm and homeward, as Basil so desired.

Ultimately, our aspiration is *renewal*, the kind that recovers the spirit of our fathers. If modern theology dissipates awe by conflating the Creator and the creature with its mutualism and personalism, classical theology is a return to mystery. For we are not concerned with imitating a Trinity remade in our image but contemplating the beauty of the Infinite to participate in the eternal life of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. To that end, we gaze at the beauty of the Lord (Psalm 27:4) because with contemplation comes communion. "For from him and through him and to him are all things" (Romans 11:36).
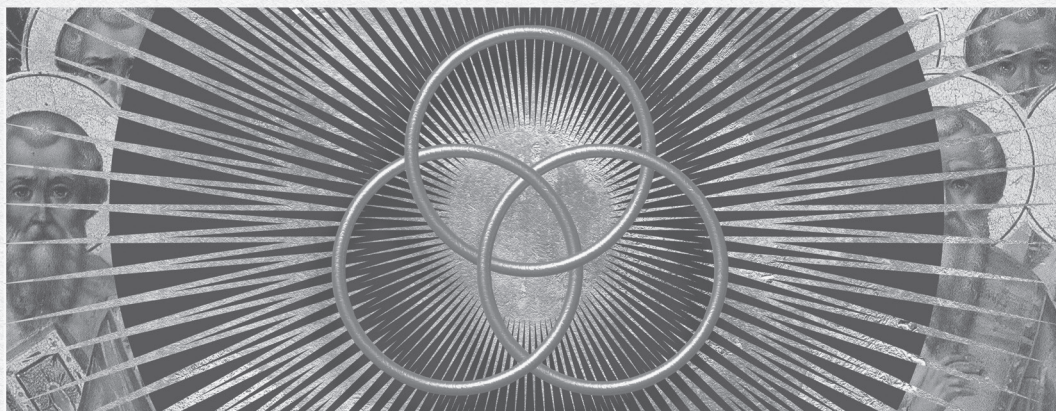
"Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and evermore shall be. World without end. Amen."[52]

---

[51]C. S. Lewis, "Preface," in Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2011), 11.
[52]Gloria Patri.

RETRIEVING NICENE TRINITARIANISM

1

ANTE-NICENE TRINITARIANISM

FROM CONFESSION TO THEOLOGY

DONALD FAIRBAIRN

As we look at the trinitarian thought of the earliest Christian centuries, there are two perspectives that are common but very problematic, approaches that we should take care to avoid. The first approach reduces the fourth-century trinitarian teaching to a formula, "one essence in three persons," and regards the history of trinitarianism primarily as the emergence of that formula and the defense of the idea that God can be one in essence and three in persons.[1] In contrast to this approach, we need to recognize that as important as the concepts of essence and person are, trinitarian theology is not fundamentally about concepts at all. It is most fundamentally about the Father, Son, and Spirit to whom the concepts point, and we need to look at the early history of that theology with that fundamental concern in mind.

The second problematic approach assumes a sharp dichotomy between the trinitarian doctrine of the fourth century and the earlier teaching of the New Testament (which, this view claims, contains no notion of the idea that Jesus or the Holy Spirit is God), and thus treats the first three centuries as a story of what went wrong.[2] I suggest that this view gets the tenor of early Christianity precisely backward. Jews in the first century, steeped in the monotheism of the Old Testament, had little expectation that the Messiah would be divine, although arguably they should have had such an inkling! What pushed the disciples and others toward the affirmation

---

[1] For critiques of this problematic way of approaching the doctrine, see John Behr, *The Nicene Faith*, part 1, *True God of True God*, The Formation of Christian Theology 2 (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 3-5; Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 1.

[2] A noteworthy scholarly defense of this view comes in Marian Hillar, *From Logos to Trinity: The Evolution of Religious Beliefs from Pythagoras to Tertullian* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

of the Trinity were the words and actions of Jesus himself, and especially the foretold and yet still unexpected fact of Christ's resurrection. The New Testament documents, inspired by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, are themselves the beginning and source of the trinitarian confession. Far from a doctrine that emerged later through the imposition of Hellenistic thinking on a Judaic New Testament, the Trinity is a doctrine that would have been inconceivable without Jesus' own testimony, his resurrection, and the resultant New Testament witness that Jesus is Lord. Absent such witness, there would have been no Christian trinitarianism.

In contrast to these problematic approaches, we should recognize that ante-Nicene trinitarian theology grew out of the nascent church's affirmation, based on the New Testament, that Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit are God just as the Father is God. In the second century, this affirmation led to the production of statements that were creed-like in character and served as precursors of the Nicene and Apostles' Creeds. Over time, these affirmations raised questions about how to make room for the Son and the Spirit within strict monotheism. Certain ways of relating the persons to one another were deemed inadequate, labeled heresies, and addressed in light of Scripture and the church's emerging tradition based on Scripture. Of these heresies, Gnosticism (including its subset or sibling, Marcionism) and modalistic monarchianism (also known as Sabellianism) were the most pressing, and three major thinkers in the late second and

early third centuries—Irenaeus, Tertullian, and Origen—headlined the list of theologians responding to them. In the process, these thinkers and others began to develop the vocabulary that would later become standard in trinitarian theology.

In this chapter I shall briefly survey these developments in ante-Nicene trinitarianism, and we shall see that the basic shape of the church's trinitarian confession emerged quickly and remained very stable. At the same time, these early developments constituted a movement from simple *confession* of faith in the three persons to actual *theology* articulating how the persons are related, how there can still be but a single God, and so on. These early developments set the stage for the greater reflection, significant conflict, and striking consensus that would be articulated in fourth-century Nicene theology.

Setting the Stage for Trinitarian Theology: Second-Century Creed-Like Statements

In spite of its unequivocal affirmation of monotheism, the earliest church was led in the New Testament to confess that this one God has a Son and a Spirit about whom we can and must make the same affirmations. John 1:1 tells us that the Word was not only with God, but also was God. Paul affirms that for us, there is one God, the Father, and in the same sentence he adds that there is one Lord, Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 8:5-6). Paul further affirms that no one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:3), thus associating the Spirit with God the Father and the Lord

Jesus Christ. Baptismal formulas (Matthew 28:19) and benedictions (2 Corinthians 13:14) include the Son and Spirit with God the Father. As the church reflected on how to include Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit in its monotheistic understanding of God, it moved in the second century from what could be called an epistemological approach to an ontological one.

Beginning with epistemology. How do we know that the Son and Spirit are to be included in our confession of the one God? We know primarily because of the life, teaching, death, and especially resurrection of Christ. Paul tells the Romans that it was through the resurrection from the dead that Christ was declared to be the Son of God with power (Romans 1:4). Accordingly, the earliest post-biblical creed-like statements focused on Christ's life, death, and resurrection as the epistemological basis for our recognition and confession that he is God.[3] For example, Ignatius of Antioch, writing circa 107, affirms of Christ:

> He is truly [ἀληθῶς] of the family of David with respect to human descent, Son of God with respect to the divine will and power [κατὰ θέλημα καὶ δύναμιν], truly born of a virgin, baptized by John . . . truly nailed in the flesh for us . . . in order that he might raise a banner for the ages through his resurrection for his saints and faithful people, whether among Jews or among Gentiles, in one body of his church.[4]

This focus on the events by which we know that Christ is God means that the emerging confession of the Trinity is intimately bound together with the saving actions of Christ's life. One cannot claim that the Trinity is irrelevant to Christian life, since the very way we know that Jesus is God's Son depends on the events of his life, chronicled for us in Scripture for our salvation. At the same time, this tight connection between how we know Christ is God's Son and the fact that he is God's Son means that the church had not yet considered what that sonship implied about divine life apart from the incarnation. In this passage, Ignatius calls Christ "Son of God with respect to the divine will and power," a phrase that could be taken to mean that by his will, God chose to create a person whom he would call "son" in some sense. The use of "will" and "power" to describe the way the Father relates to his Son would later be deemed problematic. This is an issue that Ignatius could hardly have thought of, but it shows the downside of the otherwise positive approach of focusing on the life of Jesus as the means by which we know he is truly God's Son.

---

[3]The best place to find these early creed-like documents is vol. 1 of Jaroslav Pelikan and Valerie Hotchkiss, eds., *Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition*, 3 vols. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). For detailed treatments of these statements, see John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, vol. 1, *The Formation of Christian Theology* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001), 73-133; Jaroslav Pelikan, *Credo: Historical and Theological Guide to Creeds and Confessions of Faith in the Christian Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003), 369-96. For a briefer summary, see Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 26-36.

[4]Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrneans* 1.1-2 (Greek text and E.T. in *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*, ed. Michael W. Holmes, rev. ed. [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999], 184-85; cf. Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, 40).

In the middle of the second century, Justin Martyr similarly adopts the life of Christ as his epistemological starting point, but he brings the Holy Spirit into the confession as well. He affirms that we worship "Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate. . . . For we have learnt that he is the son of the true God, and we hold him in second place [ἐν δευτέρᾳ χώρᾳ], with the prophetic Spirit in the third rank [ἐν τρίτῃ τάξῃ]."[5] Here again, the events of Christ's life are the means by which we have *learned* that he is the Son of the true God. What is surely most striking to us about this passage, though, is the use of the phrase "second place" to describe the Son and of "third rank" for the Spirit. We correctly regard this statement as suspicious or inadequate, but the question of what exactly it meant to affirm that the Son and Spirit are God, and thus the issue of their equality with the Father, had scarcely yet arisen.

From epistemology to ontology. Over time, early creed-like statements were reorganized around the persons of the Trinity themselves. An example of this new pattern is preserved in a writing of Irenaeus from ca. 190:

> God, the Father, uncreated, incomprehensible, invisible, one God, Creator of all. This is the first heading [*primum capitulum*] of our faith. But the second heading [*secundum autem capitulum*] is the Word of God, the Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. . . . By the Son's hand all things have come into being. And at the end of the time, to gather all together and sum up things, he willed to become man among men, visible and palpable, so as to destroy death and show forth life and perfect reconciliation between God and man. And the third heading [*tertium autem capitulum*] is the Holy Spirit, by whom the prophets prophesied and the fathers learned divine things and the righteous were led in the way of righteousness, who in the end of the time in a new manner, is poured out upon men, in all the world renewing man for God.[6]

This statement begins not with the life of Christ, but with God the Father. It explains the Son in relation to the Father before describing the events of his life, death, and resurrection, and it also features the Holy Spirit more prominently. Rather than starting with epistemology—how do we know?—this statement begins with ontology—the persons themselves—and in the case of each person it moves from who he is to what he has done. This is an early example of the pattern that later creeds would follow. Notice also that there is no mention of rank. Father, Son, and Spirit are numbered as the first, second, and third "headings," but they are not ranked as if the Father is highest, then the Son, then the Spirit lowest of all.

In a sense, the movement from creed-like statements revolving around the life of Christ to statements organized around the three persons paved the way for a trinitarian

---

[5]Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 13.3-4 (Greek text and E.T. in *Justin, Philosopher and Martyr: Apologies*, ed. Dennis Minns and Paul Parvis, Oxford Early Christian Texts [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009], 110-11; cf. Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, 46).

[6]Irenaeus of Lyons, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 6 (modern Latin translation of ancient Armenian version in Sources Chrétiennes [henceforth SC] 406:90-92; E.T. in Pelikan and Hotchkiss, *Creeds and Confessions*, 50).

theology, not just a trinitarian confession. By reorganizing its statements, the church set up the issues that would later be discussed and resolved theologically—whether the persons are all eternal, how they are eternally related, whether they are equal, how they constitute a single God, and so on. Nevertheless, we should remember that the complex discussions that later dominated trinitarian theology grew out of the confession that Jesus, like the Father, is Lord, a confession made possible by the Spirit. We should not substitute mere concepts for the persons to whom those concepts point.

The Maturing of Early Trinitarian Theology: Irenaeus of Lyons (died ca. 202)

In the statement from Justin Martyr quoted above, we saw a tendency to subordinate the Son and Spirit to the Father, a tendency that was present in the other second-century apologists—Athenagoras and Theophilus—as well. These apologists, by virtue of their task to explain and defend Christianity to Roman pagans, desired to make connections between Christian thought and the Middle Platonic philosophical thought world around them, in which the "high god" or "the one" was not involved in this world in any way. Creation and any subsequent divine involvement had to

happen through intermediaries whose lower status allowed their presence in this world. In such an intellectual climate, the apologists understandably—but nevertheless mistakenly—saw the Logos and the Spirit as such intermediate figures.[7]

On this issue, second-century Gnosticism followed a pattern similar to that of Middle Platonism (and the apologists), but in a much more extreme way. In the various Gnostic understandings, a host of intermediary figures called aeons—thirty of them in Valentinian Gnosticism, but 365 in Basilideanism—filled the metaphysical space between the high god and this world, and a bewildering array of cosmic myths sought to account for the production of these aeons and of our world as well.[8] Most Gnostic systems also distinguished sharply between the spiritual Christ and the physical man Jesus, and Marcionism sharpened this dualism by dubbing the god who made the universe as evil and subordinating that god to the high God, of whom the spiritual Christ was the messenger.[9] It was Gnosticism that drew Irenaeus's fire in his great work *Against Heresies* (ca. 180), but his overt rejection of Gnosticism also entailed a tacit correction of similar but less extreme mistakes the apologists had made in their interaction with Middle Platonism.[10]

---

[7]See Jackson Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 127 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 54-69. Cf. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 103-6, 114.

[8]See the exhaustive descriptions of different Gnostic systems in Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1. (This was written in Greek but is extant only in an ancient Latin version, printed in SC 264, 294, 211, 100:2, 153. E.T. of books 1–3 are in Ancient Christian Writers [henceforth ACW] 55, 65, 64. E.T. of books 1–5 are in Ante-Nicene Fathers [henceforth *ANF*] 1:315-567.) For Valentinism, see especially 1.11. For Basilideanism, see especially 1.24. Cf. Tertullian, *Against the Valentinians* 6-36. (The Latin text is in Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina [henceforth CCSL] 2.753-78. E.T. is in *ANF* 3.502-20.)

[9]On Marcionism, see especially Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 1.27. Cf. Tertullian, *Against Marcion* 1. (The Latin text is in CCSL 1:441-726. E.T. is in *ANF* 3:271-474.)

[10]See Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 8.

The Son and Spirit in opposition to created beings. In his response to various forms of Gnosticism in *Against Heresies* 1–2, Irenaeus emphasizes the unity and uniqueness of God (there are no intermediaries who can be called "god") and the unity of Christ (there is no division between a divine Christ and a human Jesus). As he makes these arguments, he articulates the equality of the trinitarian persons, especially the equality of the Father and the Son. Late in book 1, Irenaeus contrasts the Word through whom God created the universe with the intermediaries postulated by Gnosticism. He writes, "There is one God Almighty, who created all things through His Word; He both prepared and made all things out of nothing. . . . These [all things] He did not make through Angels or some Powers [*non per Angelos neque per Virtutes*] that were separated from His thought. For the God of all things needs nothing. No, He made all things by His Word and Spirit [*per Verbum et Spiritum suum*]."[11] Notice here that angels and other powers fall in the category of "all things" and were created out of nothing. But Irenaeus clearly places the Word and the Spirit in a different category; they are not numbered among created things.

At the end of this long interaction with Gnostic and Marcionite ideas of God, Irenaeus summarizes as follows:

> If . . . he by himself, by his own will and self-determination, made and ordered all things, and if his will is the [cause of the] substance of all things [*substantia omnium uoluntas eius*], then he alone will be

acknowledged as the God who made all things; he alone is omnipotent and alone the Father who, by the Word of his power, created and made all things. . . . He is the Builder, he is the Creator, he is the Originator, he is the Maker, he is the Lord of all things. Neither is there anyone beside him nor above him; neither a mother, as they falsely assert, nor another God, whom Marcion imagined; neither a Fullness of thirty Aeons.[12]

Of course, this passage is primarily about the identity of the one true God, in contrast to the myriads of Gnostic gods and aeons. For our purposes, it is important to note that it was by the one God's will that he made and ordered all things. Anything that exists because of God's will—because of his intention to make it—is created and therefore not God.

We should remember that earlier in the century, Ignatius of Antioch had described Christ as "Son of God with respect to divine will and power." Irenaeus here tacitly draws out the problem with that earlier expression—it might imply that the Son is a creature. Irenaeus himself makes no such mistake. He writes of the one God, "This is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through his Word, who is his Son, he is revealed and manifested. . . . But the Son, always coexisting with the Father [*Semper autem coexsistens Filius Patri*], of old and from the beginning always reveals the Father [*olim et ab initio semper reuelat Patrem*]."[13] Gone is a system in which a subordinate Son/Word came into existence by God's will in order to reveal

---

[11]*Against Heresies* 1.22.1 (SC 264:308; ACW 55:80-81 [cf. *ANF* 1:347]). Cf. 2.2.4-5.
[12]*Against Heresies* 2.30.9 (SC 294:318-20; ACW 65:100 [cf. *ANF* 1:406]).
[13]*Against Heresies* 2.30.9 (SC 294:320-22; ACW 65:100 [cf. *ANF* 1:406]).

only himself because the high God is too removed from the world to be known. Instead, the eternal Son, equal to and always present with his Father, reveals his Father to the world that the Father has created through him.

The Son's eternality and equality to the Father. As Irenaeus turns from his refutation of Gnosticism to an extended positive treatment of the Christian faith in books 3–5, he elaborates on themes that he has emphasized previously: the equality of the Son to the Father and the eternality of the Son. Early in book 3, after a long discussion of biblical passages in which both the Father and the Son are called "Lord," he concludes, "So, as I have already stated, no one else is named God or called Lord except the God and Lord of all things. . . . It is of him that Jesus Christ our Lord is Son."[14] The apparent logic of this statement is that if anyone is called "Lord," he cannot be a created being but must be God, yet throughout the New Testament, Jesus is called "Lord," so he must not be a created subordinate to God but God's equal Son.

Later in book 3, Irenaeus deals with the objection that Christ must have come into existence at the time he was born as a man from Mary. He reminds the readers of John 1:1-3 and writes, "For we have shown that the Son of God did not begin to exist then [*tunc*; that is, when he was born from Mary], having been always [*exsistens semper*] with the Father; but when He became incarnate and was made

man, He recapitulated in Himself the long unfolding of mankind, granting salvation by way of compendium."[15] Here again we see the eternality of the Son. The incarnation was not the beginning of his existence, but the start of a new way of existing, a human existence by which he could recapitulate the history of the human race and restore us to God.[16]

Although Irenaeus subtly corrects the problems with the teaching of the apologists by emphasizing the eternality and equality of the Son with respect to the Father, there is an important way in which he continues their earlier proclamation: he ties the confession of who the Son is to the cross. In a passage whose overt purpose is to refute the Gnostic idea that the divine Christ and the human Jesus are different persons, he writes: "Therefore, the Gospel knows no other Son of Man except this one who was born of Mary, who also suffered; nor of another Christ who flew upwards from Jesus before the passion. But it recognizes as the Son of God this Jesus Christ who was born, this same one who suffered and rose again."[17] But even as he started from the cross, Irenaeus still worked backward to the eternal relation of the Son to the Father, and he was the first theologian to stress the eternal generation of the Son, an idea that Origen would develop in more detail later.[18]

The Holy Spirit. Irenaeus also has a considerably more developed treatment of the Holy

---

[14]*Against Heresies* 3.6.2 (SC 211.68; ACW 64.39 [cf. *ANF* 1.419]).

[15]*Against Heresies* 3.18.1 (SC 211.342; ACW 64.87-8 [cf. *ANF* 1.446]).

[16]See also *Against Heresies* 4.14.1, in which Irenaeus asserts in light of John 17:24 that God was not alone before he created Adam, because the Word glorified his Father, and the Father his Son.

[17]*Against Heresies* 3.16.5 (SC 211:306-8; ACW 64:81 [cf. *ANF* 1:441]).

[18]See *Against Heresies* 2.17-18 and 2.28. On the complexities of Irenaeus's argument here, see Anthony Briggman, *God and Christ in Irenaeus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 121-37.

Spirit than other second-century writers. Unlike most of the early church, he calls the Spirit (rather than the Son) "Wisdom," and he describes the Son and Spirit as the "Hands" through which God works.[19] In the process, he specifically contrasts the Spirit with the "all things" God has created, thus stressing the equality and eternality of the Spirit as well as the Son. Irenaeus writes, "I have also largely demonstrated, that the Word, namely the Son, was always with the Father; and that Wisdom also, which is the Spirit, was present with Him, anterior to all creation [*ante omnem constitutionem*]."[20] Irenaeus also emphasizes the equality of the Spirit to the Father and the Son through the way he describes the Spirit's role in salvation: the Spirit anoints the Son, but this is not what makes Jesus be the Son. It is an anointing in keeping with his humanity, so that through his humanity, we human beings can also be anointed and saved.[21]

From these passages we see a significant maturing of trinitarian theology in the writings of Irenaeus. Although he does not use the terminology that would later come to be standard and has some idiosyncratic ways of describing the Son and Spirit, he moves beyond the mere confession of Father, Son, and Spirit to a clear articulation of their equality and eternality. They are not created

instruments but divine and equal partners in creation and redemption. With Irenaeus in the late second century, Christian trinitarian theology began to come of age.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF TRINITARIAN TERMINOLOGY: TERTULLIAN OF CARTHAGE (DIED CA. 230)

Irenaeus's younger contemporary Tertullian also wrote against Gnosticism[22] and penned a massive tome *Against Marcion*, as well as writing an *Apology* against paganism,[23] but it was a very different heresy that pushed him to make his mark on trinitarian theology through his work *Against Praxeas* (ca. 215).[24] Around the turn of the third century, modalistic monarchianism was associated with three men named Sabellius, Noetus, and Praxeas. Tertullian claims that Praxeas was the first one to import this heresy into Rome from his native Asia Minor and describes the heresy as claiming that there is no distinction between Father, Son, and Spirit, and thus it must have been the Father himself who became incarnate and who died on the cross.[25] In responding to modalism, Tertullian articulated not simply the equality of the Son and the Spirit to the Father (a moot point if they are simply different names for the same person), but also the way in which they are

---

[19]The fullest treatment of both of these ideas comes in *Against Heresies* 4.20.1-4. See Anthony Briggman, *Irenaeus of Lyons and the Theology of the Holy Spirit*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Lashier, *Irenaeus on the Trinity*, 164-88.

[20]*Against Heresies* 4.20.3 (SC 100:2.632; *ANF* 1:488).

[21]*Against Heresies* 3.9.3 (SC 211:.110-12; ACW 64:46-7 [cf. *ANF* 1:423].

[22]See the aforementioned *Against the Valentinians*, *On the Flesh of Christ* (Latin text in CCSL 2:873-917; E.T. in *ANF* 3:521-42), *On the Resurrection of the Flesh* (Latin text in CCSL 2:921-1012; E.T. in *ANF* 3:545-94).

[23]The Latin text is in CCSL 1:85-171; E.T. is in *ANF* 3:17-55.

[24]The Latin text is in CCSL 2:1159-1205; E.T. is in *ANF* 3:597-627.

[25]*Against Praxeas* 1.1-4. See Andrew B. McGowan, "God in Early Latin Theology: Tertullian and the Trinity," in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. Andrew McGowan et al., Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 94 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 64-65.

numerically distinct (that is, not the same person) and yet also the same in some yet-to-be-defined sense (because otherwise they would be different gods). Tertullian addresses the distinction and sameness between the persons in two major ways, first by his careful use of pronouns, and second by developing the terminology of *substantia* and *persona.*

Expressing unity and distinction with pronouns. Tertullian carefully uses masculine and neuter pronouns to indicate that in God there is more than one "he" even though there is only one "it." In order to clarify Tertullian's thought on this point, I shall modify the *ANF* translations (in which the translator has used the word "person" not found in the text) to "he" or "it," as a clumsy but clear way of indicating what Tertullian is doing in Latin. Early in the work, he describes Praxeas's mistake as thinking "that one cannot believe in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame 'He' [*ipsum eundemque*]."[26] Later, in chapter 9, writing not of Praxeas but of the Church's faith, Tertullian affirms,

> The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other [*inseparatos ab alterutro*]. . . . Now, observe, my assertion is that the Father is one "He," and the Son another "He," and the Spirit another "He" [*alium esse Patrem et alium Filium et alium Spiritum*]. This statement is taken in a wrong sense by every uneducated as well as every perversely disposed person, as if it predicated a diversity [*diuersitatem*], in

such a sense as to imply a separation [*separationem*] among the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit.[27]

This crucial passage emphasizes that the Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct persons—but without using the words *distinct* and *person* themselves—who are nevertheless inseparable. Here we see the beginning of theological reflection on the question, How do the persons not constitute different gods? Tertullian's twofold answer is that they have no diversity among them, and that there is no separation between them. In other words, there is a sameness to the persons (the specifics of which he spells out in more detail elsewhere, as we shall see below) that prevents one from thinking of them as different gods, and there is a unity between them that forces us to think of them as one God.

Shortly after this passage, Tertullian elaborates by commenting on the Son's sending of the Paraclete:

> Thus making the Paraclete another "Him" from Himself [*Sic alium a se Paracletum*], even as we say that the Son is also another "He" from the Father [*a Patre alium Filium*]; so He showed a third degree [*tertium gradum*] in the Paraclete, as we believe the second degree is in the Son [*secundum in Filio*], by reason of the order observed in the *Economy*.[28]

This passage shows clearly the distinction between the persons, again, without using the word *distinction* or *person*. Each trinitarian person is his own unique "he." Notice,

---

[26]*Against Praxeas* 2.3 (CCSL 2:1161; *ANF* 3:598), translation modified.
[27]*Against Praxeas* 9.1 (CCSL 2:1168; *ANF* 3:603), translation modified.
[28]*Against Praxeas* 9.3-4 (CCSL 2:1169; *ANF* 3:604), translation modified.

though, that the use of the word *gradum*, "degree," might suggest inequality between the persons. But since the context of the passage has to do with personal distinctions, not rank or characteristics or equality/inequality, I do not think we should read very much into this word choice.

Later Tertullian begins to use the word *distinct* itself when he writes, "The Father and the Son are demonstrated to be distinct [*distincte pater et filius*]; I say *distinct* but not *separate* [*distincte, inquam, non diuise*]."[29] He then quotes several biblical passages in which the persons speak one to another, and he concludes, "In these few quotations the distinction [*distinctio*] of the Trinity is clearly set forth."[30] Here we see the language of "distinct" but not "divided," to go along with Tertullian's earlier insistence that the persons are not "separate" one from another. The use of masculine and neuter pronouns has led him to the development of the classic language of "distinction without separation/division" that we still use today.

The words substantia and persona. The second way in which Tertullian indicates the unity and distinction between the persons is by pressing into service several words that would go on to become standard in trinitarian theology, especially *substantia*. In chapter 2, just after describing Praxeas's mistake as claiming that the Father and Son are the same "he" (a passage discussed above), Tertullian continues,

As if in this way also one were not All, in that All are of One, by unity (that is) of substance [*per substantiae scilicet unitatem*]; while the mystery of the dispensation [*oikonomiae sacramentum*] is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity [*quae unitatem in trinitatem disponit*], placing the three [*tres*] in their order—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree [*non statu sed gradu*]; not in substance, but in form [*nec substantia sed forma*]; not in power, but in aspect [*nec potestate sed specie*].[31]

In this passage we see that Tertullian uses the Latin word *trinitas* of the three persons and that he uses three words to unite them and three other words to distinguish them. Father, Son, and Spirit share the same *status*, *substantia*, and *potestas*, but they differ in *gradus*, *forma*, and *species*. Here Tertullian seems to be drawing on Stoic metaphysics, by which *substantia* is the single, existent entity together with the qualities inherent in that entity. If one were speaking of physical entities, the *substantia* would be the stuff of which the entity is composed, but in the case of God, it is the attributes that set him apart from creatures, including his power and condition/rank/status (both mentioned in tandem with *substantia* in this passage).[32]

Using the concept of *substantia*, Tertullian is able to correct a problem that had shown up previously—how to relate the Son to the

---

[29]*Against Praxeas* 11.2 (CCSL 2:1171; *ANF* 3:605), translation modified.
[30]*Against Praxeas* 11.9 (CCSL 2:1172; *ANF* 3:606), translation modified.
[31]*Against Praxeas* 2.4 (CCSL 2:1161; *ANF* 3:598), translation modified.
[32]See Brian E. Daley, "The Persons in God and the Person of Christ in Patristic Theology: An Argument for Parallel Development," in *God in Early Christian Thought: Essays in Memory of Lloyd G. Patterson*, ed. Andrew McGowan et al., Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 94 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 334; Bryan M. Litfin, "Tertullian on the Trinity," *Perichoresis* 17 (2019): 92-93.

Father without implying that the Son is a creature produced by the Father's will. Tertullian contrasts his teaching with that of Marcion and the Gnostics (who introduce another, or many other, gods) by writing:

> But as for me, who derive [*deduco*] the Son from none other [*non aliunde*] than from the substance of the Father [*de substantia Patris*], and (represent Him) as doing nothing without the Father's will [*nihil facientem sine Patris uoluntate*], and as having received all power from the Father [*omnem a Patre consecutum potestatem*], how can I be possibly destroying the Monarchy from the Faith? . . . The same remark (I wish also to be formally) made by me with respect to the third degree [*in tertium gradum*], because I believe the Spirit is from none other [*non aliunde*] than from the Father through the Son [*a Patre per Filium*].[33]

Here we see a crucial distinction: the Son acts according to the Father's will, but his existence does not come from the Father's will. Instead, he is derived from the Father's *substantia*. Tertullian locates the monarchy in the Father alone and understands the derivation of the Son and Spirit in relation to the Father. What makes the three inseparable/indivisible is that both the Son and Holy Spirit derive their being from the *substantia* of the Father. Thus, whatever qualities or attributes characterize God also characterize them. The word *substantia* draws on the idea of "one thing," "one it," developed through Tertullian's use of neuter

pronouns, but makes the concept vastly more specific.[34]

Likewise, Tertullian moves from using masculine pronouns to using the actual word *persona*. In opposition to Praxeas's idea that the Word is just another name for God, he writes,

> But you will not allow Him to be really a substantive being [*substantiuum*], by having a substance of His own [*habere in re per substantiae proprietatem*]; in such a way that He may be regarded as an objective thing [*res*] and a person [*persona quaedam*], and so be able (as being constituted second to God the Father,) to make two [*duos efficere*], the Father and the Son, God and the Word.[35]

Tertullian is moving from the concept of *substantia* as the qualities that characterize God to an understanding of the Son/Word as an actual entity distinct from the Father but nevertheless possessing that *substantia*. He calls this alternate entity a *substantiuum* and a *res*, both indicating something that exists concretely as a discrete entity, and finally arrives at the word *persona*. Significantly, both *substantiuum* and *res* normally apply to things, but Tertullian needs a word to apply to a "him," not an "it," as shown by the fact that *duos* is masculine at the end of the passage. The word Tertullian settles on is *persona*. Here again he appears to draw on Stoic ideas about how a given entity is related to and differentiated from others.[36]

---

[33]*Against Praxeas* 4.1 (CCSL 2:1162; *ANF* 3:599), translation modified.
[34]Other important uses of *substantia* include *Apology* 21.11-13, in which Tertullian writes of unity of substance, and *Against Marcion* 3.6.8, in which he describes the substance as that "spirit" which the three persons share identically.
[35]*Against Praxeas* 7.5 (CCSL 2:1166; *ANF* 3:602), translation modified.
[36]See Litfin, "Tertullian on the Trinity," 93.

Later, in chapter 12, Tertullian discusses the divine plurals in Genesis 1:26 and 3:22. He rejects the Jewish interpretation that God is speaking to the angels, as well as Praxeas's interpretation that God is speaking to himself. Instead, he writes, "Nay, it was because He had already His Son close at His side, as a second Person [*secunda persona*], His own Word, and a third [*tertia*] also, the Spirit in the Word, that He purposely adopted the plural phrase [*pluraliter pronuntiauit*], 'Let *us* make;' and 'in *our* image;' and 'become as one *of us*.'"[37] Here again, we see the actual word *persona*.

Thus, we see that Tertullian's coining of trinitarian terminology—*trinitas*, *substantia*, *persona*, *distinctio* without *separatio* or *diuersitas*—grows out of the need to explain that biblically, the Father, Son, and Spirit are not simply different names for the same person. If early trinitarianism began to come of age with Irenaeus, it achieved noteworthy terminological precision with Tertullian. Significantly, however, Tertullian's precision in Latin would long prove elusive for Eastern thinkers. In Greek, the use of masculine and neuter pronouns would continue for many decades as the primary vehicle for expressing unity of substance and distinction of persons, and agreement on a Greek term for "person" would not come until the 360s.

Lingering problems. In spite of Tertullian's great contributions to trinitarian theology, his writings do exhibit some significant problems. There are a few passages (*Against Praxeas* 2.1, 5.2-4, 7.1) in which he seems to indicate that the Son and the Spirit proceeded from God as a part of the economy of creation and redemption, rather than being eternally begotten and eternally proceeding. In at least one instance (*Against Praxeas* 9.1), Tertullian seems to regard the Son as having merely a portion of full divinity, rather than entire divinity as the Father has.[38] I suggest that these passages reflect a pre-Irenaean mindset in which the focus on the economy and on the way we recognize the persons of the Trinity is so strong that it leads to an insufficient consideration of the persons in their eternal relations.

WRESTLING WITH EMERGING QUESTIONS: ORIGEN OF ALEXANDRIA (DIED CA. 251)

Origen's masterwork *On First Principles* has been the source of controversy since its initial publication (ca. 230), because it purportedly lays out a vision of eternally created souls that fell away from the Logos, of a world created as a place for these souls to be united with bodies and find redemption, and of a final state in which all souls are ultimately saved, but in what may or may not be a bodily state. I write "purportedly" because there has long been dispute about what Origen himself actually wrote, and some of the most (in)famous passages in the treatise may have actually been the work of Origen's disciples who took his thought beyond his own ideas, or worse yet, of his opponents

---

[37] *Against Praxeas* 12.3 (CCSL 2:1173; *ANF* 3:606), translation slightly modified.

[38] See William G. Rusch, introduction to *The Trinitarian Controversy*, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 10-11; Litfin, "Tertullian on the Trinity," 91.

who were intent on discrediting him.[39] While most of the debated passages have to do with Origen's teaching on the eternal creation of souls and the *apokatastasis*, this textual uncertainty impinges on our understanding of his trinitarian theology to some degree.

Despite the ambiguities, I believe we can recognize that Origen made two great contributions to trinitarian theology. First, he focused more attention on the Son *as Son*, rather than just as Word, and began to probe the implications of divine fatherhood and sonship. Second, and closely related, he more clearly articulated the distinction between the Son and the Spirit while still maintaining the eternality of the three persons. At the same time, a cloud of possible subordinationism hangs over Origen's trinitarian theology, and this potential problem requires some discussion.

The sonship of the Son. In the preface of *On First Principles*, Origen summarizes the apostolic preaching, on which he will elaborate:

> First, that "there is one God, who created and arranged all things," . . . and that this God in the last days . . . sent [*misit*] our Lord Jesus Christ to call first Israel to himself and second the Gentiles. . . . This just and good God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, himself gave the law and the prophets and the Gospels, who is also the God of the apostles and of the Old and New Testaments. Then again, that Jesus Christ himself, who came, was born of the Father before all creatures [*ipse qui uenit, ante omnem creaturam natus ex patre*

est]. . . . In the last times, emptying himself, he became human and was incarnate; being God, when made human he remained what he was, God. . . . The Holy Spirit is associated [*sociatum*] in honour and dignity with the Father and the Son.[40]

Several things are noteworthy about this summary of the rule of faith. First, notice the insistence—in contrast to all varieties of Gnosticism—that the one God made all things when nothing existed. Second, notice that—in opposition to Marcionism—the same God gave us both the Old and New Testaments. Third, notice in particular the clear demarcation between the Son's eternal existence and his temporal mission. The One who was born before all creatures became human while remaining God as he had always been. This summary thus sets up his long discussions of the Son in *On First Principles* 1.2 and of the Spirit in 1.3-4.

Origen begins his discussion of the Son by pointing out that deity and humanity in Christ are one thing and another, and we must first attend to his deity by understanding him as only-begotten Son, Wisdom, and Firstborn.[41] (He will turn to Christ as man in book 2.) He then rejects the idea that God's Wisdom is simply an aspect or attribute of God, and instead argues, "If then, once it is rightly understood that the only-begotten Son of God is his Wisdom subsisting substantially. . . . And how can one, who has learnt to know and think piously

---

Footnotes

[39]See John Behr, introduction to *Origen: On First Principles*, ed. John Behr, 2 vols., Oxford Early Christian Texts [hereafter OECT] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xx-xxviii. Cf. the reprint of the same introduction in *Origen: On First Principles—a Reader's Edition*, trans. John Behr (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), xix-xxvii.

[40]*On First Principles* Pref.4 (Behr, OECT, 1:12-15 [cf. *Reader's* Edition, 6-7]).

[41]*On First Principles* 1.2.1 (Behr, OECT, 1:40-1 [cf. *Reader's* Edition, 21]).

about God, think or believe that the God and Father ever existed, even for a single moment, without begetting this Wisdom [*extra huius sapientiae generationem fuisse aliquando deum patrem, uel ad punctum momenti alicuius*]?"[42] Shortly thereafter, he concludes,

> Therefore, we acknowledge that God is always [*semper*] the Father of his only-begotten Son, who was indeed born of him [*ex ipso quidem nati*] and derives from him what he is [*quod est ab ipso trahenti*], but without, however, any beginning [*sine ullo tamen initio*], not only that which may be distinguished by periods of time, but even that which intellect alone is accustomed to contemplate within itself.[43]

This is an important passage about the eternality of the Son. Not only has there never been a *time* when the Father did not have his Son, but the end of the passage indicates that even before there were periods of time, there was no "nontime" when the Son did not exist. Later, Arius would argue that while it is true that there was no time when the Son did not exist, there was nevertheless a "once" when the Son was not. Origen here nips that potential conclusion in the bud. God *always* had a Son. Yet despite this specific and even groundbreaking statement of the Son's eternality, Origen still insists that he is derived from the Father.[44] This is part of what it means to call him "Son."

Furthermore, Origen makes clear that the eternal begetting of the Son is not analogous to the begetting of humans or animals. He writes,

> It is abominable and unlawful to equate the God and Father, in the begetting of his only-begotten Son and in his giving [him] subsistence [*atque in subsistentia*], with any generation of humans or other animals; but it must be something exceptional and worthy of God [*deo dignum*], for which can be found no comparison at all [*cuius nulla prorsus comparatio*]. . . . For this is an eternal and everlasting begetting [*aeterna ac sempiterna generatio*]. . . . For he does not become Son, in an external manner, though adoption in the Spirit [*Non enim per adoptionem spiritus filius fit extrinsecus*], but is Son by nature [*sed natura filius est*].[45]

Here Origen is at great pains to stress the nonphysical and nontemporal nature of the begetting. It must be something appropriate to God, so it cannot be a physical process taking place in time. Again he stresses that the begetting is eternal and that the Son does not ever become Son. In this passage, it is important to note the contrast Origen draws between the Son, who is by nature Son, and us, who are adopted as God's sons (and daughters). This contrast serves not only to distinguish this understanding of Christ's sonship from second-century adoptionism but also to link Christ's sonship with ours in a causative way. The one who is by nature Son is the one who makes us sons and daughters by grace/adoption. This concept of "Son by

---

[42]*On First Principles* 1.2.2 (Behr, OECT, 1:40-1 [cf. *Reader's* Edition, 21]).

[43]*On First Principles* 1.2.2 (Behr, OECT, 1:42-3 [cf. *Reader's* Edition, 22]).

[44]For the idea of the Son's having always existed and never having come into existence, see also *On First Principles* 1.2.9, 4.4.1. For the idea of the Son's being eternal and yet derived, see also 1.2.11.

[45]*On First Principles* 1.2.4 (Behr, OECT, 1:44-7 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 23-24]).

nature/sons by grace" would go on to be widespread in the fourth and fifth centuries.

Having established the eternal begetting of the Son, Origen also emphasizes that he is identical with the Father in power and work: "As, then, the Son in no respect is separated or differs [*inmutatur ac differt*] from the Father in the power of his works [*uirtute operum*], nor is the work of the Son anything other than the Father's but one and the same [*unus atque idem*] movement . . . there is no dissimilarity [*dissimilitudo*] whatsoever between the Son and the Father."[46] This is an early articulation of what later theology would call "inseparable operations," and Origen argues that this identity of work requires an identity of character; there is not only no separation between them, but no dissimilarity between them either. The Son is derived, and yet eternal, equal, and even identical in character to the Father.

The distinctness of the Spirit. During a discussion of a single goodness in God, Origen writes, "The primal goodness is recognized in the God and Father, from whom both the Son, being begotten [*filius natus*], and the Holy Spirit, proceeding [*spiritus sanctus procedens*], without doubt draw into themselves the nature of that goodness [*bonitatis eius naturam in se refert*], which exists in the source [*in eo fonte*], from whom the Son is born [*natus est filius*] and the Spirit proceeds [*procedit spiritus sanctus*]."[47] By using a different word, "procession,"[48] for the relation of

the Spirit to the Father from the word he uses for the Son's relation to the Father, Origen implies that the Spirit is not another Son.

Origen begins his specific treatment of the Holy Spirit in *On First Principles* 1.3 by asserting that we need the Spirit for salvation. The Father and Son work in all creatures, but the Holy Spirit works only in believers: "In those alone, I think, who already turn to better things and walk in the ways of Jesus Christ [*per uias Christi Iesu incedunt*], that is, who are engaged in good actions and abide in God [*in deo permanent*], is there the work of the Holy Spirit."[49]

Origen insists that this differentiation by which the Spirit works only in believers does not imply any inequality or exaltation of one person of the Trinity above others. He emphasizes, "Moreover, nothing in the Trinity can be called greater or less, for one fount of divinity upholds the universe by his Word or Reason and by the Spirit of his mouth sanctifies all things worthy of sanctification."[50] Here again, we see that the Father is the unique source of deity, and this fact is the primary reason for arguing that there is no greater or less between the persons.

Origen argues further that the Father's special ministry is to give life, the Son's is to give reason. Likewise, "There is again another grace of the Holy Spirit [*spiritus sancti gratia*], which is bestowed upon the deserving [*quae dignis praestatur*], through the ministry of Christ and the working of the Father

---

[46]*On First Principles* 1.2.12 (Behr, OECT, 1:62-3 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 32]).
[47]*On First Principles* 1.2.13 (Behr, OECT, 1:64-65 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 32]).
[48]Of course the word comes from John 15:26.
[49]*On First Principles* 1.3.5 (Behr, OECT, 1:72-75 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 37-78]).
[50]*On First Principles* 1.3.7 (Behr, OECT, 1:78-79 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 40]).

[*ministrata quidem per Christum, inoperata autem a patre*], in proportion to the merits of those who have become capable of receiving it."[51] Here we see that the work of the three persons is inseparable, because the Holy Spirit's grace is ministered (*ministrata* is feminine, directly modifying *gratia*) through Christ and worked into us (*inoperata* is likewise feminine and modifies *gratia*) from the Father.[52]

Not surprisingly, another special grace of the Holy Spirit is to give holiness. Origen writes of Christians,

> When, then, they have, firstly, from the God and Father, that they should be [*ut sint*]; secondly, from the Word, that they should be rational beings [*ut rationabilia sint*]; thirdly, from the Holy Spirit, that they should be holy [*ut sancta sint*]—they become capable of Christ anew.[53]

This passage serves both to distinguish the persons and to unite them by virtue of the harmonious interplay of their actions. Furthermore, in addition to giving life, the Spirit gives holiness.

Possible subordination in Origen's thought. We have seen from Origen's discussion that the Son and the Spirit are not merely attributes or aspects of God but distinctly existing entities. Each is clearly a "he" or a *persona* as Tertullian would call them, although Origen has no single Greek word that can serve as a term for the persons. The three share a common character or *substantia* as Tertullian would call it, although again Origen exhibits the concept

more than a term for it. The Son is begotten, the Spirit proceeds, and both of them are eternal. They do not—as the apologists and Tertullian might be read to say—differentiate from one another only in time as part of the economy of creation or redemption.

Nevertheless, even though Origen insisted that there is no greater or less within the Trinity, his thought was widely suspected of subordinating the Son and Spirit to the Father. The most infamous example of such subordination comes in a Greek fragment offered in evidence during the sixth-century Origenist controversy and alleged to be from *On First Principles* 1. This passage clearly describes the Son as "less than the Father" (ἐλλατόνως δὲ παρὰ τὸν πατέρα) and the Spirit as "still less" (ἔτι δὲ ἡττόνως τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἅγιον) and ranks the three persons from greatest power to least power.[54] But it is quite uncertain whether this passage actually goes back to Origen himself. What does unquestionably come from Origen's own pen, however, is the idea that the Son was generated by the Father's will, a problematic concept that we have seen affirmed by Ignatius and rejected (correctly) by Tertullian. In his summary statement at the end of *On First Principles*, Origen reiterates that the Father and Son are not physical, and he writes that "the Word and Wisdom was begotten from the invisible and bodiless God apart from any bodily passion, as an act of will proceeds from the intellect [*uelut si uoluntas procedat e mente*].

---

[51]*On First Principles* 1.3.7 (Behr, OECT, 1:78-79 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 40]).

[52]For Origen's longest treatment of the idea that the grace of the Holy Spirit is given in response to human merit, see *On First Principles* 3.1.

[53]*On First Principles* 1.3.8 (Behr, OECT, 1:80-81 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 41]).

[54]This fragment is from Justinian's *Letter to Menas* and is printed in Behr, OECT, 2:598 (cf. *A Reader's Edition*, 299).

Nor will it seem absurd, seeing that he is called the *Son of love*, if in this way he is also regarded as Son of his will [*voluntatis*]."[55]

This notion of the Son's begetting as an act of the Father's will sits uneasily both with the equality of the Son to the Father—an act of will is how God makes creatures—and with the eternality of the Son. In fact, it may seem hard to grasp how one so committed to the Son's eternality could affirm this, and we need to remember that for Origen—at least as far as we can tell from *On First Principles* as we have it—created beings can be eternal as well. Origen's insistence on the Son's eternality may be less significant than we might have thought. If created souls can be eternal, then the Son can also be eternal even if he was created, and this summary statement suggests that this may have been exactly what Origen meant.[56] As a result, while Origen's trinitarian theology probed the concept of sonship helpfully and elaborated on the Spirit's distinctive work, it may also have provided seeds that would later be picked up in Arian thought to argue that the Son is a creature, made by the Father's will.

Conclusion: Unresolved Issues at the Dawn of the Fourth Century

In this chapter, we have seen that the church's trinitarian confession emerged as a result of the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the presence of the Spirit, who enabled Christians to affirm that Jesus is Lord. Under pressure from various Gnosticisms and modalism, the church moved from this simple trinitarian confession to a bona fide trinitarian theology. Key to this movement were specific questions related to the Son and Spirit: whether they are eternal or "came out" from God at some point in time, whether they are distinct from God as persons or merely names for the one God, whether they are equal to God or occupy some kind of middle space between him and his creation. As the church wrestled with these questions, its answers to them were somewhat uneven and inconsistent. Irenaeus provided perhaps the most balanced and orthodox trinitarian theology, but without using any of what would later become standard terminology. Tertullian provided the Latin world with the terminology of *substantia*, *persona*, and *distinctio* without *separatio* that it would use henceforth, but he struggled to see the Son and Spirit as genuinely eternally distinct from the Father and had little to say about divine sonship. Origen probed the depths of divine begetting more than anyone had done previously, but he may not have truly distinguished the Son and Spirit from eternally created creatures. The church's trinitarian theology was understandably slow in teasing out the implications of its trinitarian faith.

Thus, as the fourth century began, there were at least two great needs in trinitarian theology. First was the need for agreement on the Greek words used to speak of what Tertullian called the one *substantia* and the three *personae*. Origen may have been the first to use ὑπόστασις

---

[55] *On First Principles* 4.4.1 (Behr, OECT, 2:562-63 [cf. *Reader's Edition*, 285]).

[56] Behr, OECT, lvi-lxii, argues that Origen meant created souls were eternal in the sense that God had foreknown them (cf. *Reader's Edition*, lv-lxi). I find this less than convincing, given that Pamphilius, in his enthusiastic defense of Origen, did not deny that Origen held to the eternality of souls. Instead, Pamphilius simply asserted that the Christian tradition was not united on this point and that Origen was not dogmatic about it. See *Apology for Origen* 159-72 (Ancient Latin version of Greek text in SC 464:244-62; E.T. in Fathers of the Church 120:109-14).

in contrast to οὐσία, as a way of differentiating the Father, Son, and Spirit,[57] but in the early fourth century, there was no consensus on whether ὑπόστασις was a synonym for οὐσία or not, and thus on whether God was a single ὑπόστασις or three of them. The second great need was for a clearer articulation of the relation between the Father and Son, coupled with a distinction between the Son and creatures. Origen's (alleged?) understanding of eternal creation either reflected a lack of clarity on this crucial question or muddied waters that had been clear earlier, and when Arius would later insist on a sharp line between God and all created things, he felt compelled to put the Son on the creaturely side of that line.

This second need, while much broader than mere terminology, had a terminological dimension as well. We have seen that Origen had stressed the derived nature of the Son, but the church needed to forge a conceptual distinction between γένητος ("having come into existence") and γέννητος ("having been begotten"), so that it could write succinctly of the Father as ἀγέννητος and ἀγένητος (that is, unbegotten and never having come into existence because he always existed), and of the Son as γέννητος but yet ἀγένητος (that is, begotten, but yet never having come into existence because he always existed). Furthermore, Origen may have used the word ὁμοούσιος to refer to the Son's relation to the Father. The word does not occur in his extant writings, but

Pamphilius, in his *Apology for Origen* (early fourth century), quotes three passages from Origen's nonextant *Commentary on Hebrews* that contain the word.[58] But this word had a suspect past since it had been used by pagan philosophers to refer to corporeal objects.[59] More important, the word would go on to have an even more suspect future, since it was allegedly used by the notorious but slippery third-century heretic Paul of Samosata and was thus seemingly condemned by the Council of Antioch in 268 that condemned Paul.[60] The fact that the Council of Nicaea would use the word ὁμοούσιος despite its suspect associations would be the catalyst for much of the tumult that engulfed the church in the 340s and 350s, before the word eventually became the watchword of orthodoxy and surely the most famous theological term in Christian history.

While these two great needs, both significantly terminological in nature, led to the controversy and the brilliance of fourth-century trinitarian theology, we should again remember that trinitarianism began not with terminology but with persons—God the Father, his Son our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit, the Lord who makes us alive. For all the imperfections of ante-Nicene trinitarian theology, it still does Christians a great service by reminding us to place our confession of the three persons front and center in our vision of Christianity.

---

[57]See Ilaria L. E. Ramelli, "Origen, Greek Philosophy, and the Birth of the Trinitarian Meaning of *Hypostasis*," *Harvard Theological Review* 105 (2012): 302-50. Cf. Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 185.

[58]*Apology for Origen* 94, 99-100 (SC 464:164-68; Fathers of the Church 120:83, 85). See M. J. Edwards, "Did Origen Apply the Word *Homoousios* to the Son?," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, N.S., 49 (1998): 658-70.

[59]See Edwards, "Did Origen Apply the Word *Homoousios*?," 667.

[60]We know little with certainty about these proceedings, but for a clear assessment of the scattered evidence, see Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 207-35.