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A One-sided Trinity in Theology: Its Continuing Impact

Norman R. Gulley
Southern Adventist University

In the early centuries theologians expended much time and energy combatting heresies about God, including major treatises on the Trinity, but mostly in defense of the divinity of Christ, with much less said about the Holy Spirit. They defended the divinity of Christ and the Spirit from the perspective of their unity in the one God. We will present some highlights of major contributors during the first four centuries, not attempting to be exhaustive but representative, and evaluate their thinking and its subsequent impact on theology.

The Trinity in Patristic Theology: The West

We begin our journey in early patristic theology by considering how the Trinity was presented in the West and then later how it was presented in the East. We will see differences, but a common focus and a common deficit as far as a biblical understanding of the Trinity is concerned.

Irenaeus (120–202). Heresies entered the early church “like locusts,” and Irenaeus spent his life combating them. Bishops of Rome were caught up in these heresies, such as Eleutherus, who accepted the Montanist heresy, and his successor Victor. Irenaeus stood up against both of them. In his books *Against Heresies* Irenaeus discusses multiple heresies (more than twenty-two) attempting to replace the truth (Book 1), after which he refutes them with reason (Book 2), and then from revelation (Books 3–5), a “reason-revelation” sequence that was repeated by Catholic theologians like Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*).

Of these heretics, Irenaeus said, “These men falsify the oracles of God, and prove themselves evil interpreters of the good word of revelation.” They claimed superior knowledge beyond that revealed in the Scriptures. Irenaeus said these

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errors are “blasphemy against Christ”¹ as “agents of Satan, sent forth for the purpose of overturning the faith of some, and drawing them away from life.”² Irenaeus said, “there are as many schemes of ‘redemption’ as there are teachers of these mystical opinions,” which compares well with postmodernism, where rampant relativism calls into question revealed truth. When Satan was defeated at Calvary, in anger he made war with the church (Rev 12:9–13,17). In other words, we must keep the cosmic controversy in mind to grasp what is going on in the battle over the Trinity. God wants to reveal what He is like. Satan seeks to distort this revelation with contrary claims. Calvary revealed God as love, as suffering for humans, but Satan would counter this with a false view of God.

Irenaeus keeps in view the controversy that Satan is waging against God. With great patience God wants humans to realize their dependence upon Him, for (1) they receive immortality from Him, and (2) it is not theirs apart from Him. Satan counters claiming that (1) incorruptibility is natural to humans, and (2) not a supernatural gift. In doing so Satan made man “more ungrateful towards his Creator, obscured the love which God had towards man, and blinded his mind not to perceive what is worthy of God, comparing himself with, and judging himself equal to, God”³

Irenaeus rejected the heretical idea that Jesus “was merely a receptacle of Christ” who came upon Him in the form of a dove, so that “He merely suffered in outward appearance, being naturally impassible.”⁴ He pointed to Christ’s baptism as proof of the Trinity.⁵ The Son “is in the Father” and the Father is in the Son.⁶ These words anticipated the future articulation of the *perichoresis* (mutual penetration) between the Persons of the Trinity. Irenaeus gained from Scripture an apparent insight into the relationship between the divine and the human natures in Jesus which was not even achieved in the Nicene (A.D. 325) or Constantinople (A.D. 461) Councils. Irenaeus said Christ “became man in order to undergo temptation, so also was He the Word that He might be glorified; the Word remaining quiescent, that He might be capable of being tempted, dishonoured, crucified, and of suffering death.”⁷ For a thousand years this insight was lost in theology, for theologians said Christ lived on earth as the Son of God, not as the Son of Man.

Evaluation. Irenaeus was right to go to Scripture to answer the heretics, but he also felt a need to go to the teachings of the church at Rome to counter the

¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 315 (Preface).

² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 440 (3.16.1); cf. “this class of men have been instigated by Satan.”ANF 1, 345 (1.21.1).

³ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 450 (3.20.1).

⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 440 (3.16.1). “Christ remained impassible . . . it was Jesus who suffered” ANF 1, 428 (3.11.7).

⁵ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 423 (3.10.3).

⁶ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 419 (3.6.2).

⁷ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 449 (3.19.3).

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numerous heresies. We must remember that this was not the Roman Catholic Church we know today, whose importance began under emperor Constantine in the 4th century, and with its later rise to prominence in the 6th century. (1) A. Cleveland Coxe rightly questions the importance of Rome in the early church period,⁸ and (2) Irenaeus repudiated the teachings of two bishops of Rome.⁹ This background must be kept in mind when Irenaeus refers to the Church of Rome as “very ancient” and writes that “every Church should agree with this Church, on account of its pre-eminent authority” (founded by Peter and Paul).¹⁰

Looking to both Scripture and to the church would one day lead to church tradition being placed above biblical revelation, which is the hallmark of Roman Catholicism. Perhaps the view of Irenaeus that the episcopate is a “succession from the apostles” and their reception of “the certain gift of truth” was one influence that led to the alleged importance of the Magesterium over Scripture.¹¹ However, in fairness to Irenaeus, the truth about the Trinity was kept alive in the early churches in their conquest against these numerous heresies. The important thing is that their understanding was based upon Scripture, which Irenaeus demonstrated so well (*Against Heresies*, Books 3–5). So on this topic the churches concurred with Scripture.

Irenaeus had a grasp of the controversy between God and Satan and keeps this in mind in his two recapitulations made by Christ and Satan. He finds both recapitulations running throughout history, and in this sense he is a historicist. He rightly says Adams’ disobedience at the tree led to Christ’s obedience at another tree (the cross), yet adds that Eve was disobedient to God’s word while Mary was obedient to God’s word, “in order that the Virgin Mary might become the patroness (*advocata*) of the virgin Eve. And thus, as the human race fell into bondage to death by means of a virgin so is it rescued by a virgin.”¹² This comparison of the two virgins was unfortunate, because it detracted from the comparison of the two Adams and may have influenced the later elevation of Mary, which proved to be a heresy as great as any Irenaeus confronted.

Irenaeus presents the Trinity as the “one God” who is Father, Word, and Wisdom, and it is this oneness that denies the diversity of heretical teachings about God. Throughout, he mentions how these three in the Trinity are related in an external sense, for example, (1) the Son and the Spirit are the two hands of God in creation, and (2) all three participate in the plan of salvation, as seen at Christ’s baptism. Irenaeus even speaks of their relationship as friends to humans. He does not, however, speak about their inner-relationship as three Persons of the Trinity. In these five books of Irenaeus there is no relational Trinity

⁸ A. Cleveland Coxe, *ANF* 1,309–313.

⁹ A. Cleveland Coxe, *ANF* 1, 309, 310.

¹⁰ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, *ANF* 1, 415 (3.3.2).

¹¹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, *ANF* 1, 497 (4.26.2).

¹² Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, *ANF* 1, 547 (5.19.1).

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because he concentrates on the one God in answer to the multiple heresies about God.

Tertullian (145–220). Tertullian, a native of Carthage, in Africa, was a convert from paganism and became the founder of Latin Christianity. In later life he left the Church and became a Montanist. This departure from primitive Christianity was to be repeated many times in the future.¹³ Even in the early church there were forces at work to derail the church from truth. An example is found in Tertullian's use of Scripture. He used the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament (the Septuagint; LXX) instead of checking the Hebrew. In most cases the texts he used differ from the Hebrew text. Furthermore, he used an old Latin version, or versions, popular in the African church of the second and third centuries, so his work was founded on some faulty translations, and he didn't check their accuracy in the Hebrew or Greek originals. One unfortunate reason for checking the Greek was because most of the heretics were Greeks or Greek-speaking, and he thought the Greek copies of the Scriptures were corrupted by them.¹⁴

One example of this is his interpretation of Isaiah 45:14, 15 from the Septuagint. In the Greek text it says various non-Jews will come to Judah pleading, “because God is in thee; and there is not God beside thee, O Lord. For thou art God, yet we knew it not, the God of Israel, the Saviour.” In Hebrew it reads, “Surely God [E]l is with you, and there is no other god [Elohiym]. Truly you are a God [E]l who hides himself, O God [E]l and Savior of Israel.” Tertullian extrapolates the Trinity from this passage. The non-Jews “shall worship Thee, because God is in Thee: for Thou art our God, yet we knew it not; Thou art the God of Israel.” For here too, by saying ‘God is in Thee,’ and ‘Thou art the God,’ he sets forth Two who were God: [in the former expression *in Thee*, he means] in Christ, and [in the other he means] the Holy Ghost.”¹⁵

Tertullian wrote on the Trinity in his *Against Praxeas* (c. 208). Praxeus defended the unity in the Trinity and did so by saying that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were one and the same. This Modalistic or Monarchian view alleged that “the Father Himself came down into the Virgin, was Himself born of her, Himself suffered, indeed was Himself Jesus Christ.” Tertullian observed that in

¹³ St. Bernard and later the Schoolmen “separated themselves far more absolutely than ever Tertullian did from the orthodoxy of Primitive Christendom. The schism which withdrew the West from Communion with the original seats of Christendom, and from Nicene Catholicity, was formidable beyond all expression, in comparison with Tertullian's entanglements with a delusion which the See of Rome itself had momentarily patronized. Since the Council of Trent, not a theologian of the Latins has been free from organic heresies, compared with which the fanaticism of our author was a trifling aberration. Since the late Council of the Vatican, essential Montanism has become organized in the Latin Churches; for what are the new revelations and oracles of the pontiff but the *deliria* of another claimant to the voice and inspiration of the Paraclete?” Introductory Note, *ANF* 3, 4.

¹⁴ Introductory Note, *ANF* 3, 5–7.

¹⁵ *Against Praxeas*, *ANF* 3, 607 (chap. 13).

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so doing “the *old* serpent has fallen out with himself, since when he tempted Christ after John’s baptism, he approached Him as ‘the Son of God,’” indicating the Father had a Son as Scripture attests.¹⁶ In other words, the serpent destroys truth by defending it, so that the Trinity is destroyed by defending the unity of God. The “Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person.”¹⁷

Praxeas took credit for worshiping the one God rather than two or three gods. Tertullian counters by saying God is one, for the Son derives from no other source than the substance of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from no other source than the Father through the Son.¹⁸ He calls these “*emanations*” so that the Son and the Spirit are emanations from the substance of the Father. All three are one God and yet are three distinct Persons in the one God. Before creation the Father was not alone, for He created everything through the Word, a Person distinct from Himself, and the Spirit is a Person distinct “from God and the Son.” Though distinct, they are not diverse. “For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges: ‘My Father is greater than I’” (John 14:28), and “his inferiority is described as being ‘a little lower than the angels’” (Psa 8:5). He grants a difference in the mode of their being, but not in their divine substance.¹⁹

The idea of the Father as the “entire substance” and the Son as a “portion” was not a helpful way of expressing the unity of God. But Tertullian used an analogy that better expressed the distinction within the unity by stating that “in order to be a husband, I must have a wife; I can never myself be my own wife,” and “I never can be a son to myself; and in order to be a son, I have a father, it being impossible for me ever to be my own father.” Here Tertullian was crystal clear, for these analogies called into question Praxeas’ view that the Father is His own Son, and the Son is His own Father, an impossible unity in the Trinity. Tertullian said it is irrelevant to say “‘with God nothing is impossible’ for then we make out God to have done anything we please.”²⁰ Then follow many biblical texts to prove the distinction of the divine Persons in the Trinity, such as “Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten Thee” (Psa 2:7), “The Lord said unto my Lord, Sit Thou on my right hand, until I make Thine enemies Thy footstool” (Psa 110:1), and “Let us make man in our own image, and after our own likeness” (Gen 1:26).²¹

Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit, who would receive from Him as He had received from the Father. “Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, who are yet distinct One from Another. The Three are one essence, not one Person, as it is said, ‘I

¹⁶ ANF 3, 597 (chap 1).

¹⁷ ANF 3, 598 (chap 2).

¹⁸ ANF 3, 599, 600 (chaps 3, 4).

¹⁹ ANF 3, 601–604 (chaps. 6–9).

²⁰ ANF 3, 604–605 (chap. 10).

²¹ ANF 3, 605–621 (chaps. 11–24).

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and my Father are One,’ in respect of unity of substance, not singularity of number.” In saying this Tertullian met Praxeas on his own ground where he misinterpreted “I and my Father are One.”²² He further pointed out that Praxeas distinguished between the Son of man in the flesh and Father as Spirit, and so did divide them rather than uniting them, which he apparently overlooked.²³

Having distinguished the Persons in the Trinity, Tertullian next distinguished the two natures in Christ. It was the human nature of Christ that died, because mortal, whereas the divine nature of Christ didn’t die, because immortal. By contrast, for Praxeas Christ is the Father, so the Father suffered on the cross (so called Patriconianism), but Praxeas says the Father was only a “fellow sufferer.” Tertullian rightly points out that this admits that there are two who suffered, and thus undermines the unity (or identity) argument of Praxeas. Tertullian stated that neither the Father nor the Spirit suffered, for God only suffered in the Son. This leads to the dereliction cry, “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” Tertullian rightly says this was the cry of the humanity of Christ, suggesting “it was uttered so as to prove the impassibility of God, who ‘forsook’ His Son, so far as He handed over His human substance to the suffering of death.”²⁴

Tertullian concludes by saying that the unity view of Praxeas was like the One God of the Jews. He suggests that in the new covenant, “His Unity might be believed in, after a new manner, through the Son and the Spirit, in order that God might now be known openly, in His proper Names and Persons, who in ancient times was not plainly understood, though declared through the Son and the Spirit.” Praxeas and his followers denied the Son when they supposed Him to be the same as the Father and needed to realize that “‘whosoever shall confess that (Jesus) Christ is the Son of God’ (not the Father), ‘God dwelleth in him, and he in God.’”²⁵

Evaluation. Gerald O’Collins, S.J., of the Gregorian University in Rome, notes that Tertullian, in “writing of one divine substance (*substantia*) in three persons,” was “the first Christian writer to exploit the term *person* in theology, the first to apply *Trinity* (*Trinitatis*) to God.”²⁶ Tertullian borrowed the term from the heretic Theodosius, who first used it around A.D.150.²⁷

Tertullian’s idea that the Father and the Spirit were unable to suffer with the Son during His cry on the cross doesn’t protect the uniqueness of God from intelligent created beings as he supposed, but denies the inner-Trinitarian love of

²² ANF 3, 621 (chap. 25).

²³ ANF 3, 623 (chap. 27).

²⁴ ANF 3, 623–627 (chaps. 27–30).

²⁵ ANF 3, 627 (chap. 31).

²⁶ Gerald O’Collins, S.J., *The Tripersonal God: Understanding and Interpreting the Trinity* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1999), 105.

²⁷ Leonardo Boff, *Holy Trinity, Perfect Community*, tr. Phillip Barryman (Maryknoll: Orbis, Portuguese 1st 1988, 4th 2004), 5.

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each member of the Trinity for the others as Scripture teaches. How could the Father who loved the world by sending His Son to save it (John 3:16) be so unloving to the Son when He fulfilled His mission in death? If the Father said at Christ’s water baptism, “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased” (Matt 3:17), what would you expect Him to say at His death baptism?

Novatian (c. 210–280). The Italian Novatian presided over the Roman presbytery about A.D. 250 and wrote His Treatise on the Trinity about A.D. 257. This work is based on Scripture alone, whose texts appear throughout the document. With clear reasoning from Scripture, Novatian skillfully meets Sabellianism’s claim that there is only one God who appears in three modes of being as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, thus denying three Persons in the one Godhead. According to Sabellianism, Christ must be the same as the Father. Novatian meets this error—like a lawyer who has arranged all his evidence—in a barrage of biblical texts that convincingly prove that Christ and the Father are both God as two distinct Persons, but not as two Gods. The Holy Spirit is mentioned first in chapter 24 (there are only 31) with respect to Christ’s incarnation, and only chapter 29 presents Him as a member of the Trinity. So clearly Novatian’s treatise on the Trinity is mostly about Christ and the Father. He spends much of his time proving the divinity of Christ, then brings in the Holy Spirit just before the end.

He presents God as Creator, the founder of all that is (chapters 1–8). God contains all things, and there is no room for a superior God.²⁸ He is the judge of evil, but He is not the originator of it.

He is immutable (unchanging), for “there is never in Him any accession or increase of any part or honour, lest anything should appear to have ever been wanting to His perfection, nor is any loss sustained in Him, lest a degree of mortality should appear to have been suffered by Him.” To propose any change in God means to cease “to be that which it had been, and consequently begins to be what it was not.”²⁹ God is perfect and cannot be added to, so therefore He must be unchanging. Anger doesn’t corrupt divine power as it does for humans.³⁰ God doesn’t have any diversity in Himself, for He is simple, which means nothing like a tabernacle or temple can contain Him because He is fully present everywhere.³¹ Hence, no figures of speech—such as love, Spirit, Light, or Fire—do justice in describing all that He is and all that He does. “He embraces all things, and contains all things,” so “His care will consequently extend even to every individual thing, since His providence reaches to the whole, whatever it is.”³²

In chapter 9, Novatian begins the argument that Jesus Christ is the Son of this God described in the previous chapters. Christ fulfills the expectations of

²⁸ ANF 5, 612 (2).

²⁹ ANF 5, 614 (4).

³⁰ ANF 5, 615 (5).

³¹ ANF 5, 615, 616 (6).

³² ANF 5, 616–618 (7, 8).

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the Old Testament by being also truly human as well as truly divine. He did not merely take an appearance of human flesh, for there is no salvation in Him if He was not also human. That's why "blood flowed forth from His hands and feet" and "He was raised again in the same bodily substance in which He died." When it says "flesh and blood do not inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 16:50), it means "the guilt of the flesh."³³ Novatian presents Jesus Christ as God and man in One Person. He asks, "If His sufferings show in Him human frailty, why may not His works assert in Him divine power?" He affirms, "He is both, lest if He should be one only, He could not be the other." In other words, "in the same manner as He is born as man subsequent to the world, so as God He is manifested to have been before the world."³⁴

In the next six chapters (12–17), Novatian defends the Divinity of Christ and repeatedly asks, "If Christ was only a man," how did he make the world, how is He present whenever called upon, how can He say "I and the Father are one?" how can He say that belief in Him means believers will never die, how can He say the Holy Spirit will declare things given to Him by Christ, and many other such questions. He allows the biblical evidence to effectively call into question those doubting Christ's divinity. In three chapters (18–20) he recites Old Testament texts where the pre-incarnate Christ appeared as an angel and is called God. He argues that Christ was God because He had the power to lay down His life and to take it up again (21) and thought it not robbery to be God when He became human (22).

He describes the divine-human in Jesus Christ as follows: "reasonably the Son of God might be made by the assumption of flesh the Son of man, and the Son of man by the reception of the Word of God the Son of God."³⁵ Novatian speaks against those who see no difference between the Son of God and the Son of man in a modalistic sense. He says there is a "mingling of association," but this resulted in the Son of man becoming what He was not, namely the Son of God (24). The distinction between being God and being human is argued from Christ's death, where His humanity, not His divinity, died. This he likens to other humans' bodies that die, but not their soul. If "the soul has this excellence of immortality that it cannot be slain, much more has the nobility of the Word of God this power of not being slain."³⁶

Although Christ is God, He is not God the Father, for "the person of the Son is second after the Father." Novatian demonstrates this from texts like the Father having the Son sit at His right hand until He defeats His enemies (Psa 110:1); "Father, glorify me with that glory with which I was with Thee before the world was made" (John 17:5); "I have glorified Thee upon earth; I have finished the world which Thou gavest me" (John 17:4); and "All things are delivered to me

³³ ANF 5, 618–620 (9, 10).

³⁴ ANF 5, 620, 621 (11).

³⁵ ANF 5, 634 (23).

³⁶ ANF 5, 634–636 (24, 25).

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by my Father" (Luke 10:22).³⁷ The text "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30) is interpreted as "the Father and Son are one in agreement, in love," which he calls the "loving association." He continues that the Son of God is "inferior to the Father" because the Father sanctified Him (set Him apart) and sent Him into the world (John 10:36). He cites Christ words, "If ye loved me, ye would rejoice because I go unto the Father: for the Father is greater than I" (John 14:28).³⁸

Finally Novatian comes to the Holy Spirit (29) and speaks about the things He does, His "different kinds of offices."

This is He who places prophets in the Church, instructs teachers, directs tongues, gives powers and healings, does wonderful works, offers discrimination of spirits, affords powers of government, suggests counsels, and orders and arranges whatever other gifts there are of *charismata*; and thus makes the Lord's Church everywhere, and in all, perfected and completed.

He then speaks of enablings that the Spirit gives to sinners.³⁹

Evaluation. Although Novatian conclusively demonstrates from Scripture that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man, that He is not the Father, and that He and the Father are not two Gods, but two Persons as one God, and gives small mention to the Holy Spirit, there seems to be a serious weakness in his presentation. When he says Christ is "inferior" or "second" to the Father he doesn't mention that most of the texts he cites are from the context of Christ's mission on earth, and there's no mention of their eternal equality before the incarnation. Nevertheless, Novatian rightly states that Christ in His human mission is God. What he is really speaking about is the economy of function among the Trinity by which they have various responsibilities in their saving mission of humans. This is important, but what is apparently missing is the inner relationship of love between them. It is true that passing mention is made of the love between the Father and the Son, but it is not developed, nor is there any similar reference to the relationship that the Holy Spirit holds to the other two, nor about their relationship with Him. But wouldn't the eternal loving relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit be the strongest argument against modalism?

Hilary of Poitiers (300–367). Neoplatonism influenced Hilary when he was a pagan, and philosophy gave him a desire to understand truth, which he finally found in Christianity and its Scriptures. As a Christian he wrote in Latin, with knowledge of Greek but no knowledge of Hebrew. He used the Greek Septuagint (LXX) for the Old Testament and the Latin for the New Testament. Looking beyond the letter of the text, he used a mystical method of interpretation. Tertullian and Origen influenced Hilary, who learned most of his theology

³⁷ ANF 5, 636, 637 (26).

³⁸ ANF 5, 637–640 (27, 28).

³⁹ ANF 5, 640–641 (29).

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from eastern sources. Although an original thinker, especially in Christology, he never wrote out his views in a systematic way, which may be the reason he is not as well known as he might have been. However, his thinking influenced Augustine (354–430), Ambrose (340–397),⁴⁰ and “all later theologians.”⁴¹

Hilary’s *De Trinitate* (On The Trinity) was written to refute Arianism, which claimed that Christ was merely a created being, even though created far back in eternity. Hilary’s entire focus is to defend the full divinity of Christ,⁴² and thus the Holy Spirit does not get equal coverage in the twelve volumes. In fact, Hilary concentrates on the Father and the Son and their relationship to each other, with no comparable space given to the relationship of the Holy Spirit to the Father and Son.⁴³ Hilary presents the eternal generation of the Son,⁴⁴ a fact denied by Arianism. He opposes Sabellius, who “makes the Son an extension of the Father,” and Hebion, who says the Son’s beginning was through Mary, and thus “represents Him not as first God and then man, but as first man then God.”⁴⁵ It was not just the *will* of the Father to create the Son, because the Father and the Son had an eternal mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*), for they are co-eternal with each Other by *nature*. They had an inseparable co-existence, which means they are One God and not two God’s as the Arians wrongly charged.⁴⁶

There is a unity of nature and distinction of Persons in the names “Father” and “Son.” For Hilary the Son is equally divine with the Father, and He is more a Revealer of God than a Redeemer of humans. The incarnation of God, viewed as an assumption of humanity into His divinity, was a plan that preceded human sin and would have taken place even if humans hadn’t sinned.⁴⁷ The purpose of

⁴⁰ NPNF 2nd Series 9, i–lxi.

⁴¹ NPNF 2nd Series 9, xxxvii.

⁴² “We proclaim in answer, on the evidence of the Apostles and Evangelists, that the Father is eternal and the Son eternal, and demonstrate that the Son of God of all with an absolute, not a limited, pre-existence,” *De Trinitate*, NPNF 2nd Series 9, 50 (1.34), after as *De Trinitate*.

⁴³ He speaks of the Holy Spirit as Divine, and proceeding from the Father and Son, he indwells believers and “cannot be cabined or confined” as He “is omnipresent in space and time, and under all conditions present in its fullness.” He is sent as an Advocate and guide into all truth, to give enlightenment. He is a “most needful gift” that “we must seek and must earn” *De Trinitate*, 60, 61 (2. 29–35). He speaks of Spirit as “sent from the Father by the Son” *De Trinitate*, 143 (8.20).

⁴⁴ “The mind of men is powerless with the ordinary resources of unaided reason to grasp the idea of an eternal birth, but they attain by study of things Divine to the apprehension of mysteries which lie beyond the range of common thought” *De Trinitate*, 49 (1.34); Creation” and “birth from everlasting are two entirely different things” *De Trinitate*, 50 (1.35).

⁴⁵ *De Trinitate*, 52 (2.4).

⁴⁶ NPNF 2nd Series 9, lvii–lxv. cf. The “one faith is, to confess the Father in the Son and the Son in the Father through the unity of an indivisible nature, not confused but inseparable, not intermingled but identical, not conjoined but co-existing, not incomplete but perfect. For there is a birth not separation, there is as Son not an adoption; and He is God, not a creature.” *De Trinitate*, 149 (8.41).

⁴⁷ NPNF 2nd Series 9, xcvi.

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the incarnation was to meet the human need for progressive revelation, and it was also God's plan to elevate human nature through uniting human nature with the divine nature.⁴⁸ In fact, the relation of Christ's divinity and assumed humanity is more central than Calvary as the means of human salvation in Hilary's thinking. Some theologians (including Hilary) who consider creation as only a first step to the incarnation include Irenaeus (c. 130–200),⁴⁹ Hilary of Poitiers (c. 300–367),⁵⁰ Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395),⁵¹ John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308),⁵² Immanuel Kant (1724–1804),⁵³ Wolfhart Pannenberg (1928–),⁵⁴ Gordon D. Kaufman,⁵⁵ Hans Urs Von Balthasar,⁵⁶ and Karl Barth (1886–1968).⁵⁷

Hilary believed Christ lived on earth as God, so even in the cradle He upheld worlds. This echoed the omnipresence of Christ during incarnation presented by his contemporary Athanasius (293–373)⁵⁸ and later adopted by John Calvin (1509–1564).⁵⁹ This view of Christ led Hilary to de-emphasize Christ's sufferings. He claimed that Christ was impossible to suffering because feelings were absent to Him. The assumption of human nature into His divinity means that Christ is humanity and not just a human, a view later held by Karl Barth throughout his *Church Dogmatics*.

⁴⁸ “God the Word became flesh, that through His Incarnation our flesh might attain to union with God, the Word” *De Trinitate*, 43 (1.11).

⁴⁹ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, ANF 1, 546–547 (5.18.3). This is the recapitulation (*recapitulatio*) view that God intended to deify humans from the beginning through Christ's incarnation, but sin interrupted the plan for a later continuance when Christ became the God-man, adopting humanity within Himself, to deify it. See also Adolf Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, tr. Neil Buchanan (Eugene: Wipf, 1997; German, 1894), 2, 239–243.

⁵⁰ Hilary of Poitiers, *NPNF 2nd Series*, 9, xivi.

⁵¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *NPNF 2nd Series*, 5, 20, 21.

⁵² Richard Cross, “John Duns Scotus (c. 1266–1308)” in *The Dictionary of Historical Theology*, gen. ed., Trevor A. Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 166.

⁵³ Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 54.

⁵⁴ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, tr. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991; Ger. 1988), 1:327.

⁵⁵ Gordon D. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historicist Perspective* (New York: Scribner's, 1968), 383. He has an evolutionary progress of history, in which the purpose of human creation is the kingdom of God arriving in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

⁵⁶ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, trs. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, et al (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1982–1991), vols. 1–9; *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, tr. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1988–1998). See Kevin Mongrain, *The Systematic Thought of Hans Urs Von Balthasar: An Irenaean Retrieval* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2002), 53–73.

⁵⁷ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 3/1: 228–329.

⁵⁸ Athanasius, *Incarnation of The Word*, *NPNF 2nd Series* 4, 45.

⁵⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, tr. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke, 1962), 1.414, (2.13.4).

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Assumption of humanity to become divine compared to *adoption of one human* into divinity is one way of expressing the difference between Hilary and Arius. Salvation for Hilary seems identified more with the effect of Christ's divinity on the humanity He assumed, rather than on His work in the believer. Yet, paradoxically, he thinks more about salvation by works than by grace.⁶⁰

For Hilary, the Father

transcends space, and time, and appearance, and all the forms of human thought. He is without and within all things, He contains all and can be contained by none, is incapable of change by increase or diminution, invisible, incomprehensible, full, perfect, eternal, not deriving anything that He has from another, but, if ought be derived from Him, still complete and self-suffering.⁶¹

Further, he says, “God, I am sure, is subject to no change; His eternity admits not of defect or amendments, or gain or of loss.”⁶² Therefore Christ is not a “severed portion” of the Father’s substance, for God, being “impassible, cannot be divided.”⁶³ Hilary therefore opposed Valentinus, who maintained “that the Son is a development of the Father,” and Manichaeus, who declared that the Son is a “consubstantial part of the Father.”⁶⁴

Whereas Arians opposed seeing Christ as divine because the Father and Son would be two Gods, Hilary replied, “We must confess Father and Son before we can apprehend God as One and true”⁶⁵ because they are “inseparable in nature, not in Person.”⁶⁶ For “there is no other way to eternal life than the assurance that Jesus Christ, God the Only-begotten, is the Son of God.”⁶⁷ In short, Hilary presents the Father and Son as “One in name, One in nature, One in the kind of Divinity which they possess,” with “no confusion of Persons.”⁶⁸

Evaluation. Hilary successfully refutes Arianism’s claim that Christ had a beginning. In Hilary the eternal divinity of the Son is clear, yet a problem remains. Whereas Arius overemphasizes Christ’s humanity at the expense of His divinity, Hilary overemphasizes Christ’s divinity at the expense of His humanity. Christ’s assumption of humanity to unite with divinity is said to be God’s plan even if there had been a Fall of humans. Thus, a plan to divinize humanity

⁶⁰ NPNF 2nd Series 9, lxvi–xcvi.

⁶¹ *De Trinitate*, 62 (3.2).

⁶² *De Trinitate*, 65 (2.13).

⁶³ *De Trinitate*, 72 (4. 5); cf. God would be changeable if He “extended or developed a part of Himself to be His Son,” *De Trinitate*, 103 (6.17).

⁶⁴ *De Trinitate*, 74 (4.12); cf. The church believes the Son exists (against Sabellius), that He is God by nature (against Arius), and that He created the universe (against Photinus) *De Trinitate* 120 (7.6).

⁶⁵ *De Trinitate*, 95 (5.35).

⁶⁶ *De Trinitate*, 96 (5.35).

⁶⁷ *De Trinitate*, 106 (6.24).

⁶⁸ *De Trinitate*, 121 (7.8).

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is prior to the plan of salvation. Hence, the assumption of humanity into divinity is God's ultimate plan for humanity, which seems to suggest that the assumption of humanity in Christ's life is more important than the substitution for humanity in Christ's death.

The incarnation, for Hilary, is the uniting of the omnipresence of God with the universal presence of humanity. But how can that be accomplished in the light of the self-emptying of Philippians 2:5–11 and His birth as one human person by the Holy Spirit through Mary (Matt 1:20–23)? With respect to the Trinity, Hilary emphasizes the unity between the Father and Son, being one in name, nature, and divinity, but he does not spell out the inner relationship between the three Persons of the Trinity.

Augustine of Hippo (354–430). Augustine spent nearly thirty years (400–428) in later life writing fifteen books on the Trinity. The first seven books are biblical and the last eight rational. There is repetition and some tedious segments in the latter section. At times the clarity of the argument is hindered by Augustine's going into some non-related topics. In contrast to John Calvin's *Institutes* where the Reformer strove for brevity,⁶⁹ which helped his argument, Augustine was too lengthy. This is one reason that his writing, so extensive in the different issues he presented, sometimes has sufficient data for both Catholics and Protestants to select and use in support of their contrary views. Augustine appropriately completes his work with a prayer and an apology for his verbosity. It gives insight into the fact that his active mind could have written more. He prays, “Set me free, O God, from that multitude of speech which I suffer in my soul, wretched as it is in Thy sight, and flying for refuge to Thy mercy; for I am not silent in thoughts, even when silent in words.”⁷⁰

But it must be said that Augustine is an original thinker, and his reasoning about the Trinity is clearer than that of his predecessors.⁷¹ For Augustine, the Trinity is “not three Gods, but one God”⁷² Therefore Christ is God, but He is also human. A theme that runs through several books is the importance of making the distinction between Christ “in the form of God” and “in the form of a servant,” based on Philippians 2:5–11. When critics deny Christ's divinity because He expressed dependence upon His Father, they ignore the fact that Christ speaks “in the form of a servant,” and His speech doesn't negate the fact that He is also “in the form of God.” He is not one without the other, but both.

Augustine put it this way: “In the form of God He is the Word, ‘by whom all things are made’ [John 1:3]; but in the form of a servant He was ‘made of a

⁶⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of The Christian Religion*, tr. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clark, 1962), 1:250 (2.3.2).

⁷⁰ Augustine, NPNF 1st Series 3, *On The Trinity*, 228 (15.28.51). After as *On The Trinity*.

⁷¹ *On The Trinity*, 55 (3.0.1). Augustine was not able to read the contributions made in the Greek language. He says, “we are not so familiar with the Greek tongue” as the Latin tongue.

⁷² *On The Trinity*, 21 (1.5.8). Biblical references are placed in the text. They are in footnotes in the original.

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woman, made under the law, to redeem them that were under the law' [Gal 4:4, 5]. In like manner, the form of God He made man; in the form of a servant He was made man."⁷³ He enumerates a number of other examples.

According to the form of God, He and the Father are one [John 10:30]; according to the form of a servant He came not to do His own will, but the will of Him that sent Him [John 6:38]. According to the form of God, 'As the Father has life in Himself, so hath He given to the Son to have life in Himself [John 5:26]; according to the form of a servant, His 'soul is sorrowful even unto death,' and, 'O my Father,' He says, 'if it be possible, let this cup pass from me' [Matt 26:38, 39]. According to the form of God, 'He is the true God, and eternal life' [1 John 5:20]; according to the form of a servant, 'He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross' [Phil 2:8]; According to the form of God, all things that the Father hath are His [John 15:15], and 'All mine,' He says, 'are Thine, and Thine are mine' [John 17:10]; according to the form of a servant, the doctrine is not His own, but His that sent Him [John 7:16].⁷⁴

In taking the form of a servant, "the unchangeable form of God remained,"⁷⁵ for He did not "lose His immortality" when "He took mortal flesh."⁷⁶ What was the result of this union? Augustine says, "By joining therefore to us the likeness of His humanity, He took away the unlikeness of our unrighteousness; and by being made partaker of our mortality, He made us partakers of His divinity."⁷⁷ Being sent to this world, Christ is not inferior to the Father who sent Him, for He is "consubstantial" and "co-eternal with the Father," for "He is sent, not because He is unequal with the Father, but because He is 'a pure emanation (*manatio*) issuing from the glory of the Almighty God."⁷⁸ The Holy Spirit is one with the Father and the Son and proceeds from both. In this context, "the Father is the beginning (*principium*) of the whole divinity" or "deity,"⁷⁹ for the Father, Son, and Spirit are "one and the same from eternity to eternity, as it were eternity itself."⁸⁰

The appellation Father and Son "is eternal and unchangeable." "Wherefore, although to be the Father and to be the Son is different, yet their substance is not different; because they are so called, not according to substance, but according to relation, which relation, however, is not accident, because it is not changeable."⁸¹ In other words, they are both divine in substance, and only Father and

⁷³ *On The Trinity*, 24 (1.7.14).

⁷⁴ *On The Trinity*, 30 (1.11.22,23).

⁷⁵ *On The Trinity*, 41 (2.5.9).

⁷⁶ *On The Trinity*, 44 (2.9.15).

⁷⁷ *On The Trinity*, 71 (3.2.4).

⁷⁸ *On The Trinity*, 83 (4.20.27).

⁷⁹ *On The Trinity*, 84, 85 (4.20.29).

⁸⁰ *On The Trinity*, 85 (4.21.30).

⁸¹ *On The Trinity*, 89 (5.5.6).

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Son in relationship. Hence the Trinity are “one essence or substance and three persons.”⁸² The Trinity is not a triplex. In fact, “the Father alone, or the Son alone, or the Holy Spirit alone, is as great as is the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit together.”⁸³

In Books 9–15 there is much said about the imaging of the Trinity within the human realm which need not detain us here.⁸⁴ More important is what Augustine says about God as love. Along with believing each of the three members of the Trinity is love, Augustine suggests that the “Holy Spirit should be specially called Love.”⁸⁵ He gives two reasons why this is so: (1) because He is common to both the Father and the Son, proceeding from both,⁸⁶ and (2) because it is through the Holy Spirit that “the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts, by which love the whole Trinity dwells in us.”⁸⁷

Evaluation. Augustine properly speaks of the eternal oneness of the Trinity, that they are in a reciprocal relationship, and that God is love, and through the Holy Spirit God’s love is spread abroad in our hearts. What is needed is to spell out the implications of that relationship as fundamental to the Trinity, for if God was only one Person, how could He be a God of love? The greatest evidence for God being more than one Person is the fact that God is love, and so His love within the inner-Trinitarian Being of the Godhead is the foundational evidence for the Trinity.

Augustine’s singling out of the Spirit to especially be called Love because He is common to both Father and Son and proceeding from both began a tradition that dominates theology in the West, continued by a number of theologians, such as Richard of Victor (d. 1173), Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), and Karl Barth (1886–1968). It was unfortunate because it detracted from the love that each Person has in the Trinity for each other, and to that extent calls into question the reciprocal love of the Trinity, and thus questions the relational Trinity.

Augustine was the major influence on Trinitarian understanding in Western theology. He passed on problems that didn’t help clarify the doctrine. Augustine introduced (1) a tendency to separate the being of God as He is in Himself (ontology, imminent Trinity) from what He is in His acts in history (economic Trinity); (2) the actions of God outwards as undivided (*opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa*), not stating the different functions of each Person in the Trinity; (3) an inadequate concept of “person” with respect to the person of the Father, Son, and Spirit, so that Augustine presented God “unipersonally, with his personhood

⁸² *On The Trinity*, 92 (5.9.10).

⁸³ *On The Trinity*, 101 (6.8.9); 115, 116 (8.1.1–2).

⁸⁴ For example, myself, that which I love, and love itself, 126 (9.2.2); mind, love, knowledge, 128 (95.8); memory, understanding, and will, Book 10; in the mind as remembering, understanding, and loving itself, Book 14.

⁸⁵ *On The Trinity*, 216 (15.17.29).

⁸⁶ *On The Trinity*, 219 (15.19.37); cf. 225 (15.26.47).

⁸⁷ *On The Trinity*, 217 (15.18.32).

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located in his oneness, not his threeness.”⁸⁸ Augustine failed to appropriate and appreciate the Trinitarian contributions of his predecessors since Origen because of viewing their writings with his neoplatonic assumptions. He failed to distinguish between the threeness (*hypostasis*) and oneness (*ousia*) of God, which was central to the Cappadocians (Basil, Gregory Nazianzus, Gregory of Nyssa).

Augustine failed to see that the oneness of God cannot be separated from the threeness of God in the economy of salvation. For the Cappadocians, the three persons are what they are in their relations (ontology). This *ontological reality* was overlooked by Augustine because he stressed the *logical reality* of the one God, which ended up focusing on alleged analogies of the Trinity in the world.⁸⁹ Apparently the analogies of the Trinity in the world were more influential in Augustine’s theology than the Trinity in the economy of salvation.

The Trinity in the Early Church: East

It is true that Western theology is oriented towards the “imminent Trinity,” whereas Eastern theology is oriented towards the “economic Trinity.”⁹⁰ One could also argue that Western theology is more interested in sacramental soteriology, whereas Eastern theology is more interested in deification soteriology (Gr. *theosis*).⁹¹ They were both interested in the “God who is” and the “God revealed in human history.” It is important to hold together the *reality of God* (imminent Trinity) and the *revelation of God* (economic Trinity), for it is the reality of God that is revealed, and the revelation is the reality of God.

Origen (c. 185–254). To introduce Origen, we first mention his teacher and then colleague Clement of Alexandria (150–214), whom he succeeded as the leader of the Alexandrian school of theology at the age of eighteen. Clement believed Christianity is the ultimate of the truths found in various philosophical doctrines. As such, he was the founder of speculative theology and is alleged to have reduced Christ to a mere creature in a lost work titled *Hypotyposeis*. The first principle in his theology is that “the Father of the universe,” who has no parts, is indivisible, with “nothing antecedent” to Him as “the Unbegotten.” The idea of the Logos is central to Clement’s theology, though he failed to create a scientific theology because the supreme idea in theology is not the idea of the Logos but the idea of God. Clement claimed that it is through the Logos that

⁸⁸ Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1991), 3, 4.

⁸⁹ Gunton, 38–42. On the analogies, see 42–48.

⁹⁰ Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, new ed., 1994), 284.

⁹¹ See Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary P, 2002), 196–216; Christoforos Stavropoulos, “Partakers of the Divine Nature,” in *Eastern Orthodox Theology: A Contemporary Reader*, ed. Daniel B. Clendenin (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999, 1st 1995), 183–192; Georgios I. Mantzaridis, *The Deification of Man*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary P, 1984); and Panayiotis Nellas, *Deification in Christ: The Nature of the Human Person* trans. Norman Russell (Crestwood: St. Vladimir’s Seminary P, 1997, 1st 1987).

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humans are deified.⁹² This deification idea has dominated Greek Orthodox theology for centuries.

Origen's *De Principiis* (First Principles) was one of the first Christian systems of theology, and Origen's most important work (220–230).⁹³ In it he states that truth doesn't differ in any respect "from ecclesiastical and apostolic tradition."⁹⁴ So what the church says as well as what Scripture says is the tradition in which he writes. We will focus only on what he says about the Trinity. He says Christ "was born of the Father before all creatures." He assumes a body like ours, except that He was born of a virgin and the Holy Spirit, and He "did truly suffer" and die.⁹⁵

So he had a beginning as the begotten Son (divinity) as He later did as the begotten Son (humanity). Yet Origin can say, "His generation is as eternal and everlasting as the brilliancy which is produced from the sun. For it is not by receiving the breath of life that He is made a Son (i.e., like Adam) by *an outward act*, but by His own nature."⁹⁶

As such, the Son is not an emanation of the Father, as if only a part of Him.⁹⁷ Origen says, "primal goodness is to be understood as residing in God the Father, from whom both the Son is born and the Holy Spirit proceeds, retaining within them, without any doubt, the nature of that goodness which is in the source whence they are derived."⁹⁸ So the divine nature of Christ is the same as the Father's divine nature, even though it is unlike His nature in having a beginning, which means it isn't as eternal as the Father, and so to that extent must be different. Origen seems to infer that because Christ was begotten of the eternal Father, receiving His nature, that in some way He shared in that eternity with the Father. This seems to be supported in Origen's interpretation of the Father's omnipotence. He says that God the Father can only be omnipotent if other things exist from the beginning with Him over which He is omnipotent, or else He was not omnipotent before their existence, and so became omnipotent, which is contrary to God being unchangeable. Furthermore, the Father brought into existence everything through the Son. He concludes that "the existence of the Son is derived from the Father, but not in time, nor from any other beginning, except, as we have said, from God Himself."⁹⁹

⁹² Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 2, 5–36.

⁹³ Rufinus translated the four books (God, World, Freedom, and Revelation), omitting any ideas that seemed contrary to Origen's other written opinions, or "to our own belief," considering "such passages as being interpolated and forged by others." He also omitted some repetitions. See *ANF* 4, 237–238, 301.

⁹⁴ *ANF* 4, 239 (Preface).

⁹⁵ *ANF* 4, 240 (Preface).

⁹⁶ *ANF* 4, 247 (1.2.4).

⁹⁷ *ANF* 4, 248 (1.2.6).

⁹⁸ *ANF* 4, 251 (1.2.13).

⁹⁹ *ANF* 4, 251 (1.2.11).

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Origen claimed that the Father and Son work in saints and sinners, in rational beings and in dumb animals; whereas the Holy Spirit works in persons who are “walking along the way which leads to Jesus Christ.”¹⁰⁰ Things derive their existence from the Father, their rational nature from the Son, and their holiness from the Spirit.¹⁰¹

For Origen, “God is altogether impassible,”¹⁰² which means He is above feelings. On this basis, one would expect this to be true of Christ’s divine nature, but Origen even sees this to be true of His human nature, for “there existed in Christ a human and rational soul, without supposing that it had any feeling or possibility of sin.”¹⁰³

Evaluation. Contrary to Tertullian, Christ is not an emanation of the Father, for Christ is not a part of Him, but has His nature. Yet Origen seems to have a logical contradiction at the heart of His view of God, for how can Christ be the “only begotten Son” far back in the eons of eternity and at the same time be the One through whom the Father created all things, which he says needed to be from all eternity in order for the Father to be unchangeably omnipotent over all things? Furthermore, how could Christ’s divinity and humanity be impassible when He can “sympathize with our weaknesses . . . one who had been tempted in every way, just as we are” (Heb 4:15)?

Basil (c. 330–379). Basil’s *De Spiritu Sancto* (On The Spirit) was published in A.D. 364 and was written against Eunomius. Whereas Basil considered “being begotten” the essence of the Son, Eunomius considered “ingenerateness” the essence of the Divine, for the Father could never “impart His own proper nature to the begotten.” Hence the Son is neither begotten of the essence of God nor begotten from eternity. So Eunomius gave great dignity to Christ, but only as a creature.¹⁰⁴

Basil described the Eunomian heresy against the Trinity as follows: “There is one nature of Cause; another of Instrument; another of Place. So the Son is by nature distinct from the Father, as the tool from the craftsman; and the Spirit is distinct in so far as place or time is distinguished from the nature of tools or from that of them that handle them.”¹⁰⁵ Basil further states that the “object of the apostle in thus writing was not to introduce the diversity of nature, but to exhibit the notion of Father and of Son as unconfounded.”¹⁰⁶

The Eunomians placed the Father above the Son and the Son below the Father or at His right side. Basil rejects the location emphasis because Scripture speaks of the omnipresence of God (Psa 139:7–10), and the expression “right

¹⁰⁰ ANF 4, 253 (1.3.5).

¹⁰¹ ANF 4, 255 (1.3.8).

¹⁰² ANF 4, 277 (2.4.4).

¹⁰³ ANF 4, 283 (2.6.5).

¹⁰⁴ Prolegomena, NPNF 2ND Series 8, xxxiii–xxxvii, after as *De Spiritu Sancto*.

¹⁰⁵ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 5 (4.6).

¹⁰⁶ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 5 (5.7).

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hand' does not . . . indicate the lower place, but equality of relation," or "equality of honour."¹⁰⁷ The Eunomians also claimed that the nature of the Spirit is different, and His dignity inferior to that of the Father and the Son. But Basil replies that this isn't so because baptism is equally in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, "it is impossible to worship the Son, save by the Holy Ghost; impossible to call upon the Father, save by the Spirit of adoption."¹⁰⁹

Basil says the Spirit is ranked with God "on account of the natural fellowship" between them.¹¹⁰ In creation all three members of the Trinity were involved, so that the Father was the *original cause*, the Son the *creative cause*, and the Spirit the *perfecting cause*. It follows that "there is no sanctification without the Spirit." Besides this, the Spirit brought Christ into His incarnation, descended upon Him in His baptism, led Him into the wilderness of temptation, and empowered Him to cast out devils. He also imparts various gifts to the Church.¹¹¹ The Spirit is called "holy" and "good," as are the Father and the Son, and "He gets these titles from His natural and close relationship," for "He existed; He pre-existed; He co-existed with the Father and the Son before the ages."¹¹² The surpassing excellence of the nature of the Spirit isn't only seen through the shared titles with the Father and the Son and the "sharing in their operations, but also from His being like them "unapproachable in thought."¹¹³ Therefore Basil denounces the Eunomians for shrinking "from the fellowship of the Spirit with the Son and the Father."¹¹⁴

Evaluation. Athanasius equated the Greek words *ousia* and *hypostasis*, as if both meant "being." It was Basil who first distinguished between the terms, stating that in the Trinity there is one being (*ousia*) with three *hypostases* (manner of being). Put another way, the Trinity share one essence (*ousia*) as three Persons in the Trinity. In this way Basil made a significant contribution to the Doctrine of the Trinity and to its definition in the Council of Chalcedon (451).¹¹⁵

In his letter #235, Basil writes that we believe God from His works. "For as we perceive His wisdom, His goodness, and all His invisible things from the creation of the world (Rom 1:20) so we know Him." He goes on to state that He knows "what it is which is beyond my comprehension" and refers to God's essence through an analogy. The analogy is what one knows about Timothy: "I know him according to his form and other properties; but I am ignorant of his

¹⁰⁷ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 8–10 (6.13–15)

¹⁰⁸ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 16 (10.24).

¹⁰⁹ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 18 (11.27).

¹¹⁰ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 19 (13.30).

¹¹¹ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 23–25 (16. 37–39).

¹¹² *De Spiritu Sancto*, 30 (19. 48,49).

¹¹³ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 34 (32.53).

¹¹⁴ *De Spiritu Sancto*, 44 (38.70).

¹¹⁵ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology* (Westminster: Christian Classics, 1990), 3:228–230.

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essence.”¹¹⁶ In so doing he departs from Athanasius and prepares the way for later Eastern view that we know God through His energies, not His essence.¹¹⁷ It is the same focus, in part, that Immanuel Kant postulated in rejecting knowledge of God as He is in Himself, with its great influence on subsequent theology.

Basil’s defense of the Trinity is persuasive, and his reference to the “natural fellowship” between the three Persons of the Trinity is important. If He had developed this insight and placed it as the greatest proof of the equality of the eternal three members of the Trinity, it would have strengthened his otherwise good case.

Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 330–389). Gregory of Nazianzus (or Nazianzen) was the greatest orator of the Greek or Eastern church, perhaps with the exception of Chrysostom, and was called the “Christian Demosthenes,” so influential were his orations. The famous Jerome traveled from Syria to Constantinople to hear him. While Bishop of Constantinople, in the summer or fall of 380, Gregory delivered five theological orations on the Trinity. In them he defended the Nicene faith of his congregation, speaking against the Eunomian and Macedonian arguments,¹¹⁸ which are sometimes tedious for contemporary thinkers.¹¹⁹

Gregory Nazianzus begins by stressing the incomparable mystery of the Trinity. “It is impossible to express Him and yet more impossible to conceive Him.” His nature is “Incomprehensible and Illimitable.” It is not enough to say what God *is not*, but what *He is*.¹²⁰

He states that God is not circumscribed in a body, and yet “comprehension is one form of circumscription.”¹²¹ It is no more possible to apprehend the “Divine Nature” than for a man to step over his own shadow or a fish to glide about outside water.¹²² For what “God is in nature and essence no man ever yet has discovered, or can discover.”¹²³ In short, the subject of God is more difficult in proportion to being more perfect than any other.¹²⁴

For Nazianzus, the Trinity is “an equality of Nature and a Union of mind.” In it, “The Father is the Begetter and the Emitter; without passion of course, and

¹¹⁶ Basil, *NPNF*, letter 234, 1–2, 275.

¹¹⁷ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity: In Scripture, History, Theology, Worship* (Phillipsburg: P & R, 2004), 153.

¹¹⁸ Gregory Nazianzus, *NPNF* 2nd Series, vol. 7, 284–328 (after as Nazianzus, *NPNF*); Quasten, 3:236–242. Macedonius was bishop of Constantinople from 342–360 and so left that position twenty years before Gregory assumed the office. The Macedonians were fighters against the Spirit (*pneumatomachi*), saying He was less than God because nowhere in Scripture is He called God. Yet there is no certain evidence that Macedonius had anything to do with the cause of Macedonians. See Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 146–148, particularly for bibliographical data on the Eunomians.

¹¹⁹ Many of his 4th century oratorical techniques are also foreign to us today. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1910), 3:918, 921.

¹²⁰ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 289–291 (28.2. 4–5, 9),

¹²¹ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 290, 292 (28.2. 7,10).

¹²² Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 292, 293 (28.2.11, 12).

¹²³ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 294 (28.2.17).

¹²⁴ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 296 (28.2.21).

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without reference to time, and not in a corporeal manner. The Son is the Begotten, and the Holy Ghost the Emission.” There never was a time when the Father, Son, and Spirit were not.¹²⁵ Nazianzus says he was unable to discover anything on earth to compare to the nature of God (e.g., the sun, a ray, and light). “I was afraid in the first place that I should present a flaw in the Godhead, incapable of standing still.” For “there is nothing prior to God which could set Him in motion; for He is Himself the Cause of all things, and He has no prior Cause.”¹²⁶

Speaking about the Son, he notes biblical passages that speak of His divine nature and other passages that speak of His human nature. He claims that His divine nature is superior to sufferings, but not His human nature. The union of the “Higher nature” with the “inferior Nature” was “in order that I too might be made God so far as He is made man.” He was tempted as a Man but conquered as God; He hungered but fed thousands; He asks where Lazarus was laid as a Man, but raises Him as God.¹²⁷

He notes that the Spirit is called “the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, the Mind of Christ, the Spirit of The Lord, and Himself the Lord, the Spirit of Adoption, of Truth, of Liberty; the Spirit of Wisdom, of Understanding, of Counsel, or Might, of Knowledge, of Godliness, of the Fear of God” and the “Finger of God.” Nazianzus says the Spirit deifies a person in baptism and gives spiritual gifts, making Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, and Teachers.¹²⁸

In his *Oration on Holy Baptism* (preached at Constantinople in January 6, 381, a few months after the other five), he gives a good summary of his thinking on the Trinity:

This is given you to share, and to defend all your life, the One Godhead and Power, found in the Three in Unity, and comprising the Three separately, not unequal, in substances or natures, neither increased nor diminished by superiorities or inferiorities; in every respect equal, in every respect the same; just as the beauty and the greatness of the heavens is one; the infinite conjunction of Three Infinite Ones, Each God when considered in Himself; as the Father so the Son, as the Son so the Holy Ghost; the Three One God when contemplated together; Each God because Consubstantial; One God because of the Monarchia. No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illumined by the Splendour of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One.¹²⁹

Another summary which speaks more of the relations between the three Persons of the Trinity is given in *Oration on the Holy Lights*: “For to us there is but One God, the Father, *of Whom* are all things, and One Lord Jesus Christ, *by*

¹²⁵ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 301 (28.3.2–3).

¹²⁶ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 328 (28.5.31, 33).

¹²⁷ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 307–309 (28.3. 17–20).

¹²⁸ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 327 (28.5.29).

¹²⁹ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 375 (40.41).

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Whom are all things; and One Holy Ghost, *in Whom* are all things” (Italics added). Here are three “personalities of a nature which is one and unconfused.” Nazianzus goes on to describe the relationship between the three.

The Father is Father, and is Unoriginate, for He is of no one; the Son is Son, and is not unoriginate, for He is of the Father. But if you take the word Origin in a temporal sense, He too is Unoriginate, for He is the Maker of Time, and is not subject to Time. The Holy Ghost is truly Spirit, coming forth from the Father indeed, but not after the manner of the Son, for it is not by Generation but by Processions (since I must coin a word for the sake of clearness); for neither did the Father cease to be Unbegotten because of His begetting something, nor the Son to be begotten because He is of the Unbegotten (how could that be?), nor is the Spirit changed into Father or Son because he proceeds, or because He is God—though the ungodly do not believe it.¹³⁰

Evaluation. Gregory of Nazianzus is right to conclude that nothing in creation can adequately illustrate the Trinity. For the Trinity is one of a kind. His understanding of the Trinity presents the separateness and unity of the Trinity, so that they are equally the One God, while each having separate individuality as Persons. In spite of his recognition of the difficulty of describing the reality of the Trinity, he gives a clear and balanced description. Johannes Quasten says, “It is Gregory’s great merit to have given for the first time a clear definition of the distinctive characters of the divine Persons.” Whereas Basil could not express properly the Holy Spirit, and would only do so when in His presence in eternity, Nazianzus clearly described Him in the present. Compared to Basil, Nazianzus emphasized more strongly the unity of God and a clearer definition of the divine relations.¹³¹ As Nazianzus pointed out, he coined the word processions to accomplish this, and this word is used by subsequent writers on the Trinity.

Although Nazianzus made a contribution on the processions of the three Persons of the Trinity, more clearly than anyone before him, he did not speak of the reciprocal love in their internal relations. With focus on an immovable and immutable God, there is no room for a relational Trinity in his theology.

Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–395). The two Gregorius (Nazianzus and Nyssa), with Basil the Great (c. 330–379), are the three theologians from Cappadocia, Asia Minor (Turkey), who formulated the doctrine of the Trinity which largely contributed to the orthodox view. In doing so they defeated the Arian challenge to this doctrine, which Eunomius supported. Gregory of Nyssa’s two books “Against Eunomius” (382–383) defend his master (and brother) Basil, and present the eternal existence of all three members of the Trinity.

Eunomius stated that the “whole account of his doctrines is summed up in the Supreme and Absolute Being, and in another Being existing by reason of the

¹³⁰ Nazianzus, *NPNF* 7, 356 (39. 12).

¹³¹ Johannes Quasten, *Patrology*, 249, 250.

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First, but after It though before all others, and in a third Being not ranking with either of these but inferior to the one as to its cause, to the other as to the energy.”¹³² Gregory rejects this distinction between the Father as proper and supreme, with the Son and Spirit as inferior to Him.¹³³ He points out the similarity of this position with that of the Jews, for the “Jews thought to honour the Almighty by excluding the Son from equal reverence: these men, by annihilating the glory of the Son, think to bestow more honour on the Father.”¹³⁴ Gregory considers it absurd that Eunomius gives an elaborate recitation of degrees and differences within the Trinity with reference to their works and energies.¹³⁵

Gregory goes to the heart of the problem—how this reasoning effects the relationship of the Trinity. He says,

since this heresy parts the Son from any essential relationship with the Father, and adopts the same view of the Spirit as estranged from any union with the Father or the Son, and since it also affirms throughout that the Son is the work of the Father, and the Spirit the work of the Son, and that these works are the results of a purpose, not of nature, what grounds has he for declaring that this work of a will is an “order inherent in the matter,” and what is the drift of this teaching, which makes the Almighty the manufacturer of such a nature as this in the Son and the Holy Spirit, where transcendent beings are made such as to be inferior the one to the other?¹³⁶

Gregory points out that, according to Eunomius, the Father was alone before the Son, and later the Spirit existed, and their relationship was such that “the next being is dependent, and the third more dependent still.” He expresses in his own words the two views of Eunomius:

He attacks the community of substance with two suppositions; he says that we either name as Father and as Son two independent principles drawn out parallel to each other, and then say that one of these existencies is produced by the other existence; or else we say that one and the same essence is conceived of, participating in both names in turn, both being Father, and becoming Son, and itself produced in generation from itself.

Gregory responds with Christ’s words, “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30). He states that Christ “conveys by that confession of a Father exactly the truth that He Himself is not a first cause, at the same time that He asserts by His union with the Father their common nature.” This counters Sabellius, who confused the individuality of the members of the Trinity, so that the One God comes

¹³² *Against Eunomius*, 1, NPNF 2nd Series, 5, 50 (1.13). After as *Against Eunomius*.

¹³³ *Against Eunomius*, 51–59 (1.14–20).

¹³⁴ *Agaisnt Eunomius*, 60 (1.21).

¹³⁵ *Agaisnt Eunomius*, 65–67 (1.24).

¹³⁶ *Against Eunomius*, 73 (1.28).

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in three modes of existence as Father, then as Son, and finally as the Holy Spirit in different periods of history. It also counters Arius, who considered Christ a created being and thus inferior to the Father.¹³⁷

Gregory quotes Christ's great commission as important to the topic. For he said, "Go, teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Repeatedly he notes that all three share the "one Name." Gregory says, "we should believe on the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. For the differentiation of the subsistences makes the distinction of Persons clear and free from confusion, while the one Name standing in the forefront of the declaration of the Faith clearly expounds to us the unity of essence of the Persons."¹³⁸

Gregory ends his first book by saying of Eunomius, "Do ye not perceive that he stirs himself up against the Name at which all must bow, so that in time the Name of the Lord shall be heard no more, and instead of Christ Eunomius shall be brought into the Churches? Do ye not yet consider that this preaching of godlessness has been set on foot by the devil as a rehearsal, preparation, and prelude of the coming of Antichrist? For he who is ambitious of showing that his own words are more authoritative than those of Christ, and of transforming the faith from the Divine Names and the sacramental customs and tokens to his own deceit,—what else, I say, could he properly be called, but only Antichrist?"¹³⁹

Evaluation. Gregory was a speculative theologian, a mystic, and the most gifted of the three Cappadocian theologians. No other Church Father of the 4th century used philosophy as much as he did. He was profoundly influenced by Plato. It should be noted that Gregory was influenced by Origen more than any other theologian of the Nicene age, even though he differed from him in some ways. Like Origen, he used the allegorical method of biblical interpretation. They both believed Christ's humanity was assumed into His divinity so a "fully human" nature ceased to exist.¹⁴⁰ This impacts Gregory's understanding of salvation and his understanding of the Trinity in relation to humans.

Like Hilary of Poitiers, Gregory teaches that the Fall did not, of itself, necessitate the incarnation of Christ, for it was the original plan of God that Christ become human in order to take humanity up into Himself to divinize it through the union of the divine and human.¹⁴¹ As in Hilary of Poitiers, this calls into question the purpose of Christ's death, and hence His saving mission through death and resurrection. By contrast, Gregory of Nazianzus said humans are deified in their baptism.

¹³⁷ *Against Eunomius*, 81 (1.34).

¹³⁸ *Against Eunomius*, 101–103 (2.1,2).

¹³⁹ *Against Eunomius*, 239 (11.5).

¹⁴⁰ Quasten, 3:254, 283, 284. To note the comparisons between Gregory and Origen, see NPNF 2nd Series 5, 14–23. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3:907.

¹⁴¹ NPNF 2nd Series 5, 20, 21.

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In his treatise to Eustathius (*On the Holy Trinity, and the Godhead of The Holy Spirit*), Gregory of Nyssa appealed to Scripture: “Let the inspired Scripture, then, be our umpire, and the vote of truth will surely be given to those whose dogmas are found to agree with the Divine words.”¹⁴² Yet, like Origen, he brings many ideas into his theology that are not based on Scripture. His theological system, *The Great Catechism*, is full of human reasoning, often taking things of this world as analogies, and he only gets to Scripture at the end. So the principle about Scripture is good, but not carried out. Origen also produced a theological system *On First Principles*, and so in this respect also Gregory was like Origen.

In his treatise to Ablabius titled *Not Three Gods*, Gregory states why the Trinity are One God and not three Gods. He compares the Trinity with three men. Three men perform an action, and you have three acts. But when the Trinity act, there is only one action. For example, each member of the Trinity is involved in the work of salvation. There is only one plan of salvation, and there are not three Saviors. So every operation from God to creation “has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁴³

In his treatise *On The Holy Trinity*,¹⁴⁴ Gregory states that the identity of operations between the Trinity indicates a “community of nature,” from which he argues the inseparability of the Holy Spirit from the Father and Son. The focus is on their shared external involvement with others, but nothing is said about their inner-relationship with each other. In his writings, Gregory does speak of the procession from Father through Son and Holy Spirit, but their external acts and processions are not the same as speaking about how each relate to the other two in eternal and reciprocal love.

Council of Nicea (325)

The Council of Nicea (325) was the first ecumenical Council in Church history, with over three hundred bishops from the East and a few bishops from the West. It was largely an Eastern Council because the problem of Arianism was in the East. It was called by the emperor Constantine to unify the empire following a schism caused by Arianism. The Council was a religious matter due to doctrinal divisions, but it was equally a matter of state, and the emperor gave the opening address on the importance of unity.

Arius (b. 250). As mentioned previously, Satan hates Christ, and even more so after his defeat at Calvary (Rev 12:9–10). So the devil “is filled with fury, because he knows that his time is short” (v. 12b). “When the dragon (Satan, v. 9) saw that he had been hurled to the earth, he pursued the woman who had

¹⁴² Gregory Nyssa, *NPNF*, 2nd Series, 5, *On The Holy Trinity*, 327.

¹⁴³ Gregory Nyssa, *NPNF*, 2nd Series, 5, *Not Three Gods*, 331–339.

¹⁴⁴ *On the Holy Spirit*, 326–330.

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given birth to the male child” (v.13). The male child is Christ, who ascended to heaven (v. 5). The woman of Revelation 12 represents believers in Christ, for she wears a *stephanos*, a crown of victory (v. 1). The woman of Revelation 17 represents a counterfeit church system, for she is seated on “a scarlet beast that was covered with blasphemous names” (Rev 17:3b). Both women are in the desert (Rev 12:6, 14; 17:3). True believers flee to the desert after Christ’s ascension (Rev 12: 6, 14), the dragon (Satan, Rev 12:9) pursues them (Rev 12:13), and God takes care of them (Rev 12:14). Here are the two sides of the cosmic controversy after Christ’s ascension and hence in the Christian church.

It is not surprising, in this context, to see how much controversy there was about Christ in early patristic theology. Satan was doing everything he could to diminish Christ, to make him less than God, to bring him to the human level, in order to make His life and death of no significance. Satan could not deny that Christ defeated Him in not giving in to his temptations and defeated him on Calvary. Satan could not change these facts about Christ, so he works to change the way humans view Christ.

One divisive issue was the relation of the Son to the Father. As early as Justin Martyr (c. 114–165) in his *First Apology*, we find Christ referred to as “the first-born of the unbegotten God”¹⁴⁵ What did “first-born” mean? For Origen (c. 185–254), it meant (1) Christ was the Son of the Father from eternity, and (2) the Son and Spirit are subject to the Father. This latter idea led to the problem of subordinationism, which influenced Arius.¹⁴⁶ For Arius, God is immutable, and therefore Christ had to be made out of nothing by God, so there was a time when He was not. So Christ is not eternal and does not proceed from God’s substance. In arriving at these two conclusions, Arius goes much further than Origen in diminishing Christ to not much more than any other created being.

Athanasius (293–373). Gregory Nazianzen, in his oration *On The Great Athanasius*, says he was “first in the holy Synod of Nicea, the gathering of the three hundred and eighteen chosen men, united by the Holy Ghost, as far as in him lay, he stayed the disease [of Arius]. Though not yet ranked among the Bishops, he held the first rank among the members of the Council, for preference was given to virtue just as much as to office.”¹⁴⁷ It may be instructive to gain an insight into the Arian views through the words of Athanasius.

¹⁴⁵ Justin Martyr, *First Apology*, ANF 1: 180 (53).

¹⁴⁶ C. C. Kroeger, “Origen,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), 2nd ed., 870.

¹⁴⁷ Gregory Nazianzen, *Oration 21: On The Great Athanasius, Bishop of Alexandria*, NPNF, 2nd Series, 8, 273 (21:13, 14), words in brackets added. See footnote: “Athanasius was present as theological assistant to Alexander of Alexandria.” By contrast, V. L. Walter says Athanasius was at Nicea, but didn’t take part much in the Council that met on May 20, 325. Three years later (328), Athanasius became bishop of Alexandria and played a major role in defeating Arianism, which lived on after the Council. See V. L. Walter, “Arius, Arianism,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, 95, 96.

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“God was not always a Father. When he was God alone he was not yet a Father; later he became a Father.” “The Son was not always,” for since all things came into being from nothing, and all existing creatures and works came into being, even the Word of God himself “came into being from nothing,” and “there was once when he was not,” and “he was not before he came into being,” but even he himself had a “beginning of his own creation. Arius said God was alone, and the Word and Wisdom were not yet. Then God, wishing to fashion us, made a certain one and name him Word, Wisdom, and Son, in order that through him he might fashion us . . . Arius dared to say, “The Word is not true God . . . in all respects the Word is alien and unlike the substance and property of the Father . . . The substances of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are divided in nature, estranged, detached, alien, and nonsharers in one another.”¹⁴⁸

In his *Four Discourses Against the Arians*, Athanasius said, “It is more pious and more accurate to signify God from the Son and call him Father, than to name him from his works and call him Unoriginate.”¹⁴⁹ In focusing on the relationship between Father and Son, rather than on the works of the Son, Nicea followed the lead of Athanasius.¹⁵⁰

Eusebius, the church historian, was present at the Council, and in writing to his church included the statement issued at the close of the deliberations which condemned Arius.

We believe in one God, Father, all-sovereign, maker of all things seen and unseen, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, that is only-begotten from the substance of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten not made, *homoousios* with the Father, through whom all things, those in heaven and those on earth, came into existence, who on account of us men and on account of our salvation came down and was made flesh, was made man, suffered, arose on the third day, went up into heaven, is coming to judge living and dead. And in the Holy Spirit. And those who say, ‘There was once when he was not’ and ‘Before he was begotten, he was not’ and that ‘he came into existence from nothing,’ or those who allege that the Son of God is ‘from another *hypostasis* or substance’ or is created or mutable or different, the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians*, Book 1 in *Sources of Early Christian Thought: The Trinitarian Controversy*, tr. & ed. William G. Rush (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 66–68.

¹⁴⁹ Athanasius, *Four Discourses Against The Arians*, NPNF 2nd Series, 4: 326 (1.34).

¹⁵⁰ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 6.

¹⁵¹ Eusebius of Caesarea, *Letter to His Church concerning the Synod at Nicea*, in *Sources of Early Christian Thought: The Trinitarian Controversy*, 58, 59

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Arius was banished to Illyricum, where he continued writing and appealed to a growing “circle of political and ecclesiastical adherents of Arianism.” Emperor Constantine, who was not theologically equipped, made contact with Arius in 332 or 333, which led to a meeting of the two in Nicomedia in 335. Arius handed the emperor a confession that Constantine considered sufficient to have him reinstated, and this reinstatement took place. Hence, “instead of resolving the issues, the Council of Nicea launched an empire-wide christological debate by its condemnation of Arius.”¹⁵²

Living subsequent to the Council of Nicea, one could be persuaded that Arianism would defeat the biblical view of Christ.

Beginning with Constantius, the court was often Arian. Five times Athanasius of Alexandria was driven in to exile, interrupting his long episcopate. A series of synods repudiated the Nicene symbols in various ways: Antioch in 341 and Arles in 353. In 355 Liberius of Rome and Ossius of Cordoba were exiled, and a year later Hilary of Poitier was sent to Phrygia. In 360 in Constantinople, all earlier creeds were disavowed and the term *ousia* (substance) was outlawed. The Son was simply declared to be “like the Father who begot him.”¹⁵³

The Cappadocians (4th Century)

The final resolution was made through the Cappadocian theologians Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus. They “divided the concept of substance (*ousia*) from that of person (*hypostasis*) and thus allowed the orthodox defenders of the original Nicene formula and the later moderate or semi-Arian party to unite in an understanding of God as one substance and three persons. Christ therefore was one substance with the Father (*homoousion*) but a distinct person.”¹⁵⁴ Nicea did not address the issue of God’s impassibility, and the Cappadocians only acknowledged a *relation of origins* in the Trinity, and in so doing did not penetrate to the biblical history that reveals the *relation among the three Persons* of the Trinity.¹⁵⁵

This led to the Council of Constantinople (381), which reaffirmed the Nicene Creed and added an article on the divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit. So the Nicean-Constantinopolitan Councils presented the official understanding of the Trinity as it was understood near the end of the 4th century,¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² Walter, 95.

¹⁵³ Walter, 95.

¹⁵⁴ Walter, 96.

¹⁵⁵ Cf. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford, 1997), 108. In her chapter “God in Communion with Us: The Trinity,” Catherine Mowry LaCugna notes that the Cappadocians made “*person rather than substance*” the primary ontological category. See *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective*, ed. Catherine Mowry LaCugna (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 86.

¹⁵⁶ Schaff, 3:349, 350.

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even though Arianism was not finally absorbed by Orthodoxy until the 7th century.¹⁵⁷ The theology of the West and the East shifted focus after Nicea from questions of function (what God does) to ontology (what God is).¹⁵⁸

The Cappadocians contributed to the final defeat of the Arians, who believed Christ was not an eternal equal with God. Kenneth Scott Latourette writes, “The difficulty with the Cappadocian effort was that it tended to make God a somewhat vague, colorless abstraction.” In other words, “For one not schooled in Platonism, this conception of God might place an obstacle to that love of God which is both the primary obligation and high privilege of men.”¹⁵⁹ Here is another example of a failure to grasp the fact that God is a relational God.

Summary

Various heretical views about God were promoted in the early centuries,¹⁶⁰ and theologians responding to these heresies even spawned some heresies of their own. Some of these include (a) the plan for God to unite humanity to Himself, even if the Fall of humans hadn’t taken place; (b) this union was considered a divinization of humanity which challenged the unique divinity of God; and (c) salvation through Christ assuming humanity called into question salvation through Christ’s substitutionary atonement, as did (d) a human’s divinization in baptism. All these had to do with *God*, for the cosmic controversy is against God.

This is no surprise to students of Scripture, for Christ said to His disciples, “I am sending you out like lambs among wolves” (Luke 10:3), and Paul said to the Ephesian elders, “I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears” (Acts 20:29–31). Paul announced to the Thessalonian church that “the secret power of lawlessness is already at work” (2 Thess 2:7a).

We did not include John of Damascus (c. 675–749) in this chapter because he comes after the first four centuries. Nevertheless, as the last great Father of

¹⁵⁷ Walter, 96.

¹⁵⁸ Catherine Mowry LaCugna, “The Trinitarian Mystery,” in *Systematic Theology: Roman Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Francis Schüssler Fiorenza and John P. Galvin (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 1:171.

¹⁵⁹ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity: Beginnings to 1500* (Peabody: Prince, 1997), 163.

¹⁶⁰ Irenaeus (120–202) names some of them (Valentinus, Ptolemaeus) with their history in his *Against Heresies*, Book 1, ANF 1 315–358. He refers to other heretics such as Marcion, Cerinthus, and Basilides. They based their views on human ideas and not on the Scriptures. They claim to have “discovered the unadulterated truth” and “have knowledge of the hidden mystery.” Irenaeus appropriately calls them “slippery serpents” (*Against Heresies*, Book 3, ANF 1, 414–415).

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the Eastern church,¹⁶¹ his *magnum opus*, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, is the first volume to bring together the views of preceding theologians.¹⁶² It seems the sole attention was given to the Father's *causation* of the Son and the Spirit to prove their deity, but nothing is said about their eternal loving fellowship with each other as the God of love. This is the greatest lack in Western and Eastern theology. They lacked comprehension of a relational Trinity.

The classical view of God's immutability, that He does not change, is the key to the way early theologians argued to combat heresies that denied the divinity of Christ and later those that denied the divinity of the Spirit. Because God is immutable, He could not become the Father of the Son in the incarnation, for that would be a change that would question the fact that He is God. Therefore it was necessary to present the idea that there is an eternal generation of the Son by the Father in order to support the divinity of both, that they were both eternal and both beyond change. They said God the Father is eternally unoriginate (without origin, self-existent, without dependence upon any other), and God the Son is eternally begotten of the Father. In coming to God the Spirit, they said He eternally proceeds from the Father through the Son, or the Spirit and the Son proceed from the Father (the *Filioque* debate).

It was the view of an unchanging God that forced theologians to go back into the Trinity and suggest these *two eternal and internal movements of generation and procession*, whereas Scripture is silent about these two movements to protect the divinity of all three Persons of the Trinity.

Biblical View of God

Christ came to reveal the Father (John 14:9b) and bring Him glory (John 17:4). The Holy Spirit comes to reveal truths not given by Christ and bring glory to Christ (John 16:12–14). Both Christ and the Spirit reveal the loving relation among the Trinity in their missions on behalf of the Father and the Son. Christ prayed that His followers "may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I in you" (John 17:21a). The Father loves the Son (Matt 3:17; John 10:17; 17:24b), which reveals the loving relationship among the Trinity. It is no wonder "the fruit of the Spirit is love" (Gal 5:22, 23), for "God is love" (1 John 4:8).

¹⁶¹ Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity*, 237.

¹⁶² John of Damascus, *Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*, NPNF, Second Series, 10, vii. In Book 1, John of Damascus spells out the relationship of the Father, Son, and Spirit only in the context of generation from the Father (for the Son) and procession from the Father through the Son (for the Spirit). It is clear that the *generation and procession are presented to prove the divinity of the Son and the Spirit*. Classical theism emphasizes the immutability of God (He is unchanging). Hence, it is argued, if God the Father only became the Father of the Son, then He would change from what He was before He became the Father of the Son, and this "is the worst form of blasphemy." It is admitted that "the nature of the generation and the procession is quite beyond comprehension." The generation/procession language is about causation, for the Father is the cause or origin of the Son and the Spirit, and the generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit are simultaneous. NPNF, Second Series, 10, 1–10 (1.1–9).

GULLEY: A ONE-SIDED TRINITY IN THEOLOGY

The Trinity are in an eternal, reciprocal relationship of love. But how can this biblical view of God be possible when God is immutable and impassible, unmoved by the feelings of others? How can God so love the world, and each Person of the Trinity have a part in Christ's coming to this world to demonstrate their love? The idea of God's immutability (except for His character as unchanging) and impassibility is not biblical, but comes from Greek philosophy. Classical Greek philosophy denies the possibility of an incarnation, for God cannot come across an unbridgeable gulf (*chorizmos*) that separates the world of gods from the world of humans.

This same kind of aloof God, detached from things human, with no empathy for human needs, is the God of classical theology, even though theologians believed in the incarnation. This lacks logical consistency. It is the God who elects a few and rejects the rest of humans and casts them into unending hell. By contrast, Christ says to the Father, you "have loved them even as you have loved me" (John 17:23b), and John says, "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1 John 1:3b), for God so loved the world that He gave Jesus to become the Savior of the world (John 3:16). "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God!" (1 John 3:1).

Continuing Impact

The relational Trinity is absent in early western and eastern theology. Early theologians sought to defend the divinity of Christ and the Spirit through the one God, believing that aloofness is compatible with God. If classical theism had penetrated past the one God to the relational Trinity in eternal reciprocal love, their theology would have been dynamic, not static, and would have precluded the need for contemporary theism (Process and Openness theology), which reacted against the static, immutable, and impassible views of Classical theism.

Contemporary views of God are little better than classical views of God because they do not think through the implications of a relational Trinity. Whereas classical theism makes God too transcendent, contemporary theism makes God too imminent. The answer to both is the biblical view of a relational Trinity, with a balance between transcendence and imminence that does justice to God's love in both internal and external relations.

Conclusion

So there are two internal relations in the Trinity before us: (1) the eternal generation of the Son from the Father, and the eternal procession of the Spirit from either the Father through the Son, or from both Father and Son; and (2) the eternal reciprocal relation of love between the three Persons of the Trinity. The former says nothing about God being a relational God, as the God of love.

It is logical that the enemy would do all he could to destroy belief in the Trinity, because once a divine Trinity is accepted, then God must be a God of

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love, for no “single divine Person” could be a God of love. It serves the enemy’s purpose well to portray God in a way that calls into question His love, for this helps his claim that God is not love. It serves Satan well to have theologians speak of God as immutable and impassible because this is compatible with the non-biblical internal relations of generation/procession, but incompatible with the biblical internal relations of love. Thus error triumphed over truth. Therefore, it is the *eternal relationship of love between the Father, Son, and Spirit that provides the most important biblical evidence that they are a Trinity, while at the same time they are One God of love.*

Norman R. Gulley earned his Ph.D. degree in Systematic Theology from the University of Edinburgh and is Research Professor of Systematic Theology at Southern Adventist University, where he has taught since 1978. He has been a pastor and missionary. He has served as Chair of the Religion Department at Madison College and of the Theology Department at Japan Missionary College. He was also founding Dean of the Graduate Seminary in the Philippines. He has written extensively for leading SDA journals, authored four Sabbath School quarterlies, and written several books—including *Christ Our Refuge* (Pacific Press, 1996), *Christ is Coming!* (Review and Herald, 1998), the *Prolegomena* to a three volume systematic theology (Andrews UP, 2003), and *Satan’s Trojan Horse and God’s End-Time Way to Victory* (Review & Herald, 2004).

ngulley@southern.edu