

The Orthodox Doctrine of the Trinity

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Part 1: The Doctrine in Summary

The doctrine of the Trinity is the primary doctrine of the Christian faith. It expresses our distinctive Christian understanding of God. Sadly, many contemporary evangelicals are inadequately informed on this doctrine, and the evangelical community is deeply and painfully divided on this matter. In seeking to promote unity among evangelicals by establishing what is to be believed about our triune God, I outline in summary what I conclude is the historic orthodox doctrine of the Trinity and then provide a biblical and theological commentary on my summary in a second and longer article, which follows.

When I had concluded my work in draft, I wrote to twelve well-informed, and mostly very well-known, academic theologians representing Roman Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical commitments, all of whom have published on the doctrine of the Trinity, asking them to read critically and comment on what I had put to paper. A few I knew personally; most I did not. To my very pleasant surprise, I received nine positive replies. Some asked for a few changes to the wording or the addition of a few lines in clarification, but otherwise, they agreed that what I have written is a faithful and accurate account of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity as it has been historically articulated. I do not give their names, as it would be unfair to suggest that my words exactly capture their thinking at all points, and because I dared not ask them to read my work a second time after I had edited it. I have given the list of the endorsing readers to the editor of this journal who holds it in strict confidence.

1. God is one in being and three persons

The New Testament speaks of the one God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. This revelation led to the development in history of the doctrine of the Trinity, which affirms there is one God in three persons who are each fully God.

The church fathers argued that the three persons are the one God because they share the one divine being/essence/substance/nature. God's unity is the unique *being-in-communion* of the eternal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. So profound is this unity of being that, without ceasing to be who they are, each person co-inheres (*perichoresis*) in the other. Their unity of being is not to be thought of impersonally, abstractly, or independently of the divine persons. There is no divine being apart from the persons.



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The New Testament speaks unambiguously of three divine persons identified as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, who are eternally related and never confused. These names given in revelation, the pro-Nicene fathers concluded, indicate how the persons are eternally and immutably distinguished. The Father as Father is unbegotten God, the Son as Son is begotten God, and the Spirit is God the Spirit because he proceeds from the Father or from the Father and the Son. On this basis, orthodoxy holds that the differing origination implied by the three divine names is what primarily and eternally differentiates the three divine persons.

In Trinitarian discourse, the word *person* is not understood to imply an individual in the sense of a conscious willing subject. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three individuals each with a distinct will and consciousness, but rather the one God in tripersonal existence and self-revelation, distinguished as Father, Son, and Spirit, but not divided or separated in any way. Other terms may be used to speak of the divine three—*hypostasis*, subsistence, mode of being, etc.—but the word “person,” despite its limitations when used of God, would seem to be the most appropriate word to speak of those revealed as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the Bible.

2. The three divine persons work inseparably

Because the three divine persons are the one God, the Scriptures consistently depict the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as working together in unison in all things. They create, rule, and redeem as the one God. On this basis, the pro-Nicene fathers developed their doctrine of “inseparable operations.” This doctrine recognizes that each of the divine three has distinctive works that are person-defining; for example, the Father sends the Son, the Son takes on human flesh and dies on the cross, and the Spirit is poured out on the day of Pentecost. The doctrine of inseparable operations adds the recognition that, in all divine operations/works/functions, the three divine persons work as one because they are the one God. They are inseparable in what they do.

3. The three divine persons have one will

Because the three divine persons are the one God, they possess one will. To suggest that each of the three divine persons has his own will is to breach divine unity. It implies three gods, the error called tritheism. Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son, fully God and fully man, has two wills, one human one divine; nevertheless, the Son in the form of a servant gladly does the will of the Father. His human will wills to conform to the one divine will.

4. The three divine persons rule as one

Because the three divine persons are the one God, working inseparably with one will, they rule as one; they share the same

sovereignty. Each is “the Lord”; each is omnipotent God, and thus there is only one divine rule. The pro-Nicene fathers thus spoke of the one *monarchia* or rule of the triune God. This is not to be confused with their teaching that the Father as the begetter of the Son is to be thought of as the *mia archē* (one source) of the person of the Son. It was the Arians who taught that God the Father was the *monarchia*, the sole and absolute ruler whom even the Son had to obey.

For the pro-Nicene fathers, the three divine persons are one in being and power; these things are two sides of one coin. For the Arians, the three divine persons are not one in being and thus not one in power. They are hierarchically ordered in being and power; the Son and the Spirit are subordinate to the Father.

5. The divine persons’ relations in eternity and operations in the world are ordered

Although the three divine persons are the one God, working inseparably with one will, their life is ordered. Both in eternity and in the world of space and time, how they relate to each other and how they operate follow a consistent pattern that is unchanging and irreversible. This order in divine life is seen in many ways. For example, there is a processional order: the Father begets the Son and breathes out the Spirit in eternity and sends them both into the world in time. There is a numerical order: the Father may be thought of as the first person of the Trinity, the Son the second, and the Spirit the third. And there is order in how God comes to us and we to him: the Father comes *to* us *through* the Son *in* the Spirit, and we come *to* the Father *through* the Son *in* the Spirit. This order in divine life and operations, it needs to be stressed, does not envisage any sub-ordering in divine life. Ranking or hierarchically ordering the three divine persons in being or power introduces the Arian error.

6. The Son, in taking human flesh, subordinated himself for our salvation

In becoming incarnate in history, the Son of God did not cease to be God in all might, majesty, and authority, but he did “empty himself,” take the form of a servant, and become the second Adam to win our salvation by going to the cross.

This means that not everything that is true of Jesus Christ in his earthly life and ministry—specifically, what is creaturely in him—can be read back into the eternal or immanent Trinity. The Son continues as God and man after his resurrection, but in returning to heaven, his humanity is exalted and glorified, and he rules as the one risen and ascended Lord and as the Mediator of our salvation. We rightly, therefore, make a contrast between the Son’s earthly ministry “in the form of a servant,” or, as Reformed theology calls it, his “state of humiliation,” and his heavenly reign as Lord and King, in all might, majesty, and authority, in “the form of God,” or, as it is called in Reformed theology, in his “state of exaltation.”

On this issue, the pro-Nicene fathers and the Arians parted company most sharply. The Arians read back into the eternal life of God the subordination of the Son seen in the incarnation; the pro-Nicene fathers refused to do this. For them, the Son’s subor-

dination and obedience to the Father was restricted to his earthly ministry in “the form of a servant.”

7. The limitations of creaturely language to speak of the triune Creator

In speaking of God, we must use human words. We have nothing else, and God must use human words to speak to us if we are to understand him. However, the words of human language that refer to our created world are inadequate when used of God, who is not a creature: he is eternal and uncreated. All the key trinitarian terms—*father*, *son*, *person*, *relation*, *unity*, *sending/mission*, *begotten*, and *procession*—are thus not to be taken univocally (or, to use everyday, nontechnical language, literally) when used of God. The content of the title *Father* and other key trinitarian terms, when used of God, is ultimately revealed knowledge apprehended by long and prayerful reflection on God’s self-revelation to us through Scripture. To give these terms content primarily on the basis of human experience results in God being depicted as a human being, which is idolatry. The Arians made this error. They took the names *Father* and *Son* and the term *begotten* literally and, on this basis, argued that the divine Son came into being in time and, like all human sons, was set under the authority of his Father.

A similar error occurs when it is assumed that, because the divine persons are spoken of in male terminology, God is male and not female. Virtually all Christian theologians agree that God is genderless; he is Spirit.

These comments on the limits of human language remind us of another fundamental truth: Human beings cannot comprehend God. All our attempts to speak of God and his triune life in eternity are frail and beggarly. We are creatures; he is the Creator, the Lord God omnipotent before whom we can only bow in worship and adoration.

8. The Trinity is not our social agenda

The way in which the three divine persons relate to one another in eternity is neither a model for nor prescriptive of human relationships in the temporal world. God’s life in heaven does not set a social agenda for human life on earth. Divine relations in eternity cannot be replicated on earth by created human beings, and fallen beings at that. What the Bible asks disciples of Christ to do, both men and women, is to exhibit the love of God to others and to give ourselves in self-denying sacrificial service and self-subordination, as the Lord of glory did in becoming one with us in our humanity and dying on the cross. In other words, the incarnate Christ provides the perfect example of Godly living, not the eternal life of God.

Specifically, appealing to the doctrine of the Trinity, a three-fold perfect divine communion, to support either the equality of men and women or their hierarchical ordering, is mistaken and to be opposed.

9. Orthodoxy defined

For evangelicals, the Scriptures are the final authority. They prescribe what is to be believed. The problem is that, on many im-

portant doctrinal questions, evangelicals cannot agree on what the Scriptures teach. This is understandable because, on most profound questions, the Bible seems to give more than one answer or address the matter in more than one way. Working out what is central and primary in the varied comments in Scripture on any complex doctrinal issue is a great challenge. On questions not disputed, or not seriously debated in the past, the great theologians of former times cannot help us. However, when it comes to the doctrines of the Trinity and the person of Christ, no issues were more fiercely debated in the early church and in the Reformation age. In dispute was the question of what the Scriptures, read holistically and theologically, say about Christ and the triune nature of God. The conclusions reached by the best theologians from the past are now codified in the Apostles', Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds, and, for Protestants, in the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions. These are for us the best guides we have for rightly interpreting and understanding what Scripture says on these two doctrines and what should be believed by those who want to see themselves as orthodox Christians. The creeds and confessions do not stand over Scripture or have the same authority as inspired Scripture, but they do speak authoritatively in a secondary way and should never be ignored in the theological enterprise. They represent the collective wisdom of the past. We, or our denomination, may not be bound by these statements of faith, but no one can deny that they define orthodoxy.

Given that we have this rich theological resource on the doctrine of the Trinity and on the person of Christ, we can make one of three responses. Each one finds supporters, and this explains why there is so much division among evangelicals on the doctrine of the Trinity.

1. We can ignore this resource, saying our concern is only what the Bible teaches.
2. We can reject this resource, saying we can work things out for ourselves with Bible in hand.
3. We can greatly value this resource, saying we believe it is the fruit of the deep and prolonged reflection of the best of theologians across the ages on what the Scripture teach and as such is the best guide we have for the correct theological interpretation of Scripture.

I think the first two responses are dangerous, being far too optimistic about individual theological effort. There is the great danger that, in going alone, we will repeat old errors in new forms or invent new ones that, given time, will undermine the Christian faith. Doctrines should be understood to be communally agreed conclusions as to what the Scriptures teach. I endorse the third option, so this account of the doctrine of the Trinity should be judged first of all as to whether or not it faithfully reflects the conclusions of the best of theologians across the ages on what the Scriptures teach on God's triune being and work in the world.

Postscript

In the last thirty years, there has been widespread criticism of what sounds like philosophical, analytical, and impersonal language used in the historic formulations of the doctrine of the Trinity. This criticism can be overstated, but not rejected completely. The Bible speaks of divine unity and of the divine persons in personal, relational, and communal terms. Wherever possible, this is the language that theologians should use in their *theo-ology*. In my commentary below on this summary of the historic doctrine of the Trinity, I seek to do this and to show that, when non-biblical terms are used, they reflect the teaching of Scripture.

Part 2: Commentary

1. God is one in being and three persons

We Christians believe that God is one because the Bible teaches this. To Moses, first of all, God discloses his name to be Yahweh (Exod 3:14), and he insists that he alone is God and he alone is to be worshipped (Exod 20:2–6; cf. Isa 42:8; 44:6; Zech 14:9). The belief that God is one is underlined in the so-called *Shema*, the Jewish confession that says, “The Lord our God, Yahweh, is one: (Deut 6:5). However, it is made plain in the Old Testament that Yahweh is not “one” in any abstract, monistic sense. The word translated into English “one” in the *Shema* is the Hebrew word *echad*. It can be used to speak of the unity of husband and wife. In the New Testament, the belief that God is one continues to be affirmed (Mark 12:29; Rom 3:30; 1 Cor 8:4–6; Eph 4:6; 1 Tim 2:5; Jas 2:19).

But we Christians also believe that God is three “persons,” because he reveals himself as the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The word “person” has its limitations because the divine three are more profoundly “one” than any human union, and because this word refers primarily to creatures and only analogically or metaphorically to the divine three. Nevertheless, the divine three are

rightly called “persons” because they are revealed as persons: as a Father and a Son who love, relate, speak, and act, and as a Spirit who does likewise. Indeed, in the New Testament, the three divine persons are so clearly depicted as persons that, if it were not for the revelation that God is one, we Christians would be tritheists.

In the New Testament, it is not only the Father who is revealed as God, but also the Son and the Spirit. Jesus is also called God many times (John 1:1; 20:28; Acts 20:28; Rom 9:5; Phil 2:6; Col 2:9; 1 Tim 3:15–16; 2 Thess 1:12; Titus 2:13; 2 Pet 1:1; Heb 1:8; 1 John 5:20). And, as such, he is confessed more than two hundred times as “the Lord,” Yahweh's own name. He is also described as doing the things that only God can do: still a storm (Matt 8:23–27), raise the dead (Mark 5:35–43; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:1–43), heal the physically sick and maimed (Mark 1:40–45; 2:1–11; 3:1–6), forgive sins (Mark 2:1–11; Luke 7:48), and offer salvation (Matt 1:21; 18:11; Luke 19:19; John 12:47). What is more, the attributes of God are ascribed to him. He is said to be self-existent (John 5:26), eternal (John 1:1; 3:13; Phil 2:5–7; 2 Cor 8:9), immutable (Heb 13:8), holy (Luke 1:35; 4:34; John 10:36; Acts 3:14; Heb 7:26), omniscient (Matt

11:25–27; John 2:24–25; 16:30; 21:17; Col 2:3; Heb 4:13), omnipotent (Heb 1:3), and righteous (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 1 Cor 1:30; Jas 5:6).

Throughout the Bible, the Holy Spirit is understood to be the Spirit of God: God’s invisible presence and power at work in the world. Peter says that to lie to the Holy Spirit is to lie to God (Acts 5:3–4). On this premise, words said to be spoken by Yahweh in the Old Testament can be attributed to the Holy Spirit in the New Testament (Jer 31:31–33; Heb 10:15–17; Exod 25:1; Heb 9:8; Isa 6:9–10; Acts 28:25–28; Isa 64:4; 1 Cor 2:9). The Spirit is consistently spoken of in personal terms: he teaches, leads, encourages, hears, knows, sends, etc., and can speak as “I” (Acts 13:2; 10:19–20). He is thus rightly called a “person.”

For the New Testament writers, given that the Son is also God, a triune understanding of God follows. In more than sixty passages, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are closely associated in a way that indicates they are understood to be alike God (Matt 28:19; 2 Cor 13:13; Eph 4:6; etc.). In every one of his epistles, Paul begins with a greeting or opening blessing in which God is designated as “our Father,” “the Father,” or “the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The latter is particularly common (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; etc.). This indicates that the term “Father” is for Paul not simply an equivalent for the term God (*theos*), but the identification of one divine person. When he refers to God’s Son, he uses the definite article; Christ is “*the* Son (of God).” The Son’s relationship with the Father is unique. Similarly, in John’s gospel, God is God the Father, distinct from God the Son (John 1:1–14; 1:18; 3:16–17, 31–36).

Paul continues to affirm monotheism, but he does not think of God’s oneness in a solitary or unitary sense. His understanding of monotheism includes the Father, Son, and Spirit. Nowhere is this expanded monotheism more clearly seen than in 1 Corinthians 8:5–6, where Paul confesses both “one God the Father” and “one Lord Jesus Christ.” In these words, Paul boldly adapts the wording of the foundational Jewish confession, the *Shema*, given in Deuteronomy 6:4, “The Lord our God is one,” to speak of the one God who is both the Father and the Son. In this text, Paul only mentions the Father and the Son, but it is evident from his many triadic comments that the one God is in fact the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Rom 15:16; 1 Cor 12:4–6; 2 Cor 13:13; Eph 4:2, 18–20, etc.).

From the time of Justin Martyr, it has been believed that generative or birth language best explains how the Son can also be God, yet other than the Father. Origen added that, because the begetting of the Son was a divine act, it must be an eternal event. Human begetting is temporal; divine begetting is eternal. God is not constrained by time.

The so-called Arians of the fourth century could speak of the Son as “begotten” in the sense that he was created in time, and thus God in second degree. This was totally unacceptable to all the pro-Nicene fathers.¹ The language of “begetting” for them spoke of a Father–Son relationship where the Father and the Son were of the same being or nature, on the premise that sons are of the same nature or being as their fathers. For them, the doctrine of the eternal generation of the Son was fundamental to the

trinitarian faith.² It guaranteed the oneness in being (*homoousios*) of the Father and the Son and, at the same time, their self-differentiation: one is unbegotten God, the other begotten God.

In the Bible, no divine act, work, or operation is ever depicted as the work of one divine person in isolation from the other two.

The great importance of the doctrine of the eternal begetting of the Son is seen in the central christological clause in the Nicene Creed, the most widely accepted summary of our trinitarian

faith. This clause was added to absolutely exclude Arianism. Here the full equality of the Son is predicated on his eternal begetting by the Father, and this is mentioned twice. In this clause in the Nicene creed, Christians say,

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,
The only (*monogenes*) Son of God,
Eternally begotten of the Father,
God from God,
Light from light,
True God from true God,
Begotten not made
Of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father.

These words affirm that the Son on the basis of his eternal begetting is as much God as the Father. Derivation in divine life in no way entails diminution of any kind.

The theological conclusion that the Son is to be understood to be eternally begotten of the Father is predicated primarily on the revealed names, Father and Son. A father–son relationship implies a generative act. This conclusion was both suggested and confirmed by Scripture. The most important texts in reaching this conclusion were Psalm 2:7, which speaks of a future begetting of a royal son, and Proverbs 8:25, which speaks of the begetting of divine Wisdom before creation. These texts were taken as prophetic because, in the New Testament, they are interpreted Christologically. The Greek-speaking church fathers did not appeal to John’s use of the word *monogenes*, which they understood to mean “unique,” as the basis for the eternal begetting of the Son. However, for them, what made the Son unique more than anything else was that he alone is (eternally) begotten of the Father.

The Latin-speaking Tertullian was the first to speak of the Trinity as *tres personae, una substantia* (three persons, one substance). From then on, *substantia* became the most common term in the Latin-speaking church to describe what is one in God—what is common to the three divine persons. The Greek-speaking fathers translated the Latin *substantia* by either the word *ousia* (being) or *physis* (nature). These words refer to what makes something what it is. The so-called Arians of the fourth century, who presupposed a Greek doctrine of God as a solitary monad who could not have contact with matter, let alone flesh, were united in opposing the idea that Jesus Christ was of one *substantia* or one *ousia* with the Father. Not one of them could confess that Jesus Christ is God in the same sense as the Father, that he was of the same divine being (*substantia* or *ousia*) and power as the Father. In response, first in AD 325 at the Council of Nicaea, and then again in AD 381 at the Council of Constantinople, the bishops ruled that the Son is

one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father; in other words, “true God from true God.” In doing so, they believed they were exactly reflecting the teaching of Scripture.

The use of the Greek word *ousia* to speak of what unites and is common to the three divine persons, Athanasius believed, was sanctioned by Scripture in the words God used to reveal himself to Moses. On the basis of the wording of his Greek Old Testament of Exodus 3:14, “I am who I am,” Athanasius argued, God discloses both his name (*Yahweh*) and his being (his “I am”-ness).³ Augustine appealed to the same text to make the same point. He said that a “better word” than “substance” (Latin, *substantia*) for what unites and is common to the three divine persons is “essence” (Latin, *essentia*), “what the Greeks call *ousia*.”⁴ The word *essentia*, he noted, comes from the Latin verb *esse*, “to be.” God does not have *essentia*/being; he is *essentia*/being. Here, we could also recall Jesus’ self-designation as “I am” (*egō eimi*) in John 8:24, 28; 13:19; 6:35; etc.

Once it had been agreed that the Father and the Son share perfectly the same divine being/*ousia*, it is not surprising to find the pro-Nicene fathers, beginning with Athanasius, speaking of the mutual indwelling of the three divine persons and appealing to Jesus’ words, “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” for support (John 14:11; 17:21–22). Later, the term *perichoresis* was used of this mutual indwelling or coinherence of the three divine persons in their communion of nature or being.

To conclude these comments on the terms used in Trinitarian orthodoxy of what is one in God (*ousia, physis, essentia, substantia*), it is important to add that they are not the cause, origin, or source of anything. These synonymous terms in Trinitarian discourse speak of what is common to and unites the divine persons—what makes them the one God.

2. The three divine persons work inseparably

The Scriptures associate distinctive works with each divine person; for example, the Father, creation; the Son, salvation; and the Spirit, sanctification. Yet Scripture also makes clear that the divine persons always work as one, or, as orthodoxy says, “inseparably,” because they are the one God. In the Bible, no divine act, work, or operation is ever depicted as the work of one divine person in isolation from the other two. The three persons baptize as one (Matt 28:19), bless as one (2 Cor 13:13), and minister through believers as one (1 Cor 12:4–6). Creation is a work of God involving the Father, Son, and Spirit (Gen 1:1; Ps 36:6; 104:30; John 1:2–3; Col. 1:16; Heb 1:10). So too are election (Matt 11:27; John 3:3–9; 6:70; 13:18; Acts 1:2, Rom. 8:29, Eph.1:4, 1 Peter 1:2) and salvation (John 3:1–6; Rom 8:1–30; 2 Cor 2:6; Eph 1:3–14). When it comes to divine rule, both the Father and the Son are named “Lord,” the supreme ruler, and, it would seem, the Holy Spirit as well (2 Cor 3:17). In the Book of Revelation, the Father and the Son rule from the one throne (Rev 5:13; 7:10). And on the last day, judgment is exercised by God the Father and God the Son (Ps 7:8; 9:7–8; Rom 2:16; Rev 16:7; Matt 25:31–32; John 5:27; Acts 10:42; Phil 2:10).

As far as the Father and the Son are concerned, Jesus himself affirms the doctrine of inseparable operations. He says, “For whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise” (John 5:19).

3. The three divine persons have one will

In John’s gospel, the Son does the Father’s will (4:34; 5:30; 6:38–39; etc.), but the evangelist never suggests that Jesus is under compulsion to do as the Father commands. Rather, John thinks of Jesus as the “instrument or expression of the Father’s will.”⁵ The word *obedience* is never actually used in connection with the Father–Son relationship in John’s gospel.

At first glance, the report of Jesus’ struggle in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mark 14:32–42; Matt 26:36–46; Luke 22:40–46; cf. John 12:27; Heb 5:7–8) could be taken to indicate that the Father and the Son each will independently. To understand this account rightly, a distinction has to be made between the incarnate life of the Son in time and his life with the Father and the Spirit in eternity. As fully God and fully man, the incarnate Son has his own human will. In the Garden of Gethsemane, we see the human will of the Son struggling with doing the will of God. And so he prays, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me, yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 12:36). He asks for the human strength to do God’s will as a free human agent, despite his fear of the suffering and separation this will entail.

John’s more theological account of this event makes it clear that there is no clash of divine wills between the Son as the eternal Son and the Father. In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus prays just before his arrest: “Now my soul is troubled. And should I say—‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it is for this reason that I have come to this hour” (John 12:27). This prayer is a declaration by the incarnate Son that his will is to do the Father’s will. We no longer see the struggle in these words between the human and the divine will in the incarnate Son, or between the Son’s will and that of his Father. What Jesus prays perfectly matches the way John the evangelist speaks of the Father–Son relationship throughout his gospel. The incarnate Son does the Father’s will because he and the Father are one (John 10:30; 17:21). The Son wills, acts, and speaks in perfect unison with the Father.

On the basis of John’s teaching, and on the premise that the triune God is one in being, the Greek pro-Nicene fathers came to speak of the divine persons willing as one, which Augustine and later orthodoxy took to mean they have one will.

4. The three divine persons rule as one

If the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit alike are God without any qualifications, then they are alike omnipotent. Omnipotence is possibly the most self-defining of all God’s attributes—what makes God God. He alone has sovereign power over all things. To confess the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as Lord is to acknowledge that they are all omnipotent. In reply to the Arian claim that the Son is eternally set under the Father’s authority, the confession “Jesus is Lord” (Acts 2:21; Rom 9:10, 13; 1 Cor 12:3; Phil 2:11), basic to Christian identity, is on its own a reply. If Jesus is Lord, he is not set under anyone. The full import of this title is seen when we observe that New Testament writers take Old Testament texts that speak of Yahweh as “the Lord” and apply

them directly to Jesus Christ (Rom 10:13; 1 Cor 1:31; 10:26; 2 Cor 10:17; etc.; cf. Acts 2:21). This transference of the name of God to Jesus is most clearly illustrated in eschatological texts. In the Old Testament, the day when Yahweh comes in judgment at the end is called “the day of the Lord.” In the New Testament, the eschatological climax, “the day of the Lord,” is when “our Lord Jesus Christ” comes in judgment (1 Thess 4:15–17; 5:23; 1 Cor 1:7–8; 4:1–5; etc.). Similarly, in Philippians 2:9–11, in speaking of the Son’s post-Easter exaltation, Paul says that every knee will bow before him, “to the glory of God the Father.” These words reflect Isaiah 45:23, envisaging the universal worship of Yahweh.

Unambiguous affirmations that Jesus Christ is God in all might, majesty, and authority are common in the Epistle to the Colossians. In 1:10–20 and its echo in 2:9–10, Christ is said to be “the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God” (1:15), and “the firstborn of all creation [*prototokos*].” The firstborn of the king in Israel shared the honor and rule of the king. The allusion is to Psalm 89:27, where God says of the messianic king, “I will make him the firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth.” Then Paul says that “in him [Christ] all things in heaven and on earth were created” (Col 1:16). The preposition *in* indicates that Christ is the agent of creation. Far from being a subordinate, Christ is the co-creator who rules over all. He has “first place in everything” (v. 18). This is so because “in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (v. 20). In him the completeness of deity was present. In Colossians 2:9–10, Paul says much the same of Christ a second time. He says, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily,” and, “he is the head of every ruler and authority.” Following on in chapter 3, Paul takes up one of the most important Christological motifs in the New Testament. He speaks of the exalted Christ as “seated at the right hand of God” (3:1). These words reflect Psalm 110:1, the most often quoted Old Testament text in the New Testament. They speak of Christ’s rule over all, depicting him “in a position of supreme authority.”⁶ In the Epistle to the Hebrews and in the Book of Revelation, the imagery changes: the Father and the Son rule from the one throne “forever and ever” (Heb 1:8; Rev 5:13; 7:10–12; 11:15).

In John’s gospel, rather than the Son, or the Son and the Spirit, deferring to the Father, we find a pattern of mutual deference. The Son glorifies the Father (John 7:18; 17:4) and the Father and the Spirit glorify the Son (John 8:50, 54; 12:23; 17:1; 16:14). John also says that, before his incarnation, the Son shared the Father’s glory as his only Son (John 1:14; 12:41; 17:5, 24), during his ministry he revealed the Father’s glory (1:14; 8:54; 11:4; 13:32; 17:15, 10, 22), and, after his glorification on the cross, that he will again share the Father’s glory, a glory he had before the world existed (John 17:5).

In the New Testament, the reign or rule (*basileia*), the power (*dynamis*), and the authority (*exousia*) of the exalted Christ speak of the one reality. Christ now *reigns* as the divine Lord in all *power* (omnipotence), having “all authority in heaven and on earth” (Matt 28:19). On this basis, the pro-Nicene fathers spoke of the *monarchia*, the one or united rule, of the triune God.⁷ In contrast, the Arians limited the *monarchia* to the Father. The Son stands under his authority, and any authority the Son has is derived au-

thority.⁸ The one rule or *monarchia* of the triune God should not be confused with the pro-Nicene fathers teaching that the Father is the one source, or *mia archē*, of the Son, an idea that follows from speaking of the Father as the eternal begetter of the Son.

On this strong biblical basis, virtually all Reformation and post-Reformation confessions speak of the Father and the Son as one in being/essence and power/authority.⁹ Following them, the Evangelical Theological Society’s statement of faith makes the same affirmation.

5. The divine three persons’ relations in eternity and operations in the world are ordered

In the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, the concept of order is another key element. It refers to revealed constancy in divine relations and operations. Both in eternity and in the world of space and time, how the three divine persons relate to each other and to us and how they operate follow a consistent pattern that is unchanging and irreversible. Robert Letham says order in divine life is “not to be understood in terms of human arrangements, such as rank or hierarchy, but in terms of appropriate disposition.”¹⁰ Order in divine life and operations is multifaceted.

First and fundamentally, there is a *processional order*. In eternity within the life of God, the Father begets or generates the Son and breathes out the Spirit. And in time and space, the Father sends the Son and pours out the Spirit (the divine missions). The temporal *missions* (sendings) of the Son and the Spirit into the world do not constitute God’s triunity; they reflect what is true eternally. The one God is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These internal and external acts of God differentiate the divine persons without dividing or separating them in divine being or power. They tell us that, in the one God, the Father is precisely the Father because he begets the Son, God the Son is precisely the Son because he is begotten, and God the Spirit is precisely the Spirit because he “proceeds” from the Father or the Father and the Son. For this reason, the order reflected in the eternal acts of generation and procession and in the temporal missions cannot be changed or reversed because they reflect what is constitutive for the eternal triune life of God. For orthodoxy, the eternal begetting of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit and the Father’s temporal sending (mission) of the Son and the Spirit into the world do not subordinate the Son or the Spirit, as the Arians and those who followed them across the ages have argued. The pro-Nicene fathers are adamant: derivation and sending in no way diminish any of the persons. In seeking to explain *processional order*, Basil says, a distinction must be made between a “natural order,” arranged for created beings, setting one before or above another, and “a deliberative order” which is simply conceptual or logical, like “the kind of order between fire and light.”¹¹ In this kind of order, the fire is the cause of the light, but the fire and the light cannot be temporally or hierarchically ranked. By the time Augustine wrote his great work on the Trinity, *De Trinitate*, early in the fifth century, the so-called Arians had made it an “axiom that the one who sends is greater than the one who is sent.”¹² Augustine spends many pages in several sections repu-

diating the idea that to be sent implies subordination.¹³ Modern biblical studies have shown that his conclusion is correct. The sending language used of the Son's mission in the New Testament (Mark 9:37; Luke 4:43; John 3:17; 4:34; 5:36; 17:3; Gal 4:4; etc.) reflects the Jewish *shaliach* concept. In Judaism, the one sent (the *shaliach*) has the same authority as the one who sends him: he is as the sender himself. It would thus seem that Jesus is said to be "sent" to make the point that he has the same authority as the Father, or, more accurately, that he expresses the Father's authority. To obey the Son is to obey the Father, and to honor the Son is to honor the Father (John 5:23; cf. 13:20).

Second, we can observe an *operational order*. In divine operations or works in the world, the three divine persons work inseparably, yet each makes a distinctive contribution to every work in accord with who each one is, whether Father, Son, or Spirit. Thus, we note, for example, that Paul speaks of God the Father creating through the Son (Col 1:16), judging through the Son (Rom 2:16), justifying sinners through the Son (Rom 5:1, 21; cf. 1 Thess 5:9), electing to salvation through the Son (Eph 1:5), reconciling through the Son (2 Cor 5:18; Col 1:20), and pouring out the Spirit through the Son (Titus 3:6). John uses different wording, but similarly speaks of an operational order in the work of the Father, Son, and Spirit. What the Son does and says reflects exactly what God the Father says and does, and what the Spirit does is to continue the work of the Son after his departure (John 4:34; 5:19; 14:10; 16:13–14; 15:26; 17:7; etc.). On this basis, Athanasius first of all enunciated the principle that, in various wordings, would be embraced by orthodoxy: "The Father does all things through the Word in the Holy Spirit."¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa's version of this principle is, "every operation which extends from God to the creation, and is named according to our various conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected by the Spirit."¹⁵ And, in speaking of this operational order, the pro-Nicene fathers also noted an order or consistency in how God comes to us and we to him. The Father comes *to us through* the Son *in* the Spirit and we come *to* the Father *through* the Son *in* the Spirit.

Third, we may speak of a *numerical order*. How the divine persons are sequentially revealed in Scripture leads the human mind to think of the Father as the first person of the Trinity, the Son the second, and the Spirit as the third. On this basis, the Nicene Creed speaks of the divine three persons in this order. However, it is to be noted that the Cappadocian father Basil argued strongly against the threefold "subnumeration" (*hyparithmeō*) of the persons of the Trinity because he vehemently opposed anything that might suggest the ranking of the divine persons in a descending order.¹⁶ In making this point, he noted, as many have done after him, that in the more than sixty triadic comments in the New Testament, no one person is consistently placed first. In roughly equal numbers, sometimes the Father is mentioned first (e.g., Matt 28:19), sometimes the Son (e.g., 2 Cor 13:13), and sometimes the Spirit (e.g., 1 Cor 12:4–6).¹⁷ Thus, although we may speak of

the first, second, and third persons of the Trinity, we should not infer hierarchical ordering or precedence in divine life on this basis. In English and in Greek, to speak of an order where someone is ranked under someone else, a preposition meaning "under"

This passage speaks of how the Father and the Son exercise divine rule in a historical and redemptive sequential order, not of hierarchical order in being or power.

must be added to show that hierarchical ordering is envisaged. In Greek, this is done by adding the prefix *hypo* to create the verb *hypotassō*, and in English by adding the prefix *sub-* to get the verb *subordinate*.

More significantly than numeric order, how the divine persons are revealed and operate in space and time suggests what may be called an *historical/redemptive sequential order*. I take 1 Corinthians 15:20–28, a much-debated text, as an example of this. Here, Paul prophetically speaks of an eschatological sequence of events leading up to the time when "the Son himself will be subjected to the one who put all things in subjection to him so that God may be all in all" (v. 28). This comment has frequently been taken to speak either of the ultimate subordination of the Son to the Father or of the end of triune life (i.e., at the eschaton, the Trinity will become a monad). Neither conclusion can be accepted. What Paul says in verse 28 must be interpreted in light of both the immediate literary context and of what the Bible says elsewhere on the rule of Christ. Numerous other texts speak of Christ's rule as "forever" (2 Sam 7:12–16; Isa 9:7; Luke 1:33; 2 Pet 1:11; Rev 7:10–12; 11:15; cf. Eph 1:20), and, on this basis, the Nicene Creed says his rule "will have no end."

The key to understanding this passage lies in recognizing that the Son's distinctive work is to reveal and redeem. It is he, not the Father or the Spirit, who "came down from heaven," took the form of a servant, and died on the cross to win our salvation. Human history includes events before and after this: a *sequential order*. After the Son's death, he is raised to reign as the ruling Messiah/Christ (Acts 2:30–33; Rom 1:3–4). His exaltation marks the inauguration of his reign as the *Messiah*, something new, notwithstanding that God had determined for all eternity that he would exercise his rule in and through the Son. Following his exaltation, Christ occupies center stage. He is spoken of as the ruler of the universe, he is confessed as "Lord," and he is the focus of Christian worship. Nevertheless, Paul insists, his preeminence is "to the glory of God the Father" (Phil 2:11; cf. Rom 16:27; Gal 1:3–5). The Father and the Son cannot be separated, divided, or set in opposition. In 1 Corinthians 15:20–27, Paul speaks of the risen and exalted Christ's *sequentially ordered* triumphs in the post-Easter age over all of his enemies, the last of which is death. These verses are entirely Christocentric. When his triumph as the ruling Messiah/Christ is completed, Paul says, the Son will "hand over the kingdom to God the Father" (1 Cor 15:24). This is another transitional event; at the end, the rule of the Son as the exalted Messiah/Christ will end. What the Father gave him he will hand back to the Father, and the Father will take it from him, so that God "may be all in all" (1 Cor 15:28), which probably means God the Father himself will assume rule, or it could mean that the triune God in unity will rule. This passage speaks of how

the Father and the Son exercise divine rule in a *historical and redemptive sequential order*, not of hierarchical order in being or power. Paul is not speaking of the ontological subordination of the Son or of the Trinity becoming a monad.

6. The Son, in taking human flesh, subordinated himself for our salvation

In the Bible, we find texts that explicitly speak of the Son as God in all might, majesty, and authority, as we have noted, and yet there are other texts that speak of him as praying to the Father (Mark 14:36; 17:2; etc.), dependent on the Father (John 5:19; 8:28; 1 Cor 3:23; Mark 14:36; Heb 5:7; etc.), obedient to the Father (Rom 5:19; Phil 2:8; Heb 5:8; etc.), and even of him as “less than the Father” (John 14:28). Explaining how these texts in tension can all be affirmed and reconciled has caused more theological division in the church over the centuries than any other doctrinal dispute. I outline four competing explanations.

a. The fourth-century Arians

The Arians’ solution was to focus on the texts that spoke of the Son as praying to the Father, dependent on the Father, obedient to the Father, and particularly Proverbs 8:22, “the Lord created me at the beginning of his work,” which they took to mean that the Son was created in time and thus subordinate God. The texts that spoke of the Son as God and as the Lord, and of his absolute authority, were all explained in the light of such primary texts for them. They could call the Son “God,” but, for them, he was subordinated God, less in divine being and power than the Father. Particularly important in their explanation was their appeal to the fact that Jesus was spoken of as “the Son.” They gave content to the title *Son* by way of human analogy. They understood the title literally. If Jesus was a son, then he was begotten in time and less in authority than his father.

In this explanation, the Father and the Son are sharply differentiated and divided. We have two gods, one the true God who is supreme, the other his subordinate. Basic to this position is the thesis that the subordination of the Son seen in the incarnation should be read back into the eternal life of God.

b. The pro-Nicene fathers

Strongly and consistently opposing this Arian construal of the Trinity, the pro-Nicene fathers argued that it eclipsed half of the “double account of the Savior,” as Athanasius put it. Their explanation of the texts in tension was that all the texts that speak of the Son in the loftiest terms as God in all might, majesty, and authority speak of him “in the form of God,” as he is in eternity, and all texts that speak of or could imply his subordination to the Father speak of him as man in “the form of a servant” in his incarnation in history (the economy). Or, to put it in terms of later Reformed theology, the equality texts speak of him in his “state of exaltation” in eternity, and the subordination texts speak of him in his “state of humiliation” in his incarnate earthly ministry.

Traditionally, the temporal subordination of the Son has been called “the economic subordination of the Son,” and, in modern

times by some mainline theologians, the *temporal* “functional subordination of the Son” or *temporal* “role subordination of the Son.” The words *function* and *role* are modern terms not found in the Nicene tradition or the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions. When used of the work or operations of the Son, and, in particular, of his ministry in the “form of a servant” on earth, the use of these contemporary terms is not contentious. Below it will be made clear why I mention this incidental matter. The passage in Scripture that most clearly explains how the “double account of the Savior”—one in “the form of God” and one in “the form of a servant”—is to be rightly understood is Philippians 2:4–11. Here, Paul speaks of God the Son having equality with God the Father and of the Son freely choosing to empty himself to be born in human likeness, take the form of a servant or slave, and go to the cross, and of the Father raising him from death and exalting him to rule in all might, majesty, and power “in the name above every name,” that is as Yahweh.

For the pro-Nicene fathers to confess Jesus Christ as “the Son of God” indicated not his subordinate status, but his sovereign rule. They recognized that, in the New Testament, this title identified Jesus as the kingly messianic Son prophesied in Psalm 2:7. The Jews in fact understood that, in speaking of himself as the Son of God in a unique sense, Jesus was “making himself equal to God” (John 5:18).

This explanation of the texts in tension won the day and became historic orthodoxy. It did so because it reflected the teaching of the Apostle Paul given in Philippians 2 and because it made more sense of and explained better all that we find in Scripture.

c. Karl Barth

In his innovative *reformulation* of the doctrine of the Trinity, Karl Barth provides an alternative way of explaining the “double account of the Savior.” Barth’s doctrine of the Trinity is characterized by a very strong affirmation of divine unity and equality.¹⁸ He says, “The name of Father, Son, and Spirit means that God is the one God in threefold repetition, and in such a way that the repetition itself is grounded in his Godhead.”¹⁹ And, “Father, Son, and Spirit are one single God.”²⁰ And, “Only the substantial equality of Christ and the Spirit with the Father is compatible with monotheism.”²¹ When divine unity is stressed, tritheism and subordinationism are categorically excluded: the three persons are the one God.

However, to be true to Barth, we must note that he also speaks of the Son as subordinate, but never *simpliciter*. For him, the “double account of the Savior” is not explained temporally and successively as a contrast between the Son in the form of a servant in historical revelation and his exalted status in eternity. The Son is subordinate and supreme God simultaneously and eternally. He is “Lord and servant” at all times. He is never one or the other in isolation. In this highly dialectical construal of the Trinity, the Son is forever God in all might, majesty, and authority, and yet, at the same time, in his “mode of being” (distinct identity) as the Son, he is subordinate, submissive, and obedient to the Father.

Barth’s construal of the Trinity is generally taken to be within the bounds of orthodoxy, but is not without its major problems.

These include (1) his very strong emphasis on divine unity, which has led many to argue that he veers toward modalism, (2) his breach of the temporal divide between Christ in glory in eternity and as the servant in his incarnation in history, and (3) his perplexing dialectical manner of speaking of the one God that often makes it hard to know exactly what he is saying.

d. Some contemporary evangelicals

Beginning in the mid 1970s, conservative evangelicals concerned to maintain the traditional hierarchical understanding of the male–female relationship developed a fourth explanation of these texts in tension.²² From the 1990s, this distinctive evangelical explanation has been self-designated by its proponents as the “complementarian position.” Fundamental to this construct as it relates to both men and women and the Son and the Father is a distinctive and novel use of the closely related modern terms *function* and *role* that are sometimes found in contemporary mainline discussions on the Trinity in their dictionary sense as noted above.

“Complementarian” evangelicals argue that the equality texts speak of the eternal *ontological* equality of the Father and the Son, and the subordinating texts of the *eternal functional* or *role* subordination of the Son. We are told that men and women, like the divine Father and Son, are equal in *being*, yet have different *roles* that indelibly distinguish them. The Father has the role of commanding and sending, and the Son the role of obeying and going. In this literature, the word *role* is given a meaning not found in any dictionary or sociological text without ever disclosing that this is the case. As normally understood, the word *role* speaks of routine behavior or acts—and so we ask, who in the home has the role of gardening, washing clothes, doing the shopping, managing the finances, etc.? In this sense, roles are not fixed and person-defining. Roles can and do change. In this dictionary sense, it is thus perfectly acceptable to speak of the *temporal* role subordination or functional subordination of the Son in the incarnation, as has been conceded. However, in evangelical literature arguing for the subordination of women on the basis of a supposed eternal subordination of the Son, the word *role* is given another meaning. It is used only to speak of who rules and who obeys in an unchanging and unchangeable hierarchy. In this usage, what indelibly differentiates men and women, and the Father and the Son, is that the Father is *eternally* set over the Son in authority as men are *permanently* set over women in the church and the home. Their roles can never change. Thus, in this usage, despite denials, the word *role* has ontological implications. One’s role defines who one is. This idiosyncratic usage of the term *role* is indefensible because it obfuscates what is being taught, namely, the necessary and eternal subordination of the Son in authority. This is bad theology. One of the foundational aims of theology is to clarify the issues in contention, especially by sorting out terminological confusion.

In this understanding of the Trinity, embraced by hierarchical conservative evangelicals, 1 Corinthians 11:3 is the primary text. They read Paul to be saying, God the Father is *head over* God the

Son, just as men are *head over* women. It is clear that Paul uses the word *kephalē* (head) metaphorically at this point to introduce his directive on women covering their (literal) heads and men not covering their heads when leading in church; what is disputed is the force of the word *kephalē* in this context. The meaning “head over” or “authority over” is improbable because Paul immediately goes on to speak of men and women leading the congregation in word and prayer, and, in verse 10, of women having authority on their heads. The meaning *source* is more likely. Paul is saying that, just as the Son is *from* the Father, his source, so woman (Eve) is *from* Adam, her originating source.²³ But whatever force we give to the Greek word *kephalē* in verse 3 (head over, source, top part), the relationship between the Father and the Son and that between men and women must be very different. We cannot define perfect, triadic divine relations in terms of fallen dual human relationships.

Most theologians across the centuries have not read 1 Corinthians 11:3 to be speaking of the eternal subordination of the Son. They have not done so because they have not wanted to set Scripture in conflict with Scripture. Consistently, the New Testament authors speak of the ascended Christ as ruling in all might, majesty, and authority as Lord and, in Paul’s terms, “head over all things” (Eph 1:20–22; Col 2:10). The Nicene fathers concluded that Paul was here alluding to the eternal generation of the Son. The Father is the *source* of the Son in that he is eternally begotten of the Father, not created in time, and as such is “God from God, true God from true God.” Basil says, “God is the *kephalē* of Christ as Father,” and, as such, is one in being with him.²⁴ Calvin takes another path. He is of the opinion that Paul in this verse does infer the subordination of the Son, and, for this reason, the conclusion must be drawn that he is speaking of his temporal subjection in “the form of a servant.” Commenting on 1 Corinthians 11:3, he says Christ “made himself subject to the Father in our flesh, apart from that, being of one essence with the Father, he is equal with him.”²⁵

This fourth explanation of the texts in tension cannot be endorsed. It stands too close to Arianism. Like Arianism of old, it (1) reads back the incarnational, temporal subordination of the Son into the eternal life of God, (2) does not do justice to the texts that speak of the Son as God in all might, majesty, and authority, (3) gives content to the title *Son* by appeal to fallen family relationships rather than from what is revealed of the Son in Scripture, (4) makes the Father alone the *monarchia*, the one supreme ruler, who is set over a Son who must do as he is commanded, and (5) results in a hierarchical model of the Trinity which introduces the errors of both tritheism and subordinationism. We have two Gods, the supreme Father and the Son who obeys him.

7. The limitations of creaturely language to speak of the triune creator

From the time of Athanasius, the limitations of human language—the speech of those created by God—to speak adequately and exactly of God the creator has been recognized and discussed. Athanasius, the Cappadocian fathers, and Augustine all

addressed this issue because they saw that foundational to the Arian error was the belief that words such as *father*, *son*, and *begotten*, when used of God, should be taken literally, in a creaturely sense. Thomas Aquinas put his able mind to work on this problem. He argued that human speech used of God could be one of three things:

1. It could be *univocal*. To say God loves me means the same as to say my parents love me or my wife loves me. If our language of God is univocal, it would mean that God is just like human beings.

2. It could be *equivocal*. To say God loves me means something altogether different from saying my parents or wife loves me. If our language used of God is equivocal, we could not say anything factual about God.

3. It could be *analogical*. To say God loves me tells me something true about God, but it only captures part of the reality. If our language used of God is analogical, as would seem to be the case, it means we can speak of and understand God in the categories of human thought, but never fully comprehend him.

The limitations of human creaturely language used of God are an acute problem for theologians seeking to enunciate the doctrine of the Trinity. All the key terms—*son*, *father*, *person*, *relation*, *unity*, *sending/mission*, and, not least, *begotten*—cannot be understood literally, or, to use the more exact technical term, univocally, when used of God. Thus, calling God “Father,” for example, certainly tells us something about the Father, but only revelation can tell us what this is, because the divine Father in so many ways is not like a human father. He does not have a father himself, he is not married, he does not impregnate, he does not grow old, and both he and his Son are called “the Lord.” This means the content of such terms must be based on what Scripture reveals, not on human analogies reflecting fallen creaturely existence. To reject this rule invariably leads to error. God is reduced by being described in human categories.

Because human language used of God is analogical, we cannot conclude that, simply because the divine persons are spoken of in male terms, God should be understood to be male, not female. God must include both human genders because the opening chapter of the Bible says, “God created humankind in his image . . . male and female” (Gen 1:26–27). This means both genders together in their complementary differences image and reflect their maker. Deuteronomy 4:16 expressly forbids representing God in the form of a man or a woman. And, the Apostle John excludes the thought that God is to be understood as male or female when he says, “God is Spirit” (John 4:24).

8. The Trinity is not our social agenda

In contemporary mainline Catholic and Protestant literature on the Trinity, the triune life of God in eternity is frequently taken to be a model or pattern for the social relationships God wills on earth, or, in stronger terms, to be prescriptive of human social ordering. A coequal social model of the Trinity is presupposed, and, on this basis, social equality on earth is thought to be mandated. Many contemporary conservative evangelicals also believe divine relations in heaven are prescriptive of human relationships

on earth, but they presuppose a hierarchically ordered Trinity.²⁶ For them, God’s life in eternity is thought to endorse a social order on earth where some rule (males/husbands) and some obey (females/wives). In both cases, we have an entirely novel argument without historical precedent and which is invalid. Orthodoxy, as spelled out in the Athanasian Creed, speaks of a coequal Trinity where “none is before or after, greater or lesser,” and yet no one in past times ever appealed to this teaching to question the prevailing hierarchical social ordering of their age. It was not thought that the divine life in eternity modeled or prescribed human social life on earth. In any case, to argue that perfect divine relations apart from history somehow model or prescribe human relations in a fallen world is unconvincing. What may be true of God in heaven may not be applicable to creatures, even God-imaging creatures, on earth.

The great danger in believing that the Trinity models or prescribes our social agenda is that, instead of Scripture, interpreted in the light of the theological tradition now codified in the creeds and confessions, being the basis for our doctrine of the Trinity, our concerns on earth may dictate our theology of the Trinity. All too many contemporary theologians who have made the Trinity their social agenda would seem to have first of all construed the Trinity in terms of their social agenda, whatever that may be, and then appealed to this to support what they would like to see on earth.

The impossibility of making God’s triune life a model or prescription for social life on earth is illustrated by reference to the husband-wife relationship. Correlation seems impossible. Trinitarian relations are threefold, the husband-wife relationship is twofold; the Father-Son relationship is analogically described in male-male terms, the husband-wife relationship is a male-female relationship; and the divine Father-Son relationship does not allow for offspring, while the earthly male-female relationship does.

In any case, making the eternal Father-Son relationship a model or pattern for human relationships has no biblical warrant. Once Paul asks believers, men and women, “to imitate God” (Eph 5:1); all the other imitation exhortations ask believers, men and women, to follow the example set by Jesus (John 13:34; 1 Cor 11:1; Phil 2:4–11; 1 Thess 1:6; 1 Pet 2:21; 1 John 2:6).

9. Orthodoxy defined

In concluding my summary of the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, I pointed out that the Nicene and Athanasian creeds and the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions prescribe what has been concluded is the teaching of Scripture on the doctrine of the Trinity. The Athanasian Creed gives the fullest account, and, to conclude, I note what it says. This creed was composed late in the fifth century AD in southern Gaul (France). It is first mentioned around 542 by the theologian Caesarius of Arles. In Latin, it is called by the words that begin this confession, *Quicumque vult*, “Whosoever will.” It was not called the Athanasian Creed until the ninth century. It reflects Augustine’s theology more than anyone else’s. This creed consists of two parts: lines 1–28 spell out

the doctrine of the Trinity; lines 29–44 the doctrine of the person of Christ.

The Athanasian Creed is binding on Roman Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, and most continental Reformed Christians.²⁷ This means it is taken as an authoritative definition of the doctrine of the Trinity for a large majority of Christians in the world. One-time Oxford Professor Leonard Hodgson says that the Athanasian Creed is the only one of the ancient creeds “that explicitly and unequivocally states the full Christian doctrine of God.”²⁸ The Athanasian Creed begins,

We worship one God in Trinity, and Trinity in unity, neither confounding the persons nor dividing the substance. For there is one person of the Father, another of the Son, and another of the Holy Spirit. But the Godhead of the Father, of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit is all one: the glory equal, the majesty coeternal. Such as the Father is, such is the Son: and such is the Holy Spirit.

After reiterating that God is one and yet three equal persons in the clauses following, this creed then declares that the human mind cannot comprehend the divine persons.

The Father is incomprehensible, the Son is incomprehensible: and the Holy Spirit is incomprehensible.

This is a basic tenet of orthodoxy. We only know what God reveals of himself, and even what is revealed cannot be fully grasped by fallen human beings. After this, we have two clauses specifically denying that the Son is less than the Father in authority:

So likewise the Father is almighty, the Son almighty, and the Holy Spirit almighty. And yet there are not three almighties, but one almighty.

So likewise the Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, and the Holy Spirit is Lord. And yet not three Lords, but one Lord.

Then comes a clause that grounds divine threefold differentiation in differing origination. The Father is “not begotten,” the Son is “not created but begotten,” and the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Finally, to sum up what is to be confessed in worshipping the Trinity, this creed says,

In this Trinity none is before or after another: none is greater or less than another; but the whole three persons are coeternal together and coequal.

These words absolutely exclude hierarchical ordering of any kind in divine life. The wording could not be more explicit.

In the second and shorter section of this creed that follows, what is demanded for right belief in “the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ” is spelled out. As the incarnate Son of God, he is to be confessed as

God and man. God of the substance of the Father, begotten before the worlds: and man of the substance of his mother, born in the world. Perfect God and perfect man. . . . Equal to the

Father, as touching his Godhead: and inferior to the Father as touching his manhood. Who although he be God and man: yet he is not two, but one Christ. One not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking the manhood into God.

I admit that the language of the Athanasian Creed is not the language of Scripture. It is rather the language characteristic of the theological enterprise that aims to unambiguously state what is to be believed and categorically exclude what is thought to be error. Nevertheless, the Roman Catholic and most of the Reformation churches confess this creed because they believe it accurately and explicitly sums up what is taught or implied by Scripture, even if the language is not a reiteration of the exact words of Scripture. We find the same analytical and precise language in the Reformation and post-Reformation confessions. Such statements of faith express categorically and unambiguously what Christians should believe. We may dissent from what they say, but there can be very little debate as to what they say, and no denying, for most Christians past and present, that they spell out orthodoxy.²⁹

Notes

1. I designate all those who endorsed the Nicene Creed of 325, especially the inclusion of the term *homoousios*, the *pro-Nicene fathers*. I am well aware that, between the council of Nicaea in 325 and the council of Constantinople in 381, both the so-called Arians and their opponents were never two opposing parties with settled and fixed positions. In both camps, there was development and some division of opinion.

2. I am seeking to outline the historic orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. It cannot be questioned that the correlated doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and eternal procession of the Spirit are integral to this. These doctrines are affirmed in the Nicene and Athanasian creeds and by the Reformation and post-Reformation Protestant confessions, strongly supported by every significant theologian who has written on the Trinity until modern times, including Calvin, and by every Christian today for whom the Nicene creed is a binding summary of core Christian beliefs, which is the overwhelming majority of contemporary Christians. These doctrines gain such huge support because they explain eternal divine self-differentiation on the basis of what is inferred by Scripture, using scriptural terms, and because they exclude absolutely the errors of modalism, tritheism, and subordinationism. On the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son, see in more detail Kevin Giles, *The Eternal Generation of the Son: Maintaining Trinitarian Orthodoxy* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2012).

3. Athanasius, *Defence of the Nicene Definition* 22 (165), *The Councils of Ariminum and Seleucia* 34 (469), and *To the Bishops in Africa* 8 (492–93), in *The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 4, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (New York, NY: The Christian Literature Company, 1892), henceforth abbreviated as *NPNF*.

4. *St. Augustine: The Trinity* 5.1.3, trans. Edmund Hill (New York, NY: New City Press, 1991), 190. See also 202, n. 4.

5. So M. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father: Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 2000), 150, who exactly follows Basil on this matter.

6. P. O’Brien, *Colossians and Philemon* (Waco, TX: Word, 1982), 163.

7. Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 5.26 (*NPNF* 4:167), *Against the Arians* 4.1 (*NPNF* 4:433); Basil, *On the Spirit* 18.45 (*NPNF* 8:28); Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius* 1.36 (*NPNF* 4:84); Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration* 29 2 (*NPNF* 7:301).

8. This is explicitly spelled out in Eunomius’s *Confession of Faith*. On this, see R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), 619–21.

9. So the Augsburg confession of 1530, the Belgic confession of 1561, the 39 Articles of the Church of England, the Westminster confession of 1646, the London Baptist confession of 1689, and the Methodist articles of 1784. In this usage, the terms *power* and *authority* are virtual synonyms, as are *being*, *essence*, and *nature*.

10. Robert Letham, *The Holy Trinity in Scripture, History, Theology, and Worship* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2004), 383. See also p. 179, n. 29, and p. 400.

11. Basil, *Against Eunomius* 1.20, quotations from *St. Basil of Caesarea: Against Eunomius*, trans. M. DelCogliano and A. Radde-Gallwitz (Washington, DC: Catholic University, 2011), 120–21.

12. Augustine, *The Trinity* 2.2.7, 101.

13. Augustine, *The Trinity* 2.2.7, 101–02; 2.2.8, 108; 2.2.9, 108–09; 4.5.25–32, 171–77.

14. Athanasius, *Letters of St. Athanasius Concerning the Holy Spirit*, trans. C. R. B. Shapland (London: Epworth, 1951), 135.

15. Gregory of Nyssa, *On Not Three Gods*, NPNF 5:334.

16. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Holy Spirit* 17.41–45 (NPNF 8:26–28).

17. In more detail, see Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 109–10.

18. For what follows, see K. N. Giles, “Barth and Subordinationism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64, no. 3 (2011): 327–46.

19. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* 1.1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. G. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1975), 350.

20. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 381.

21. Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 353.

22. In more detail and for documentation, see Giles, *Jesus and the Father*, 17–33.

23. P. B. Payne, *Man and Woman, One in Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 117–39.

24. Basil, *Letters and Selected Works* (NPNF 8:xl).

25. John Calvin, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, trans. J. W. Fraser, ed. D. W. Torrance and T. F. Torrance (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 229.

26. Appeal to a supposed hierarchically ordered Trinity as the ground for the hierarchical ordering of the sexes on earth is characteristic of and intrinsic to the post 1970s evangelical “complementarian” case for the permanent subordination of women. Evangelical egalitarians as a general rule have not appealed to a coequal Trinity to support their biblical arguments for the substantial equality of the differentiated sexes.

27. It is endorsed for Lutherans by the *Augsburg Confession* and the *Formula of Concord*; for the Reformed by the *Second Helvetic Confession* and the *Belgic Confession*, and for Anglicans by the *Thirty-Nine Articles*. G. R. Bray says this creed failed to obtain endorsement in the Westminster Confession of 1646 because doubts were then circulating about its authorship by Athanasius. “Whosoever Will Be Saved: The Athanasian Creed and the Modern Church,” in T. George, ed., *Evangelicals and the Nicene Faith: Reclaiming the Apostolic Witness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 47.

28. Leonard Hodgson, *The Doctrine of the Trinity* (London: Nisbet, 1955), 102.

29. The author (kngiles@gmail.com) welcomes comments about this statement from any academic theologian who has published on the Trinity who would be willing to confidentially endorse in principle this account of the historic orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, offer constructive criticism, or suggest improvements.

Posterity will serve him;
future generations will be told about the Lord.
They will proclaim his righteousness to *a people yet unborn*—
for he has done it.

— Psalm 22:30–31

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