Part I

God

1 Trinity
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INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of the Trinity is not only central to Christianity but one of its most distinctive teachings. Although the term "Trinity" never appears in the Christian Bible, Christians believe the doctrine to be grounded in Scripture. The doctrine developed during the first few centuries of Christianity, as early Christians began to reflect on Jesus' teachings, the writings of the apostles, the sacred writings that Christians came to call the Old Testament, and Christian practices such as worshiping Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Given the difficulties surrounding the doctrine, debates and disagreements inevitably arose, leading to a need for church councils to set agreed-upon teachings. Within the boundaries set by the conciliar decisions, Christians have discussed important issues related to the Trinity, including what a person is, what natures and substances are, and whether the Trinity has implications for the claim that humans are created in the image of God. Since the early twentieth century, Christians of various traditions have paid renewed attention to the doctrine of the Trinity.

BIBLICAL GROUNDING

How can someone affirm one of the central teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures – that there is but one God, Yahweh (Deut. 6:4; Mark 12:29) – and at the same time regard Jesus not only as Messiah (Christ) and Son of God, but also as God? If the Son is God (John 1:1), then what is the relationship between the Father and the Son? Is this in any way compatible with monotheism? Is God's Holy Spirit also a distinct divine agent, as Scripture seems to suggest? Although the New Testament includes brief glimpses into the relationship between Father and Son, as in Jesus' prayer to the Father (John 17:1–26), or among Father, Son, and Spirit, as in Jesus' farewell discourses (John 14–16), it leaves many unanswered questions regarding these persons and relationships.

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Nevertheless, the New Testament's ascription of divine titles and functions to the Father and the Son offers significant grounds for Trinity doctrine. The New Testament identifies God as one, as Father, or as God and Father: "one God and Father of all" (Ep. 4:6; cf. Rom. 3:30; 1 Cor. 8: 4–6). Yet at the same time, it speaks of Jesus Christ as Lord (Acts 7:59; Rom. 10:9; 1 Cor. 8:6, 16:22; Phil. 2:11) and as God (John 1:1–2, 18; John 20:28). It also appears that early Christian worship spoke of Jesus Christ as Lord and God. The New Testament describes Jesus Christ as performing the divine functions of receiving prayer, and of creating, saving, and judging (Acts 7:59–60; Rev. 22:20; Col. 1:16; John 3:16–17; John 5:21–27).

Biblical descriptions of Jesus Christ's relationship to God the Father also raise important and complicated issues. On the one hand, the New Testament describes Jesus as having existed with the Father prior to his birth and as the "exact imprint" of God's being (John 8:58; John 17:5; Heb. 1:2–3). On the other hand, the New Testament suggests Jesus' subordination to the Father as the one sent by the Father and as one who will be subordinate to the Father at the eschaton (John 5:30; John 14:28; 1 Cor. 15:24–28). Although the Son, like the Father, has life in himself and deserves the same honor as the Father, nevertheless the Son can do nothing by himself, but only what he sees the Father doing (John 5:19–27). The complexity of biblical descriptions of Jesus Christ can be seen in a single passage that describes Jesus as "the firstborn of all creation" (suggesting creaturely subordination) and also as the one who is "before all things" and in whom "all things in heaven and on earth were created," and "all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col. 1:15–20). Passages such as these contributed to early Christians' struggle to understand and articulate Jesus Christ's status and relationship to the Father.

The New Testament's comments about the Spirit also lend support to the doctrine of the Trinity. Although some references to the Spirit might not suggest that the Spirit is personal, other passages do seem to imply that the Spirit is a person. Thus, according to the Gospels, Jesus describes the Spirit as guiding his disciples' speech when they are brought to trial (Mark 13:11) and as one against whom blasphemy is not forgivable – and by implication as one against whom blasphemy can be committed (Mark 3:29; Matt. 12:31; Luke 12:10).

The New Testament does not clarify the relationship between the work of the Spirit and the work of Christ. Jesus promises his disciples that when he leaves them, he will send the Spirit, who will be their advocate (John 16:7). But he sometimes speaks of himself and sometimes of the Spirit as coming to his disciples after he leaves them (John 14:18, 26).

Paul speaks of both the Spirit and Christ dwelling in and making intercession for believers (Rom. 8:9–11, 26–27, 34). Paul even seems to identify Christ and the Spirit: "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17–18).

Given the ambiguous biblical evidence regarding whether the Spirit is personal, as well as suggestions that the Spirit may be the ascended Christ, one might have thought that Christians would seriously debate whether there are two or three divine agents or persons. The lack of such a debate follows from such biblical accounts as the story of Jesus' baptism, at which three divine figures are present: Jesus as the one being baptized, the Spirit as one who descends on him, and the Father as a voice from heaven speaking of Jesus as "my Son" (Mark 1:9–11; Matt. 3:16–17; Luke 3:21–22; John 1:32–34). The New Testament also includes triadic statements such as the baptismal formula ("baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" [Matt. 28:19]) and the closing benediction of Second Corinthians ("The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" [2 Cor. 13:14]). Other passages also include threefold references to Father (sometimes simply called God), Son, and Spirit (1 Cor. 12:4–6; 2 Thess. 2:13–14; Titus 3:4–6; 1 Pet. 1:2). Taken together, the descriptions of Jesus' baptism and these triadic statements suggest that Father, Son, and Spirit are distinct in certain functions, yet equal in status. These passages do not, however, clarify the relationships among the three.

So the Christian doctrine of the Trinity is rooted in biblical affirmations of the divinity of Jesus Christ and the Spirit as well key triadic texts. Still, the New Testament's lack of clarity about the relationships among the three, especially given statements that suggest both the Son's equality with and his subordination to the Father, left important issues to be resolved by the early church.

THE EARLY CHURCH

Early Christians began to reflect on how their commitment to monotheism fit with Jesus' teachings and the writings of the apostles, as well as with their practice of worshiping Jesus and the Holy Spirit. In the second century, Christian Apologists such as Justin Martyr and Theophilus spoke about the unity of God, the divine preexistence of the Logos, and the Triad (*trias*) of Father, Word, and Wisdom.[1] By the

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[1] Eugene Fortman, *The Triune God: A Historical Study of the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1982), 50–51; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1978), 109.

third century, two currents of thought developed. One current, known as monarchians and largely associated with Rome in the West, thought the emphasis on threeness threatened divine unity. Their belief in the oneness of God and the deity of Christ led the modalistic monarchians (notably, Sabellius) to speak of God as one being who appears first as Father and then as Son in the work of creation and redemption. The other current, initially associated with Alexandria in the East, emphasized the divine threeness. Origen of Alexandria spoke of Father, Son, and Spirit as three persons or *hypostases*, distinct eternally and not just as manifested in their work. Origen also spoke of the Son and Spirit as possessing divine characteristics derivatively from the Father and therefore as subordinate to the Father.[2]

At the beginning of the fourth century, amid a lack of agreement over how to think or speak about the divine threeness and oneness, Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, provoked the church into resolving some central issues. Arius proposed that God the Father is the unique, transcendent, unoriginate source of everything that exists, including the Son, who was created out of nothing by the Father's will or decision and therefore had a beginning. He also held that, as a finite being whose essence was dissimilar to the Father's, the Word or Son "can neither see nor know the Father perfectly and accurately." His followers spoke of the divine Triad as three *hypostases* who did not share the same essence or nature.[3]

Arius's proposals generated much controversy, prompting the emperor to call the council of Nicaea in 325. This council composed a creed that affirms belief in "one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, . . . begotten not made, of one substance [*homoousion*] with the Father" and anathematizes those who "assert that the Son of God is from a different hypostasis or substance" than the Father.[4] Nicaea apparently used the term *homoousion* at least in part because the Arians found it unacceptable, but without clarifying what the terms *homoousion* and *hypostasis* meant.[5] For example, does the term *ousia* refer to an individual thing or entity (primary substance) or does it

[2] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 109–10, 121–22, 129–32.
[3] R. P. C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318–381* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1989), 143–44; Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 227–29.
[4] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 232.
[5] Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 181–202; Christopher Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 160–72.

refer to an essence or substance common to several individuals (secondary substance)? As the debate took shape in succeeding decades, affirming "three hypostases" as distinct but consubstantial persons became accepted despite concerns by some Western theologians that it suggested three *hypostases* that were alien from one another and thus three gods. Debate during this period also clarified the Spirit's status as fully divine and equal with the Father and Son (such that some referred to the Spirit as *homoousion* with the Father and the Son).[6]

The Council of Constantinople (381) issued a new creed, sometimes known as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, both reaffirming and revising important teachings of Nicaea. It drops Nicaea's anathemas (including the anathema against saying the Son is of a different hypostasis than the Father) and it adds to Nicaea's mere mention of the Holy Spirit by affirming that the Spirit is Lord and life-giver, proceeds from the Father, is worshiped and glorified together with the Father and the Son, and spoke by the prophets.[7] The following year, a group of bishops in Constantinople wrote a synodical letter summarizing the true faith as belief in "one divinity, power, and substance of the Father and Son and Holy Spirit; and in their equal honor, dignity, and co-eternal majesty; in three most perfect hypostases or three perfect prosopa."[8]

The major figures engaged in the fourth-century discussions included Athanasius of Alexandria (ca. 296–373) and the Cappadocians – Basil of Caesarea (ca. 330–379), Gregory of Nazianzus (329/30–389/90), and Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 330–ca. 395). The Cappadocians spoke of the Trinity as three divine *hypostases* sharing one divine *ousia* and therefore as homoousios with one another.[9] Accordingly, Gregory of Nyssa describes the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as being analogous to Peter, James, and John, who share one human nature yet are three distinct persons. Recognizing that some might accuse him of holding to three gods, Gregory offers two responses. His first response is based on his own Platonism: just as three persons who share divinity are one God, so, too, three persons who share humanity should be called "one human," although we customarily abuse the language by speaking of "many humans."[10] His second response appeals to the unity of operations or

[6] Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, 253–63.

[7] Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 816–19.

[8] Fortman, *The Triune God*, 85.

[9] Stead, *Philosophy in Christian Antiquity*, 162.

[10] Gregory of Nyssa, "On 'Not Three Gods': To Ablabius," in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, second series, ed. P. Schaff and H. Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 5:331, 336.

works of God as ground for the unity of the three divine persons as one God. The Father does not do anything by himself "in which the Son does not work conjointly"; nor does the Son have "any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit"; and therefore the "unity existing in the action" of the three divine persons prevents speaking in the plural of three gods.[11] In sum, Gregory argues, "The Father is God: the Son is God: and yet by the same proclamation God is One, because no difference either of nature or of operation is contemplated in the Godhead."[12] The views of Gregory and the other Cappadocians have been especially influential in Eastern Christian thought and in recent discussions of the Trinity.

In the Western church, Augustine's theology of the Trinity, like his work on many other topics, has been enormously influential. Like the Cappadocians, Augustine emphasizes the unity of will and work of Father, Son, and Spirit, who have "but one will and are indivisible in their working."[13] Similarly, Augustine rejects any suggestion that the sending of the Son and Spirit implies "any inequality or disparity or dissimilarity of substance between the divine persons."[14] Augustine's discussion of the Trinity is influenced by his understanding of divine simplicity.[15] Noting the difficulty of translating concepts from Greek to Latin theology, he says that the Greek formula of one *ousia*, three *hypostases* sounds to him as if it means one being, three substances, so he prefers to speak of one being or substance, three persons.[16]

Augustine's differences with the Cappadocians over terminology are expressed in his discussion of analogies for the Trinity. Augustine rejects the three human analogy, noting both the disanalogy that other humans could emerge with the same nature and that, if the image of the Trinity is realized in three human beings, then humans would not have been in God's image until there was a man, woman, and their child.[17] He offers instead a variety of psychological or unipersonal analogies for the Trinity. Therefore, when someone loves, the triad of the human mind, its self-knowledge, and its love is an image of the one substance of the Trinity. Alternatively, a person is one mind or substance, yet with a distinct memory, understanding, and will.[18]

[11] Gregory of Nyssa, "On 'Not Three Gods,'" 334–35.
[12] Gregory, "On 'Not Three Gods,'" 336.
[13] Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans., with an introduction and notes, by E. Hill (New York: New City Press, 1991), II.9, 103.
[14] Augustine, *The Trinity*, IV.32, 176–77.
[15] Augustine, *The Trinity*, VI.8, VII.1–3, XIV.22; 210–11, 217–21, 414–15.
[16] Augustine, *The Trinity*, V.10, VII.10–11, 196, 227–29.
[17] Augustine, *The Trinity*, VII.11, XII.5–9, 229–30, 324–27.
[18] Augustine, *The Trinity*, IX.2–18, X.17–18, 271–82, 298–99.

Still, Augustine does not completely avoid social analogies; and he sharply qualifies his commitment to unipersonal analogies for the Trinity. In discussing Jesus' claim that he and the Father are one (John 10:30) and his prayer that his disciples will be one as he and the Father are one (John 17:22), Augustine employs a social analogy: "just as Father and Son are one not only by equality of substance but also by identity of will, so these men . . . might be one not only by being of the same nature, but also by being bound in the fellowship of the same love."[19] Then, in the concluding book of his work on the Trinity, Augustine notes that all images of the Trinity are inadequate: "So the trinity as a thing in itself is quite different from the image of the trinity in another thing." In particular, both social and psychological analogies ultimately falter: "while a triad of men cannot be called a man, that triad is called, and is, one God. . . . Nor is that triad like this image, man, which is one person *having* those three things; on the contrary, it *is* three persons, the Father of the Son and the Son of the Father and the Spirit of the Father and the Son."[20]

Augustine and the Cappadocians share broad areas of agreement on the Trinity as well as commitment to the language of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Still, the differences between them mark out two distinct streams of Christian thought on the Trinity: one primarily associated with Western Christianity and the other primarily with Eastern Christianity.

MEDIEVAL THOUGHT

Western thought on the Trinity in the Middle Ages was influenced by Boethius (ca. 480–ca. 524), who defines a person as the "individual substance of a rational nature," which he takes to be equivalent to the Greek term *hypostasis*.[21] But in his treatise on the Trinity, Boethius speaks of divine persons as "predicates of relation."[22] Medieval Western thought also bears evidence of influence from the Cappadocians. For example, Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109) echoes Gregory of Nyssa when he asks, "For in what way can those who do not yet understand how several specifically human beings are one human being understand

[19] Augustine, *The Trinity*, IV.12, 161.
[20] Augustine, *The Trinity*, XV.42–43, 428.
[21] Boethius, *The Theological Tractates* and *The Consolation of Philosophy*, trans. H. F. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge: Harvard University Press; London: William Heinemann, 1973), 85–87.
[22] Boethius, *The Theological Tractates* and *The Consolation of Philosophy*, 27.

in the most hidden and highest nature how several persons, each of whom is complete God, are one God."[23] Like Gregory of Nyssa, Anselm considers the union of several human persons constituting one humanity to reflect the union of three divine persons constituting one God.

Differences over the doctrine of the Trinity became a significant point of contention in the eleventh-century schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. Although the Nicene-Chalcedonian Creed of 381 says that the Holy Spirit "proceeds from the Father," by the fifth and sixth centuries, under the influence of Augustine's thought, Western Christian thinkers held that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*).[24] Asserting the Spirit's procession from the Son as well as the Father had become an important means for Western theologians to affirm the Son's full equality with the Father. In contrast, Eastern Christian thinkers held that "the Spirit proceeded *from* the Father *through* the Son," but insisted that "the Father was the source or fountain-head of Deity."[25] For the East, "there could be no procession also from the Son, for whatever was common to two hypostases had to be common to all three, and then the Holy Spirit would proceed also from himself."[26] Although the church of Rome for a time resisted tampering with the creed, eventually it added the filioque, thereby provoking a dispute with the East.[27]

By the thirteenth century, using Boethius's definition of person as well as his understanding of divine persons as relations, Thomas Aquinas says, "a divine person signifies a relation as subsisting . . . and such a relation is a hypostasis subsisting in the divine nature, although in truth that which subsists in the divine nature is the divine nature itself."[28] So Aquinas adds "heft" to Boethius's concept by defining a trinitarian person as a *subsistent* relation. Aquinas sees his position as occupying a middle ground between two opposite errors: Arianism and Sabellianism. To avoid Arianism, Aquinas speaks of a *distinction* between divine persons, but not of a separation or division; to avoid Sabellianism, he rejects both the phrase "the only God," since "Deity is common to several," and also the word "solitary," "lest we take away the society of the three

23   Anselm of Canterbury, "On the Incarnation of the Word," in *The Major Works*, ed. B. Davies and G. R. Evans (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 237.
24   J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. (New York: Longman, 1972), 358–59.
25   Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 359.
26   Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600–1700)*, vol. 2 of *The Christian Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 194.
27   Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 366–67.
28   Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, rev. ed., trans. the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Bengizer, 1948), I, Q. 29, a. 4.

persons."[29] Reflecting Western views, Aquinas holds that, if the Spirit did not proceed from the Son as well as from the Father, he could not be distinguished from the Son, since his relation to the Father would be identical to the Son's relation to the Father.[30]

RECENT PROPOSALS

The renaissance in work on the Trinity that began in the twentieth century in many ways is a response to the thought of the nineteenth-century theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher, who considers the Trinity only in the conclusion of his major work, *The Christian Faith*. Schleiermacher gives several reasons for putting the doctrine of the Trinity in what is essentially an appendix to this theology. First, based on his method of working from an analysis of the religious consciousness, Schleiermacher argues that this consciousness could never give rise to "the assumption of an eternal distinction in the Supreme Being."[31] Raising an issue that would become important in twentieth-century theology, Schleiermacher adds, "we have no formula for the being of God in Himself as distinct from the being of God in the world."[32] Second, he finds the church's doctrine inconsistent, affirming the equality of the persons while also making the Father superior to the other two persons. Finally, on the grounds that the Protestant Reformation offered no new treatment of this doctrine, but left the church vacillating between Tritheism and Unitarianism, he sees a doctrine due for "reconstruction."[33]

The "reconstruction" of the doctrine of the Trinity began in the first half of the twentieth century, initiated by Karl Barth but joined in by theologians of every theological and confessional stripe, including Karl Rahner, Leonard Hodgson, Jürgen Moltmann, Leonardo Boff, Catherine LaCugna, and John Zizioulas. In recent years, Christian philosophers as well as theologians have addressed important issues in the doctrine of the Trinity.

In the first volume of his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth develops the doctrine of the Trinity from his analysis of the event of divine revelation. In the event of revelation, says Barth, "God, the Revealer, is identical with His act in revelation and also identical with its effect" – a threefold reality that Barth describes as "Revealer, Revelation, and

[29] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 31, a. 2.
[30] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I, Q. 36, a. 2.
[31] Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, ed. H. R. Mackintosh and J. S. Stewart (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1928), 739.
[32] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 748.
[33] Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, 742–49.