On the Creation of Classical Theism

By J. V. Fesko[1]

In recent days talk and works on classical theism have been all the rage. Theologians across the spectrum have sought to recover classical theism—to return to the writings of the church fathers, medievals, and Reformers. The term *classical*, however, is something of a misnomer. There was a time when there was no such thing as classical theism—there was just theism—a theism commonly shared by theologians from the early church all the way through the seventeenth century, whether Roman Catholic or Protestant. While there are significant doctrines that separate Rome from the Reformation, the doctrine of God is not one of them. So, what happened? And whence classical theism?

In the nineteenth century two key historical developments occurred that shaped the doctrine of God for the next century-plus. First, Adolf von Harnack (1851–1930) created the myth of the Hellenization thesis. He claimed that the early church fathers had uncritically imbibed foreign Greek philosophical ideas that infected their theology. Theological concepts such as simplicity, aseity, and God as the first cause of all that is were supposedly more indebted to Aristotle's unmoved mover than the God of Scripture. The God of the church fathers, medievals, and Reformers was not the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Second, Theodore de Regnon (1831–93), among others, made the claim that Eastern and Western theologians approached the doctrine of the Trinity from different starting points: Eastern theologians started from the three persons, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and Western theologians started from the divine essence. Given that theologians such as Augustine (354–430) included doctrines such as simplicity and aseity as attributes of the divine essence, there was supposedly an inability to reach the fruit of the biblical doctrine of the Trinity and the three persons from the philosophically infected soil of the divine essence. These two developments supposedly then set the stage for a Trinitarian renaissance in the twentieth century.

In the twentieth century theologians such as Karl Rahner (1904–84) wanted to return the doctrine of the Trinity to its proper place as the lodestar of theology. But he criticized medievals such as Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) for supposedly separating the divine essence from the three persons in his *Summa Theologica* because he first treated *de Deo uno* before he wrote of *de Deo Trio*. Another factor

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was the influence of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831) and his "Trinitarian" philosophy. Hegel is probably the most dominant philosopher of the modern period who influenced nineteenth- and twentieth-century theologians to re-write the doctrine of the Trinity. The supposed corruption of patristic and medieval theology, the purported differences between Eastern and Western approaches to the Trinity, and the influence of Hegel all set the stage for the rise of social Trinitarianism and theistic personalism. Theologians began to speak of God as three distinct centers of consciousness and the Trinity in relational terms—that there was a real give-and-take among Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and their creation. In more technical terms, the triune God was no longer the God who is, the great I AM (Exo. 3:14), the God who "is and who was and who is to come" (Rev. 1:4), but rather the great "I am becoming," the God who evolves and who will be. God was no longer the divine *being* but the divine *becoming*. Theologians needed to be able to contrast the catholic doctrines of God and the Trinity and thus created the term *classical theism* to distinguish them from their own views. By tagging the catholic view as *classical* over and against *theism* signaled to the broader church and world that the classical view was outdated and unbiblical and the newer theism was superior. This narrative has become so popular in our own day that well-known conservative Evangelical and Confessional Protestant theologians have abandoned many aspects of the catholic doctrines of God and the Trinity and promoted the newer theism of personalism and social Trinitarianism all under a banner of exegetical fidelity to the Scriptures. Some have even claimed that the Reformers did not take the Reformation far enough and have called to reform the doctrine of God.

In recent years a bevy of theologians from across the theological spectrum have pushed back against these trends and sought to recover classical theism. But this retrieval is not simply the recovery of tradition for the sake of pining for the past. Rather, theologians and historians have returned *ad fontes* to see that the claims of Harnack and de Regnon are false—they have stripped away the encrusted layers of myth to get to the bedrock of primary sources to see that theologians like Augustine plied concepts such as simplicity and aseity, not because he allowed Athens to dictate terms to Jerusalem, but because he saw that Athens could clarify truths from Jerusalem. In other words, philosophy was a handmaiden, not a mistress, to scriptural truths. Augustine used the concept of simplicity to make sense of Philippians 2:5–11 in his *De Trinitate* to explain how the Son was fully human and yet in full possession of the Father's essence. Alternatively stated, Augustine used the truths of general revelation and metaphysics to clarify the truths of special revelation. In other words, Augustine's doctrine

of the Trinity is rigorously exegetical and not beholden to Aristotle's unmoved mover. But by the same token, those retrieving classical theism rightly point out that the theism of modernity and social Trinitarianism is not as purely biblical as its proponents would like us to think. Social Trinitarianism rests on a shaky foundation of bad historiography, the historical critical exegesis of Scriptures, and the philosophy of Hegel. Perhaps the theism of modernity is not all that biblical and should spur the question, "What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What concord is there between the modern philosophy and the church? What agreement is there between heretics and Christians?" This is not to say that there is absolutely no truth in modern philosophy, but theologians should not assume that the patristics and medievals were the only ones to ply philosophical insights for the sake of theological formulation. Modern doctrines of God and the Trinity are arguably as much or more philosophical than classical views as well as less scripturally grounded, or in some cases, contrary to Scripture.

Classical theism is not simply a throwback to days gone by but is instead a rich exegetical, theological, and catholic phenomenon that beckons us. While it would be fitting to dispense with the adjective *classical* and simply refer to theism, enough theological water has flowed under the bridge of history to warrant the term so long as we understand that *classical* is a synonym for *catholic*, and that we have much to learn from our forebears. As C. S. Lewis (1898–1960) once encouraged us, we need to let the fresh breeze of the centuries past remind us of truths we have long forgotten. For every new book, we need to read three old ones. There are rich treasures in Athanasius's *On the Incarnation*, in Gregory of Nazianzus's *On God and Christ*, in Augustine's *De Trinitate*, and in Aquinas's *Summa Theologica*. Classical theism is ultimately about seeking to listen to the pastors and teachers throughout the ages with which Christ has blessed the church (Eph. 4:11–12) as they exegete the Scriptures so that we can better know, love, and serve the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the God who was, who is, and who is to come.