The Ox's Exalted Doctrine of God: The Rich Inheritance of Aquinas

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Abstract: *Doctrinal Trinitarian drift in evangelicalism has increasingly become an issue of concern. The historical cycle of the church demonstrates a perennial need to retrieve her rich heritage. The process of retrieval arms the church with a better appreciation of the past—and with the theological tools and grammar developed in the past to wrestle with vital doctrines. This article aims to measure the faithfulness of Thomas Aquinas's use of the patristics with respect to the classical doctrine of the Trinity. The goal of this evaluation is to demonstrate that today's pastor-theologian must be conversant with historic orthodox Christianity. Furthermore, this article seeks to survey the development of Trinitarian grammar in the church as being done in faithfulness to generations past rather than unconnected, innovative thought. The councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon give the church effective fruitful language to combat abuses of Scripture and set forth a proper taxonomy for Trinitarian dialogue. However, they did not develop this language in a vacuum, nor did they view themselves as forerunners of novelty. This paper aims to demonstrate that Thomas Aquinas was no different; he saw himself as receiving the baton of pro-Nicene Trinitarianism from the church before him.*

Key Words: Aquinas, Patristics, Trinity, Augustine, Classical Theism

Introduction

It is common for theological disagreements to devolve into one party accusing the other of being unbiblical. That trend is especially notable in Trinitarian disputes (see the 2016 EFS debates, for example).[2] Some have argued that

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[2] Eternal Functional Subordination/Eternal Subordination of the Son/Eternal Relations of Authority and Submission is not a monolithic position. It essentially says that the obedience of the Son to the Father is not limited merely to the Incarnation, rather, it also extends to the Son's eternal relationship with the Father. Intrinsic to the eternal relationship between the Father and Son there is authority and submission. For relevant literature, see, e.g., Bruce Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005); Kevin Giles, *Jesus and the Father: Modern Evangelicals Reinvent the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006); Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 249–52; Millard J. Erickson, *Who's Tampering with the Trinity: An Assessment of the Subordination Debate* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009); D. Glenn Butner Jr., "Eternal Functional Subordination and the Problem of the Divine Will," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 58, no. 1 (March 2015): 131–49; Idem., *The Son Who Learned Obedience* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018); James E. Dolezal, *All that is in God: Evangelical Theology and the Chal-*

classical theism is a grid superimposed on Scripture, ignoring its function as a guardrail. However, the rich heritage of orthodox Trinitarianism was not something the Fathers articulated in abstraction from Scripture; rather, it is a harmonization of the biblical text they cherished with their lives.[3]

Presenting Jesus as a subordinate or created deity, God without a body, or no Son at all—each is a repulsive thought to the Bible-believing Christian. What many evangelicals forget—or do not know—is the reason those thoughts are repulsive: They do not properly present the totality of Scripture. There is a reason why John 10:30 is not invalidated by John 14:28, why John 1 does not allow for a "created Son," and why John 3:16 is to be understood as teaching eternal generation. The reason these are normative conclusions in twenty-first century Christianity is because of past generations' fierce battles over the interpretation of Scripture. The Arians so over-emphasized the scriptural texts on Jesus' humanity as to damage their interpretation of those which speak of Him as consubstantial with the Father. The Sabellians so overemphasized God's oneness that they removed the simultaneity and distinction of persons in the Godhead. The Gnostics so overemphasized the deity of Jesus as to remove his true humanity. The rich Christian heritage that evangelicals have today resulted from such battles over how to properly harmonize all of Scripture.

The modern Christian church must recover and maintain the grammar of Trinitarian taxonomy so that we do not revive the errors that previous generations have already faced down.[4] So while lexical, syntactical, contextual exegesis and systematic harmonization remain the vital, foremost tasks for every student of Scripture, every responsible student also recognizes a subsequent and indispensable stage in the process of interpretation where they must employ a built-in self-check for their conclusions, whereby, they evaluate their conclusions against

lenge of Classical Christian Theism (Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage Books, 2017), 133–4; Ware and Starke, *One God in Three Persons*; Dennis W. Jowers and H. Wayne House, eds., *The New Evangelical Subordinationism? Perspectives on the Equality of God the Father and God the Son* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2012); Michael J. Ovey, *Your Will Be Done: Exploring Eternal Subordination, Divine Monarchy and Divine Humility* (London: Latimer Trust, 2016).

[3] Historians have long recognized that the Fathers' focus in Trinitarian theology was Scripture: "To underpin that in sacred theology the literal sense of the Bible is fundamental, Thomas appeals again to Augustine" (Leo J. Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors: The Philosophers and the Church Fathers in His Works* [Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 2015], 112). As Gilles Emery explains, their conviction was to be guided "by the authority of the Holy Scriptures." "Trinitarian Theology as Spiritual Exercise in Augustine and Aquinas," in *Aquinas the Augustinian*, ed. M. Dauphinias, Barry David, and M. Levering (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 3 n10: *De Trinitate*, I.2.4; cf. XV.3.5.

[4] This is exactly the serious nature of the modern errors of EFS/ESS/ERAS.

the backdrop of the history of the faith. Many expositors today are missing this humble step in their exegetical method. They succumb to the fallacy of conflating their personal or private interpretation with divine meaning.

It is commonly held that the creeds and confessions—which undergird confessionalism—are opposed to the historical-grammatical hermeneutic. This is an erroneous conclusion. A creed or confession is a norm for the faith, but one that is itself normed by Scripture. Scripture, conversely, is the norm not normed by anything outside itself. Proper, private interpretation falls between these two—it is built on the supreme authority of Scripture yet self-governed by historic orthodoxy as expressed in the creeds and confessions. For this reason, it should gravely concern the modern church if our doctrine of the Trinity were unrecognizable to—or, even worse, condemned by—historic orthodoxy.

But Much Increase Comes by the Strength of an Ox

So how should we incorporate historical theology into our private interpretation? One fundamental approach is to recognize doctrinal harmony, advancement, and agreement in the church. As an example, this article will appeal to one often deemed an enemy: Thomas Aquinas. This is no attempt to protestantize Thomas, but rather to demonstrate the vital contributions to historic Trinitarian doctrine made by one whom many Protestants might consider best absented from that stream.[5]

Instead of dismissing such influential theologians outright, Christians should be noted for their charity, fairness, and objectivity in assessing them. Herman Bavinck modeled that attitude well. In volume 2 of his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Aquinas seems to be his dearest friend—Bavinck approvingly cites Thomas numerous times. Yet in volume 3 on soteriology, Aquinas is one of Bavinck's fiercest foes. Despite serious disagreements on certain other points, many Protestants have long recognized Aquinas's accuracy and invaluable contributions in theology proper. With the same intent, this article will survey how Nicene consensus was formed and summarize Aquinas's doctrine of the Trinity as an advancement of pro-Nicene orthodoxy, and finally demonstrate why the church should earnestly defend that doctrine today.

[5] Far too often, students are quick to commit the Genetic Fallacy when they come to Aquinas. They look to the man, or his body of doctrine, or even the Counter-Reformation at Trent (which appealed to Aquinas to build much of their doctrine of sacramentalism) and conclude that any theological claim from him must be invalid. Consequently, they never give his doctrine of the Trinity a fair assessment. Another mistake made from misplaced disapproval (and, quite frankly, chronological snobbery) is to commit the Composition Fallacy—that his error in certain areas invalidates his contributions in others.

Historical Grammar Development

Before engaging in the historical discussion, it is important to recognize the grammar that the early church fathers and subsequent generations applied in developing their understanding of God. We see the Fathers work with some basic categories. And while not every father held to these categories, it is important to identify each of them, so that we can better see their persistence into following generations and better understand the debates that led to their acceptance. This grammar of the early church included terms like *essence*, *persons*, *relations*, and *missions*. And while we will clarify the definition of each term, and not merely within its historical context, it is important to recognize the unavoidable presupposition of the pre-modern church: "St. Thomas maintains that one can know neither what God is (*quid*) nor how God is (*quomodo*); one can grasp only that God is (*quia est*), what God is not (*quid non est*), and how He is not (*quomodo non est*)."[6]

That astute summary puts the exegete and historical theologian in a proper place. Man cannot know God as He is, nor define Him however he sees fit. For example, the Fathers recognized that defining the persons of the Godhead cannot be done via experience, by looking at what we think constitutes personhood in man and then superimposing that back onto God—a practice fraught with pitfalls. Rather, defining the persons is best done by first understanding divine processions, which then prepares the student to consider and define relations.

Furthermore, the terms used for each of the distinct processions do not reflect mere philosophical conjecture but are taken verbatim from the pages of Scripture. The Father begets, the Son is begotten of the Father, and the Spirit proceeds from both.[7] Historically the term *procession* has been used in two ways: generally, to define modes of origin (that is, generically to distinguish the processions), and more specifically in speaking about the Spirit.[8] Scripture gives language such as *generating* and *generation* to the Father and Son, and Aquinas adds, of the Spirit, "[b]ut this procession can be called spiration, since it is the

[6] Emery, "Trinitarian Theology as Spiritual Exercise in Augustine and Aquinas," 22–3.

[7] John 1:14; 8:42; 15:26; Hebrews 1:5 (Psalm 2:7); Isaiah 48:16, et al.

[8] Gilles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52. For more on the matter of *modes of origin* see: J. Warren Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), who writes, "Modes of God's being differs significantly from Sabellius' 'modes of God's self-revelation.' For the modalist, the persons are the way the one God reveals himself in history, but are not real and eternal distinctions within the Godhead. For the Cappadocians by contrast, the persons are real distinctions within God" (116).

procession of the Spirit."[9]

Broadly speaking, philosophers and theologians alike have viewed relations in two major categories: quantity and action.[10] God's relations cannot be defined by quantity, since that would necessitate either tritheism or posit greater and lesser in God (in which case, that which is greater is truly God, and that which is lesser would not be God). So quantity "is incompatible with the consubstantiality of the divine persons."[11] Hence the only distinct relations possible in God are those of action. In short, only action can entail a dual relation that is adequate to define divine relations.

Against a host of historical errors, Aquinas distinguished between two kinds of action: immanent and transitive. *Immanent* refers to God's action which remains *ad intra*, whereas God's *transitive* action explains God's work *ad extra*. So God's processions are immanent act, whereas God's missions in the economy of redemption are transitive act. Aquinas notes:

> Some have understood this procession in the sense of an effect proceeding from its cause; so Arius took it, saying that the Son proceeds from the Father as the first amongst his creatures, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son as the creature of both. But then, neither the Son nor the Holy Spirit would be true God.[12]

Arius and Sabellius mistook procession to be an *ad extra* expression, when it is properly an immanent action.[13] Some protest this framework and its terms as pagan philosophy imposed on, rather than derived from, Scripture, but historians and theologians routinely deny this.[14] Heresies are fundamentally philosophical errors at heart, even if they are disguised under the noble banner of "biblicism."

Another important note is that relations of origin determine the order, but the order should not be confused with any idea of supremacy, authority, or priority. This confusion is a hallmark of the modern novelty that is EFS/ESS/ERAS.

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[9] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. The Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, MD: Christian Classics, 1981), I.27.4 *ad* 3. Hereafter, *ST*.

[10] Aristotle, *The Metaphysics*, trans. John H. McMahon (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), 90–122. Book V.

[11] Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 55.

[12] *ST* I.27.1.

[13] *ST* I.27.1.

[14] Everyone has a philosophy. See, Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Crossway, 2012). Emery helpfully said, "This doctrine has nothing in common with Gnostic philosophizing." *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 58 n37: . . . St. Hilary (*De Trinitate* VI.9; SC, 488, 182–5) and Augustine (*De haeresibus* 11; CCSL 46, 295–6). Cf. St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, II.28.6.

As Aquinas notes: "The Father has no priority in relation to the Son: neither in duration, nor in nature, nor conceptually, nor in dignity . . . There is no priority whatsoever of one person over another in God."[15]

Aquinas and the Church Fathers

What sets Aquinas apart from many contemporary theologians is his willingness to have his contemplative theology evaluated by the historical norm. He regularly tells his readers that his aim is historical fidelity. Aquinas scholars commonly affirm, "St. Thomas presents his speculative Trinitarian doctrine as an extension or personal development of the teaching of the fathers, and of St. Augustine in particular."[16] Thus it is a rather simple matter of evaluation to see if Aquinas held true to his intention. Was he faithful, or did he deviate?

First and Second Centuries

Though the term *Trinity* is not used until Tertullian, we see interesting developments in Trinitarian language during the first few centuries of the church. What we find, primarily in the apologists, is a focus on unity in the Godhead and that "persons" were commonly referenced, though not with the specificity that would later be termed *relations of origin*.[17] The early church, especially the Greek fathers, was heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy.[18] This uniquely influenced how expressions of Trinitarianism developed.

As many new Christians were wrestling with different passages of Scripture, they quickly recognized the deity of the Father and the Son. This has been described as "binitarian" theology.[19] We see affirmations of the divinity of the Father and the Son clearly in the New Testament and recognized in the church's writings by Clement of Rome, Polycarp, and Ignatius.[20]

[15] Cited in Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 71 n95: *I Sent.* D.9, q.2, a.1; d. 12, q.1, a.1.

[16] Emery, "Trinitarian Theology as Spiritual Exercise in Augustine and Aquinas," 1.

[17] Sometimes called *modes of origin*; not to be confused with modalism. See J. Warren Smith "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 116.

[18] Leo Elders, "The Greek Christian Authors and Aristotle," in *Aristotle in Late Antiquity*, ed. Larence P. Schrenk (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University Press, 1994), 111–42.

[19] Larry W. Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2003), 52–3.

[20] For a list of helpful resources on this period see: Thomas G. Weinandy, "St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*: The Importance of Being Human," *Logos*, 6:15–34; interestingly related, see: Thomas G. Weinandy, *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to His Biblical Commentaries* (London: T. & T. Clark Publ., 2005); *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*, in Early Christian Fathers, ed. and trans. Cyril Richardson (New York: Touchstone, 1996), 149–60; St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, in *The Apostolic Fathers with Justin*

In the following generation of Christian theology, the desire to harmonize the biblical texts which speak of one God with those that refer to distinct persons as God necessitated greater precision of thought and expression. In his attempt, Justin Martyr built what has been termed "Logos theology."[21] Justin, recognizing two persons (at least) in Scripture who are God, articulates that reality as if the Father were the transcendent one in heaven and the Son were the immanent one on earth. This unfortunately leads to subordinationism, as it mirrors the Platonic framework.[22] That in turn has resulted in the broad-brush categorization of second-generation theologians as mere Greek philosophers. Yet we should hesitate to dismiss them as entirely pagan Platonic thinkers, since "Justin's Logos theology is not about Stoicism, Middle Platonism, or Platonic Hellenistic Judaism; rather it is about Jesus Christ."[23] Furthermore, it is important to note that the emphasis of Trinitarian theology in the second century was largely on economy.[24]

Third Century

The third phase of Trinitarian debate was against not pagan philosophy but other Christians. Two major errors arose from interpretive mistakes of the biblical data: modalism (Monarchianism, Sabellianism) and Gnosticism (addressed even in the New Testament). Three major figures arose in this debate to help correct these mishandlings of God's Word: Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Origen.

Irenaeus helped to identify the Gnostic fallacy of dividing God from the

Martyr and Irenaeus, trans. M. Dods, et al., *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, First Series. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 315–567; Stephen M. Hildebrand, "The Trinity in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 95–6.

[21] L. W. Barnard, "The Logos Theology of St Justin Martyr," *The Downside Review*, 89, no. 295 (1971): 132–41.

[22] Hurtado, *Lord Jesus Christ: Devotion to Jesus in Earliest Christianity*, 52–3. He writes, "There are a fairly consistent linkage and subordination of Jesus to God 'the Father' in these circles, evident even in the Christian texts from the latter decades of the 1st century that are commonly regarded as a very 'high' Christology, such as the Gospel of John and Revelation. This is why I referred to this Jesus-devotion as a 'binitarian' form of monotheism: there are two distinguishable figures (God and Jesus), but they are posited in a relation to each other that seems intended to avoid the ditheism of two gods."

[23] Hildebrand, "The Trinity in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," 97. Hildebrand helpfully points to C. Baechle, "A Reappraisal of the Christology of St Justin Martyr" (PhD dissertation, Fordham University, Bronx, NY: 2009), for more detail.

[24] Theophilus of Antioch is a common example of such. Heavy Platonic influence is still very noticeable. For further research on this see: R. Grant, *Greek Apologists of the Second Century* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1988), 167.

Son and the Spirit. Drawing upon John 1, he refused to allow for a theology that divided the members of the Godhead or placed one in subordination to another.[25] Therefore, establishing the *co-existence* of the members of the Godhead was an important doctrine for Irenaeus. As he noted, "the Word, that is the Son, was always with the Father," and, "the Son, eternally co-existing with the Father . . ."[26] This thinking obviously became a patter for articulating eternal generation in subsequent generations.

It has rightly been observed that "Clement [of Alexandria]'s problem, then, comes not from philosophy but from revelation, though he uses Middle Platonic philosophy to help answer the problem."[27] It may be that he was the first to apply metaphysics to the relations between the Father and Son to avoid the errors of modalism or Gnosticism. However, Clement seems subject to the pitfalls of subordinationism, which his predecessors and many of his contemporaries successfully avoided. Stephen M. Hildebrand explains, "Thus the Son is a metaphysical mediator, ontologically subordinate to the One as he brings the many into contact with it."[28]

Origen, like many others who imperfectly handled the biblical data, articulated that the Son is begotten of the Father's will.[29] His mistaken theory would become the driving philosophy behind Arius's claims. However, unlike Arius, Origen expressed the eternal existence of the Son without a beginning.[30] While Clement of Alexandria introduced some problematic interpretations of Scripture in the West, we see a clearer harmony (though still not as well refined as in later generations) of those same biblical texts in Tertullian.[31] In addition to

[25] See more on why Irenaeus was anti-subordinationism: D. Minns, *Irenaeus: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: T&R Clark, 2010), 63–4.

[26] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 488, 406.

[27] Hildebrand, "The Trinity in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," 102.

[28] Hildebrand, "The Trinity in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," 102, also explains that not everyone agrees that Clement of Alexandria fell into too heavy a form of subordinationism as presented by R. Feulner, *Clemens von Alexandrien. Sein Leben Werk und philosophisch-theologisches Denken*, Bamberger theologische Studien, 31 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2006), 164–67. I agree with Hilderbrand's assessment, but I believe the reason was largely due to Clement of Alexanderia's hermeneutical approach as much as his use of Middle Platonic philosophy.

[29] Hildebrand, "The Trinity in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," 103.

[30] Origen, *On First Principles*, trans. G. W. Butterworth (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1973), 314. 4.4.1. However, historians have recognized clear subordinationist sayings in Origen. For more sources on subordination in Origen see: Hildebrand, "The Trinity in the Ante-Nicene Fathers," 104.

[31] It is also important to note that Tertullian and others saw themselves as standing in continuity with those who came before them. Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, "Tertullian and the beginnings of the doctrine of the Trinity," *The Works of Benjamin B. Warfield*, eds. Ethelbert Dudley Warfield, and William Park Armstrong (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003), 4:1–109.

being identified as the first theologian to use the term *Trinity*, he introduced an idea of *relations* between the persons of the Godhead (later developed more clearly and biblically by Augustine). Tertullian also introduced a guiding formula of "one substance in three persons" that would be developed later in Nicaea and Constantinople. He said they are three "not in condition [*statu*], but in degree [*gradu*], not in substance [*substantia*], but in form [*forma*], not in power [*potestate*], but in aspect [*specie*]; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power."[32]

Fourth Century

The fourth and fifth centuries saw an establishment of appropriate terminology for discussing God that has shaped theological formulation and grammar to this day.[33] The Trinity received its greatest focus during the fourth century—a time of significant world-historical events, plentiful enemies, strange political and theological alliances, and vital definitional development.[34] The major contributions of a few theologians stand out as Trinitarian grammar set the guardrails within which successive generations have functioned. It is important to remember,

> [T]he logic of Nicaea that seemed incontrovertible in 381 was not so obvious in 318. The language and logic of the grammar unfolded gradually in the theological imagination of Nicaea's supporters and critics alike. Therefore, the fourth-century doctrine of the Trinity must be seen as a work in progress and so its evolution needs to be traced out chronologically.[35]

The fires of Trinitarian controversy were stoked by disagreements over how to handle certain Christological texts. The notorious presbyter Arius infamously contended that "there was a time when the Son was not." His was an attempt to preserve the monotheism of texts such as Deuteronomy 6:4 (also Mark 12:29; John 17:3; Eph. 4:6; etc.). But to reconcile the oneness of God with other texts that

[32] Tertullian, *Against Prazeas*, trans. P. Holmes, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 598.

[33] As with their predecessors, it has been observed that these generations of theologians continued to be heavily Platonic. Elders, *Aquinas and His Predecessors*, 1.

[34] For a few resources that cover the history in more detail see Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 109–22; Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Khaled Anatolios and Brian Daley, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011); Augustine Casiday and Frederick W. Norris, *The Cambridge History of Christianity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Smith's was the most succinct treatment.

[35] Smith, "The Trinity in the Fourth-Century Fathers," 110.

spoke of Jesus' humanity—his real birth, his human emotions—Arius declared that the Son was a created being. He said, "[A]t the will of God, [he was] created before times and before ages, and gaining life and being from the Father."[36] While Arius did teach that the Son was created, he also taught that Jesus was unique, not a created being just like all other created beings. Arius used two primary texts to support his view for the Son's creaturehood: Proverbs 8:22–31 and Colossians 1:15.[37] He also highlighted texts that putatively show the Son to be lesser than the Father, such as John 14:28 and Mark 13:32.[38] Roman emperor Constantine wanted theological consensus to resolve these matters, which resulted in the famous Council of Nicaea, AD 325. Ultimately Arianism was weighed, ruled to be outside the bounds of orthodoxy, and condemned as heresy.

Athanasius

Athanasius's contribution is crucial to seeing how this debate developed. He is the natural starting point, since he was the assistant and deacon to Alexander of Alexandria at the First Council of Nicaea.[39] Athanasius eventually succeeded Alexander as bishop, all the while defending Trinitarianism against the vastly more popular Arianism, even when that doctrine was espoused by Constantine's son, Emperor Constantius II. That first council agreed upon the creed, "We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father, only-begotten, that is, from the substance of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through Whom all things came into being." The key to the debate, which Athanasius stressed, was that Jesus is *homoousios* (of the same substance) with the Father, controverting Arius's claim that Jesus is merely *homoiousios* (of like substance) with the Father. Such an important distinction was made using one letter in a Greek philosophical term, yet the difference was unequivocal.

While Athanasius laid the groundwork in 325 at Nicaea, no full consensus was reached during his lifetime. In fact, Arianism and its ugly stepchild semi-Arianism were revived many times by men such as Aëtius and Eunomius after

[36] Arius, "*Letter to Alexander*," Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1997), 4:458.

[37] It is interesting to point out that these were the same texts Origen used in order to highlight the unique status of Christ. However, Origen stopped short of claiming that Jesus was a created being.

[38] This trend is akin to EFS/ESS/ERAS proponents today, except to highlight the Father's "priority," "authority," or "superiority" over the Son.

[39] He served for 45 years. Of those, he spent 17 in exile on five different occasions, at the behest of four different emperors for his—at the time—controversial positions.

Athanasius's and Arius's deaths. It took the Cappadocian fathers (Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus), with their contributions in the First Council of Constantinople (381), to produce the final version of the creed that remains a monument of orthodox Trinitarianism—the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. The contributions of these men, along with Athanasius beforehand and Augustine afterward, provide a unity for doctrinal definitions of the Trinity that remains, without a doubt, the standard of Trinitarian taxonomy by which all controversy is measured. Still, Arius's monster would not so readily die. Men such as Hilary of Poitiers and the Cappadocian fathers further developed Trinitarian orthodoxy from the pages of Scripture, assuming the mantle of Athanasius in defense of the biblical Trinity in the fourth century.

The Cappadocian Fathers

The Cappadocian fathers were Basil of Caesarea (329–379), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), and Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390). These men each wrote treatises on both the unity of the Godhead and the proper way to distinguish the divine persons. Their contributions to Trinitarian orthodoxy were no mere academic exercises but were deeply entrenched in, and concerned with, the preservation of the gospel. To preface a detailed look at their contributions with a summary, we see their harmony in three brief statements: Basil wrote, "The term *ousia* is common . . . while *hypostasis* is contemplated in the special property of Fatherhood, Sonship, or the power to sanctify."[40]

Gregory of Nazianzus explained, "The Godhead is one in three, and the three are one, in whom the Godhead is, or to speak more accurately, who are the Godhead."[41] Gregory of Nyssa similarly reasoned, "Our Lord is the maker of all things, that He is King of the universe, set above it not by an arbitrary act of capricious power, but ruling by virtue of a superior nature; and besides this, we will find that the one First Cause, as taught by us, is not divided by any unlikeness of substance into separate first causes, but one Godhead, one Cause, one Power over all things is believed in . . . ."[42]

[40] St Basil, *Letters*, *Volume 2* (186–368), in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Agnes Clare Way, with notes by Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1955), *Letter* 214.4. Hereafter *Letters, Volume 2*.

[41] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 39, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 7:355–56 (*Oration* 39.11). Hereafter *Oration*.

[42] Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. trans. William Moore, Henry Austin Wilson, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 5:84.

Notably, this era lacked scholastic organization and was built almost entirely through polemical writings. As a result, it deals wonderfully with specific errors, but in others did not leave even a simple definitional framework. This period exhibits a strict terminology built upon the Nicene Creed that the church used to distinguish, yet harmonize, those texts in Scripture that speak of the oneness of God and those that reference three distinct, simultaneous, co-extensive, co-eternal, consubstantial persons who are all called *God*. That drove the Nicene and post-Nicene fathers to develop the necessary language for discussing the Trinity. The term *ousia* (along with *phusis,* meaning "nature") best encapsulates the divine unity: what is one in God. This was later referred to as God's substance, essence, nature, or being. In like manner, *prosopon* distinguishes the threeness of God, later referred to as person(s) or subsistence(s).

These two categories of how God is one in a certain respect and three in another were necessary for the church to maintain and articulate Scripture's testimony about God (cf. 2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Cor. 12:4–6; Eph. 4:4–6; 1 Pet. 1:2; Rev. 1:4–5). Additionally, those terms helped keep aberrant views at bay; any view that misunderstood the category of essence, or person, or both, was examined and rejected. Still, the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*, or even the proper way to define the *hypostasis* of the Father, Son, and Spirit, do not appear in texts like Matthew 28:19 or Deuteronomy 6:4. We have inherited the proper taxonomy to describe the Trinity (essence and persons) from the early church, and for that we are greatly in its debt.

To harmonize such texts, allowing the exegetical data of each to remain and without removing or distorting other texts, is to engage in *theologia*. *Theologia* refers to the mysteries of God's nature as He is in Himself, sometimes called God's incommunicable attributes or nature. An example of *theologia* is how we define *ousia*. *Oikonomia*, in contrast, refers to the manner of revelation or how God has made Himself known.[43] We must be careful not to collapse these categories or to confuse them—and the Cappadocians provide superior examples in preserving that delicate balance and precision.

Basil of Caesarea

Basil's contribution of the categorical differences between essence (or nature) and persons cannot be overlooked. He thoroughly explains that natures are common,

[43] Basil is engaged in *theologia*, Lewis Ayres explains, "In discussing the 'Cappadocians,' much is often made of the distinction between θεολογία and οικονόμια. Some caution is required here. Basil generally uses θεολογία as a mode of insight into the nature of God that comes as a result of an ability to see beyond material reality, or beyond the material-sounding phraseology of some scriptural passages." *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 220.

while persons specify qualities of a nature. His concern is that the biblical text be delicately handled, to avoid its misuse. He explains this concern in his *Letters*, where he says, "It must well be understood that, as he who does not confess a community of substance falls into polytheism, so too he who does not grant the individuality of the Persons is carried away into Judaism."[44] Basil achieved this proper biblical balance in his clear theological grammar, which distinguished between the one *ousia* (essence/nature) and the three subnumerations (subsistences/persons) of God.[45]

Basil correctly appropriated the Greek technical terms that good and necessary consequence demanded to properly express what Scripture says to be true about God without requiring the diminution or manipulation of any biblical text.[46] Basil examined what was common among the persons and what was distinct. In his AD 377 letter to Amphilochius of Iconium, he wrote,

> The distinction between ὀύσία and ὑπόστασις is the same as that between general and the particular; as, for instance, between the animal and the particular man. Wherefore, in the case of the Godhead, we confess one essence or substance so as not to give a variant definition of existence, but we confess a particular hypostasis, in order that our conception of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit may be without confusion and clear.[47]

That sort of reasoning was an important feature of his letters and permeates Basil's writings. It is most famously expressed in his work *On the Holy Spirit*, which also showcases his habit of using a human to illustrate the difference between what is common and what is proper. "Essence, for instance, is a common noun, predicable of all things both animate and inanimate; while animal is more specific, being predicated of fewer subjects than the former . . . as it embraces both rational and irrational nature. Again, human is more specific than animal, and man than human, and than man the individual Peter, Paul, or John."[48] The

[44] See St Basil, *Letters, Volume 1* (1-185), in *The Fathers of the Church*, trans. Agnes Clare Way, C.D.P with notes by Roy J. Deferrari (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1977), 210. *Letter* 69.2. Hereafter *Letters, Volume 1*.

[45] Basil is quick to point out that *subnumerations* does not mean divisions of subordinate parties, which he says even the madmen would not dare say.

[46] On Basil's unique use of Greek philosophical language to advance Trinitarian orthodoxy see: Stephen Hildebrand, *The Trinitarian Theology of Basil of Caesarea* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 98–9.

[47] Basil, *Letter CCXXXVI*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 8:278.

[48] Basil, *On the Spirit*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace

essence of what makes a man a man brings to mind all the common qualities that men share. However, these qualities do not distinguish Peter from Paul or Mary; a qualifier is necessary to distinguish persons from one another who have the same nature. This, Basil called a *specific characterization*.[49] This specific characterization (also known as a *subsistence*) is a way to speak about a certain person who participates in human nature. Basil concludes:

> This, therefore, is our explanation. That which is spoken of in the specific sense is signified by the word "person" [hypóstasis]. For, because of the indefiniteness of the term, he who says "man" has introduced through our hearing some vague idea, so that, although the nature is manifested by the name, that which subsists in the nature and is specifically designated by the name is not indicated. On the other hand, he who says "Paul" has shown the subsistent nature of the object signified by the name. This, then, is the "person" [hypóstasis]. It is not the indefinite notion of "substance" [ousia], which creates no definite image because of the generality of its significance, but it is that which, through the specific qualities evident in it, restricts and defines in a certain object the general and indefinite, as is often done in many places in Scripture and especially in the story of Job.[50]

Many have recognized that Basil is using the general language of predicables as a way to distinguish terms handed down from Aristotle.[51]

Basil's categories become helpful to distinguish differences between *ousia* and *hypostasis*. This enables us to speak of the Father as "unbegotten," without making that a moniker of essence but rather an expression of his unique hypostasis. As Basil asserts, "God, who is over all things has His own mark of differentiation which characterizes His subsistence; and this is that He alone is Father; He alone has His hypostasis underived from any cause."[52]

The unique *relation* (although this term would not come until later) of the Son is that He is the begotten One; the unbegotten God's hypostatic Image and Word. Basil wrote:

(Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 8:26.

[49] Basil, *Letters, Volume 1*, 13:85. He calls this same principle "subnumeration" (Basil, *On the Spirit*, 8:26–27).

[50] Basil, *Letters*, *Volume 1*, 13:85–6.

[51] Basil *On the Spirit*, 8:26. See FN 1 in Column 2 for a good paraphrase of this observation.

[52] Basil, *Letters, Volume 1*, 80. Also, *Letter* 38.4.

> The Son, Who declares the Spirit proceeding from the Father through Himself and with Himself, shining forth alone and by only-begetting from the unbegotten light, so far as the peculiar notes are concerned, has nothing in common either with the Father or with the Holy Spirit. He alone is known by the stated signs.[53]

And the unique manner of speaking of the subsistence of the Spirit is that He ". . . proceeds. [The Spirit] has this note of its peculiar hypostatic nature, that it is known after the Son and together with the Son, and that it has its subsistence of the Father."[54]

To summarize, what characterizes Basil is his consistency to distinguish essence (*ousia*) as what is common, while person (*hypostasis*) specifies a relation, thereby allowing us to distinguish the generic essence of deity from the individual *hypostasis* or specific characterization of each of the persons of God. Basil's letters and polemics were written before the First Council of Constantinople in 381.[55] He would also die three years prior to that council, therefore leaving the battle against the various Eastern and Western subordinationist groups to be fought by the ecumenical orthodoxy of the two Gregories.[56] Some refer to this as the "pro-Nicene" consensus,[57] an ecumenical harmony that bridged the Greek-Latin divide and is best represented by Gregory of Nyssa and, later, Augustine of Hippo.

Gregory of Nyssa

In Gregory of Nyssa's letter *On Not Three Gods* he seeks to answer an objection Ablabius raised: "The argument which you state is something like this:—Peter, James, and John being in one human nature, are called three men: and there is no absurdity in describing those who are united in nature, if they are more than one, by the plural number derived from their nature."[58] In short, if God is three persons, then it seems fair to say there are three gods.

To combat this misunderstanding, Gregory appeals to the doctrine which would later be termed *inseparable operations* as a way to correct Ablabius's mistake—a method which would subsequently become standard when

[53] Basil, *Letters, Volume 1*, 80.

[54] Basil, *Letters, Volume 1*, 80.

[55] Charles Freeman, *A.D. 381: Heretics, Pagans, and the Christian State* (Abrams Press, 2009), 91–104.

[56] M. Wiles, *Archetypal Hersey: Arianism through the Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 27–40.

[57] Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 236.

[58] Gregory of Nyssa, *On Not Three Gods to Ablabius*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. trans. William Moore and Henry Austin Wilson, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 5:331

defending Trinitarian monotheism. Gregory argues,

> In the case of men, those who share with one another in the same pursuits are enumerated and spoken of in the plural, while on the other hand the Deity is spoken of in the singular as one God and one Godhead . . . in the case of the Divine nature we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. . . . Yet what does come to pass is not three things . . . so neither can we call those who exercise this Divine and superintending power and operation toward ourselves and all creation, conjointly and inseparably, by their mutual action, three Gods.[59]

While Gregory of Nyssa advances much of what Athanasius and Basil articulated, and while the other Fathers utilized like argumentation, Nyssa is most notable for his reliance on inseparable operations to defend Trinitarian monotheism.

Gregory of Nazianzus

The Cappadocians passionately and pastorally defended the Trinity. There is no clearer expression of this than Gregory of Nazianzus in his *Baptism Orations*, where he not only commissions the baptized to "share and defend all your life" but includes these profound truths:

> No sooner do I conceive of the One than I am illuminated by the Splendor of the Three; no sooner do I distinguish Them than I am carried back to the One. When I think of any One of the Three I think of Him as the Whole, and my eyes are filled, and the greater part of what I am thinking escapes me. I cannot grasp the greatness of That One so as to attribute a greater greatness to the Rest. When

[59] Nyssa, *On Not Three Gods to Ablabius*, 5:334–5. He further states, "If these Persons, then, are inseparate from each other, how great is the folly of these men who undertake to sunder this indivisibility by certain distinctions of time, and so are to divide the Inseparable as to assert confidently, 'The Father alone, through the Son alone, made all things'. . . ." 5:319. For more on inseparable operations see: Peter Sammons, "When Distinction Becomes Separation: The Doctrine of Inseparable Operation in the Contemporary Evangelical Church" *TMSJ* 33/1 (Spring 2022) 75–97; more importantly: Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

> I contemplate the Three together, I see but one torch, and cannot divide or measure out the Undivided Light.[60]

One of the points of Trinitarian doctrine that characterized all of the fourth-century fathers is the teaching of the deity of the Holy Spirit as a means to properly expound Nicene orthodoxy. All of the Cappadocians produced works on the Holy Spirit, but the best-rounded Trinitarian expression in that polemical age was Gregory's *Five Theological Orations*.

The Cappadocians were concerned with the lingering influence of Arianism and its refrain, "There was a time when the Son was not." Gregory masterfully responds, "If ever there was a time when the Father was not, then there was a time when the Son was not. If ever there was a time when the Son was not, then there was a time when the Spirit was not. If the One was from the beginning, then the Three were so too."[61]

Gregory also contributes to Trinitarian grammar by establishing the language of *processions*. His exegetical method in drawing from the Greek text of John 15:26 provided a theological synthesis that had been absent from many of his predecessors' work. For example, Gregory, employing procession language in Trinitarian taxonomy, wrote, "The Holy Ghost, which proceeds from the Father; Who, inasmuch as He proceeds from That Source, is no Creature; and inasmuch as He is not Begotten is no Son; and inasmuch as He is between the Unbegotten and the Begotten is God."[62] Here, the language Scripture employs is helpful in defining the different persons: Unbegotten, Begotten, Proceeding. Because the Spirit is not "begotten" but "proceeds from" the Father and Son, therefore the Son and the Spirit are not one and the same. Emery notes, regarding this language: " 'Procession' enables one to attach the economy, that is, the 'procession of creatures,' to its origin in the inner-Trinitarian-ness of the divine persons."[63]

In the *Third Theological Oration: On the Son*, Gregory contrasts the order in the Godhead between "anarchy" and "monarchy." He asserts, "It is, however, a Monarchy that is not limited to one Person."[64] This means that in the single

[60] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration on Holy Baptism* 41, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 7:375 (*Oration* 40.41).

[61] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 5, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 7:318 (*Oration* 5.4).

[62] Nazianzus, *Oration* 5.8, 7:320.

[63] Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 40.

[64] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 3, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (Peabody,

monarchy there is no division of substance. Clearly grounding the definitions of the persons in biblical language, he explains, "This is what we mean by Father and Son and Holy Ghost. The Father the Begetter and Emitter; without passion, of course, and without reference to time, and not in a corporeal manner. The Son is the Begotten, and the Holy Ghost is the Emission."[65] Defining the persons in this manner was a way to maintain a biblical tether, seeking to prevent definitions of Father, Son, and Spirit drawn—in error—from human experience.

Fifth Century

Trinitarian advancements of the fifth century find their locus in Augustine's work. Continuing this rich tradition, Augustine also furthered Pro-Nicene Trinitarianism against lingering Arianism. In *On the Trinity* he wrote, "Whatever . . . is spoken of God in respect to himself, is both spoken singly of each person, that is, of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and together of the Trinity itself, not plurally but in the singular."[66]

What we also find in Augustine is that more categorical definitions become normalized. Augustine helped set trajectories for classical theism with his focus on God's essence, in that God is simple, timeless, and immutable. In this respect, Augustine helped set a standard in hermeneutics that still guides and guards Christian theism today. This interpretive rule is that of accommodations: that things which are true of creatures are "accidents" in us while "inherent and necessary" in God.[67] For example, consider that God's love is categorically different from ours. God is love, so love is predicated of God by necessity, whereas creatures happen to have it to one degree or another, but it is not our essence. Furthermore, when it comes to such properties in creatures, they are different from one another, while in God they are one and the same divine essence. Augustine made the doctrine of divine simplicity a manner for defending Trinitarianism. It has been observed that "Augustine's contribution to this tradition is to reflect on how the paradox of distinction without division presents itself to thought

MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 7:301 (*Oration* 3.2).

[65] Nazianzus, *Oration* 3.2.

[66] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 3:92. 5.8.9.

[67] Richard Barcellos, *Trinity and Creation* (Eugene:Wipf and Stock, 2020), "A better, more technically precise word than "inherent" is "intrinsic," since nothing actually or really inheres in God" (13). See Bernard Wuellner, *Dictionary of Scholastic Philosophy* (Fitzwilliam, NH: Loreto Publications, 2012), 61, where the entrance for "inherence" reads as follows: "existence in another being as in a subject of being or as a modification of another being. Accidents are said to inhere in substance"; and 64, where the entrance for "intrinsic" reads: "1. pertaining to the nature of a thing or person; constitutive. 2. contained or being within; internal. 3. inherent." I'm indebted to Richard Barcellos for pointing out this note to me.

when we consider what it means for the Father to generate a Son who shares all that the Father is within the divine simplicity."[68]

Augustine then applied this concept to the question concerning the terms *Father* and *Son*. God cannot be "Father" and "Son" accidentally. It is difficult to prove this as an essential feature, so Augustine suggested that the persons of Father, Son, and Spirit are differentiated by *relations*.[69] The Father is in relation to the Son with begetting/begotten language, and Augustine presented the Spirit's dual procession from both the Father and Son.[70] He argued that the Bible implicitly teaches this kind of Trinitarianism.[71]

Furthermore, Augustine's helpful articulation of *relations* as the proper way to define the Father, Son, and Spirit intra-Trinitarian relations led him to conclude,

> Wherefore let us hold this above all, that whatsoever is said of that most eminent and divine loftiness in respect to itself, is said in respect to substance, but that which is said in relation to anything, is not said in respect to substance, but relatively; and that the effect of the same substance in Father and Son and Holy Spirit is, that whatsoever is said of each in respect to themselves, is to be taken of them, not in the plural in sum, but in the singular.[72]

The language of relations in Augustine was prominently articulated in procession terminology.

Augustine further developed the *relations* by clarifying the aforementioned

[68] Lewis Ayres, "Augustine on The Trinity," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 123.

[69] It is interesting to note that Augustine considers, but ultimately rejects, the idea that all truth claims about God must be relational (Books V–VII). This is something the mutualistic theist, relational theist, or biblical personalism groups would do well to pay attention to.

[70] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 15.17.29. Furthermore, Augustine said, "For that which is begotten of the simple Good is simple as itself, and the same as itself. These two we call the Father and the Son; and both together with the Holy Spirit are one God . . . . And this Trinity is one God; and none the less simple because a Trinity." Augustine, *City of God*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series. Philip Schaff, trans. Marcus Dods (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 2:210. XI.10.

[71] Augustine uses the scriptural designations for the First and Second persons of the Godhead to explain how the distinction between persons and essence are implicit in these designations. There is a plurality of persons and yet one essence. He says, "And hence they are not therefore not one essence, because the Father is not the Son, and the Son is not the Father, or because the Father is unbegotten, but the Son is begotten: since by these names only their *relative* attributes are expressed. But both together are one wisdom and one essence." Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 3:107. VII.3.

[72] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 3:91. V.8.9. Aquinas helpfully explained that these relations are incomprehensible to men, as we will see later.

question regarding procession: If the Son and Spirit both proceed—since procession can be used in a generic sense—from the Father, what differentiates the Son and the Spirit? *Relations*, especially dual procession, help distinguish the second and third persons of the Godhead. He explains, "Therefore He (the Father) so begat Him (the Son) as that the common Gift should proceed from Him also, and the Holy Spirit should be the Spirit of both. This distinction, then, of the inseparable Trinity is not to be merely accepted in passing, but to be carefully considered."[73]

While Augustine made many contributions, one of the more important relates to the question, Why was the Son sent and not the Father? Augustine's answer explains that missions are defined by processions.[74] He said,

> But if the Son is said to be sent by the Father on this account, that the one is the Father, and the other the Son, this does not in any manner hinder us from believing the Son to be equal, and consubstantial, and co-eternal with the Father, and yet to have been sent as Son by the Father. Not because the one is greater, the other less; but because the one is Father, the other Son; the one begetter, the other begotten; the one, He from whom He is who is sent; the other, He who is from Him who sends. For the Son is from the Father, not the Father from the Son.[75]

Here is evidenced both Augustine's hesitance and his precision. He would not allow the employment of any form of subordination language in describing the missions from the eternal processions. But it is common fare in modern culture to do precisely that—that is, read missions from the biblical text back onto the persons, or even worse, to read from the creation back onto the creator.[76]

Middle Ages

In the period from Augustine to Aquinas, Trinitarianism was guarded well. The ecumenical centralization of Christianity ensured that the boundaries of cardinal doctrines, such as the Trinity, were kept in check by the creeds until the Protestant Reformation. Those creeds continued to guide the magisterial Reformers and puritans as well; in fact, the Protestant confessions restate the early ecumenical creeds with only minor additions. Those additions largely sprung

[73] Augustine, *On the Trinity*, 3:216. XV.19.29.
[74] Ayres, "Augustine on The Trinity," 126.
[75] Augustine, *On The Trinity*, 3:83. IV.20.27.
[76] This is precisely what EFS/ESS/ERAS advocates do when they define the Father/Son relation as authority/submission.

from Aquinas's contributions to subsequent generations' attempts to codify and define what Augustine had presented in his sermons.

How did the church determine what was important to stress in Trinitarian theology? I often ask my students the non-negotiables of a definition for the Trinity, and in large part—whether they realize it or not—their answers draw heavily from Thomas Aquinas's influence on Trinitarian theology. He helpfully distilled the many concepts found in the early fathers by saying, "Three truths must be known about the divinity: first the unity of the divine essence, secondly the Trinity of persons, and thirdly the effects wrought by the divinity."[77]

The rule of God's transcendence articulated in Scripture as God's incomprehensibility is often described in theology as God *ad intra* versus God *ad extra*, or the immanent versus economic Trinity. However, when discussing God's *ad intra* nature and the processions, action is essential to describe those intra-Trinitarian relations. Augustine famously used the concept of love to do so. But importantly, since the divine persons and inner relations are not dependent on anything in creation, it is inappropriate to collapse the economic work back onto the eternal Godhead to describe those persons and relations.[78]

The ancient errors all confused the *ad intra* work of God with his *ad extra* work, and in abrogating that delicate difference made God's eternal relations (or processions) like God's temporal actions in the world.[79] Aquinas termed these different actions *immanent* for those which remain internal, and *transitive* for the external reality outside the acting agent.[80] But the two, while distinct, are related, for the immanent action is the ground for the transitive action.[81]

Aquinas's distinctions regarding the three necessary affirmations of Trinitarianism are borrowed from the early church. The first two affirmations (unity of essence and trinity of persons) are evident, for example, in Basil and in Gregory of Nazianzus. Basil has been summarized saying, "The divinity is common, but the paternity and the filiation are properties (*idiomata*); and combining of the two elements, the common (*koinon*) and the proper (*idion*), brings about in us

[77] Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis: B. Herder Books, 1947), 5.

[78] Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 40.

[79] "For this reason, the Trinitarian treatise begins precisely by showing that one ought not to conceive the procession of the divine persons like a divine action in the world, but like an immanent action brought about within God." Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 41. While Emery does not mention this, it is precisely the concern and criticism against the new heterodoxy of EFS/ERAS.

[80] Aquinas, *ST* I.27.1.

[81] Aquinas, *ST* I.32.1,*ad* 3.

the comprehension of the truth."[82] There the distinction between common and proper is observable. The common speaks to the essence of God, whereas the proper speaks to each person. More from Basil: "The substance (*ousia*) relates to the hypostasis (*hypostasis*) as the common (*koinon*) relates to the proper (*idion*)."[83] In like fashion, Gregory of Nazianzus said, "We use in an orthodox sense the terms one Essence and three Hypostases, the one to denote the nature of the Godhead, the other the properties of the Three."[84]

Basil famously expressed these affirmations using the imagery of light. He designated the Father as light unbegotten, the Son as light begotten, and the Spirit as light proceeding. There is one light, but the appropriate adjectives express the persons as distinguished from one another. We see therein the essential dual affirmations: the unity of the divine essence and the distinction of persons without a separation. The church continues to distinguish without separation. There is a reason these concepts are ordered, with common preceding proper, and why so many have taught the Trinity in a similar manner—besides its being a helpful way to avoid Tritheism.

The dissolution of that logical order underlies another EFS misstep: Proponents of that system err in beginning with our concept of fatherhood to shape their understanding of God the Father. They carry the same issue over into formulating how Father and Son relate, by leaning too heavily on our human experience as their starting point. Helpfully, Emery says, "We cannot grasp the person of the Father just by conceiving his typical characteristic or property: we think of the Father as a person who subsists in the divine being; that is as a person who is God. . . . Our knowledge of the property of the person presupposes and includes the knowledge of the divinity of the person."[85]

Aquinas

A few further observations will help set up a study of Aquinas's contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity. First, the doctrine of the Trinity is essential. Wawrykow notes, "What is true about the one God who is three, active in the world, must be

[82] Basil, *Against Eunomius*, II. 28. First found in Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of St Thomas Aquinas*, 45. See also: Basil, Mark DelCogliano, and Andrew Radde-Gallwitz, *Against Eunomius* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2011). The introduction has some great summary remarks regarding Basil on the issue.

[83] Basil, *Letters, volume 2*, 205. *Letter* 214.4.

[84] Gregory of Nazianzus, *Theological Orations* 21, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Gordon Browne and James Edward Swallow (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 7:279 (*Oration* 21.35).

[85] Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 47.

affirmed to attain eternal life."[86] This is no mere pedantic, academic exercise but a matter of fidelity to God's self-revelation. Second, Scripture is the foundation. The church fathers are a source for articulating its doctrine accurately only insofar as they are faithful to the total text of Scripture. Even the consensus of the Fathers on a topic does not give an absolute guide or conclusion.[87]

Aquinas saw himself standing well within the stream of continuity and desired to be measured by it. Elders writes, "The numerous quotations from the Fathers in the works of Aquinas were meant to establish the doctrinal elaboration of a theme on the solid foundation of the authentic tradition of the Church . . ."[88] Aquinas quoted Augustine over fifteen hundred times in the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* and over two thousand times in the *Summa Theologica*.[89] He obviously identified his teaching with that of Augustine. Thomas's reliance on the early church was precisely why the later reformed scholastics utilized him. He took the polemical work of the Cappadocians and the pastoral articulations found in Augustine and presented the same truth in a more detailed form, as is characteristic of the scholastics.

Aquinas maintained the early church's distinction between God *ad intra* and *ad extra*. Scholars have observed that he mirrors Augustine's articulation that processions determine "missions," summarizing his position as, "Acts of God *ad extra* are patterned on the inner activities of the Trinity."[90] Such proofs buttress the academic consensus that Aquinas is well in tune with the early church on the crucial points of classical theism. But it is important to notice that he did not blindly follow all that he found in the Christian tradition. He would come to augment or reject certain theological and philosophical commitments, and even methods, that the early church used. For instance, the early church fathers operated within a very Platonic metaphysic, yet with the discovery, reproduction, and study of Aristotle in the thirteenth century, scholastics in the Christian church began to reevaluate their metaphysical commitments. The great theological debate at the University of Paris between Platonism (via Augustine) and Aristotle's

[86] Joseph Wawrykow, "Franciscan and Dominican Trinitarian Theology (Thirteenth Century): Bonaventure and Aquinas," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Trinity*, ed. Gilles Emery and Matthew Levering (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 183. See references: *ST* I.32.1 *ad* 3; *ST* II–II.1.8, *ad* 3.

[87] Aquinas has a nuanced account of the authority of Scripture, Fathers of the Church, and philosophy, see: *ST* I.1.8, *ad* 2.

[88] Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors*, 103.

[89] It has been observed that the scant references in the *Summa Contra Gentiles* is due largely to the fact he is not speaking to Christians.

[90] Wawrykow, "Franciscan and Dominican Trinitarian Theology (Thirteenth Century): Bonaventure and Aquinas," 190.

realism was largely due to the fact that, as Elders explains, "Heretics, and especially the Arians, used the Aristotelian logic—although in a totally unjustified way—in order to attack the orthodox expression of the mysteries of the Trinity and Christ as a Divine Person, [and thus] increased the reserve of Christians with regard to Aristotle."[91]

Aquinas seemed ready to accept truths from both philosophical positions, looking for as many similarities between their commitments as possible.[92] His interest in Aristotle was toward helping him form a philosophy of man and creation,[93] since those are measurable by the senses. (An interesting contrasting paradigm is evident—between the early church leaning heavily toward Platonism for categories to explain intangibles, and Aquinas looking to Aristotle to understand the tangibles).[94]

Aquinas's contribution at this point was that of recognizing a potential issue in explaining immaterial substance as one for one.[95] That is to say, we should not treat our conception of God as if it were comprehensive or even exhaustive knowledge; how we think of something is not to be equated to how that thing actually exists. This line of thinking helpfully establishes a distinction between *ad intra* and *ad extra* knowledge of God. So while Plato did not embrace a proper epistemology, he was helpful toward distinguishing the immaterial from the material.

In defining the taxonomy of nature, Aquinas's legacy is evident through the concept of participation such as he expressed in *De Hebdomadibus*, where he uses the example of Socrates' participation in human nature.[96] Socrates is not the

[91] Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors*, 20.

[92] Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors*, 2. "Thomas wants to see a substantial agreement insofar as both acknowledge the existence of a superior principle from which spiritual and material things depend, and both accept a certain form of divine providence." See: Thomas Aquinas, *De Substantiis Separatis: Treatise on Separate Substances*, trans. Francis J. Lescoe (West Hartford, CN: Saint Joseph College, 1959). Aquinas believed there was some agreement between the philosophical commitments of Aristotle and Plato in that they agree 1) that the immaterial substances exist, 2) on the condition of their immaterial nature, 3) on the nature of providence, equating those separate immaterial substances as having caused the material world.

[93] That is not to say Aristotle had a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*.

[94] What is important to note is that Aquinas's access to Plato's works was pieced together via Aristotle, the early church fathers, and especially Augustine. As a result, he inaccurately attributes later developments to Platonic philosophy that was not original to Plato himself (Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors*, 4). Aquinas nevertheless recognized that the "Reminiscence Theory" of Plato is outside the boundaries of Christian thought, since it would mean that something would exist independent of God.

[95] The student will find it useful to read Aquinas on the difference between univocal, equivocal, and analogical language here, see: *ST* I.13.5.

[96] Thomas Aquinas, *An Exposition of the On the Hebdomads of Boethius*, trans. Janice L. Schultz, and

sine qua non of human nature but participates in it essentially, and in a higher order. In a way, a substances relate to their accidents. That gives us a better idea of how God relates in an accidental way (what we later call *Cambridge changes* or *Cambridge relations*): Man relates to God, as God is the efficient cause of our being. That helped distinguish the communicable from the incommunicable attributes in later Reformed scholasticism. For example, God communicates the attributes of love, mercy, or goodness in differing levels to his creatures.[97]

Another carryover from Aquinas into reformed scholasticism is the recognition that, with respect to the communicable attributes, man does not possess God's attributes in the way in which God does. In man these attributes are *potencies* of levels of goodness, love, or mercy, which may be expressed at various levels or be absent entirely. They move from potency to actuality.[98] In God, in contrast, every attribute is always pure act. God does not have potential love, mercy, or goodness that needs to be actualized.[99]

From here we begin to see how Aquinas understood and appropriated the Platonic concepts found in the early church to explain the metaphysic of God's essence. That is evident through Thomas's commitments to simplicity, pure actuality, immutability, and timelessness. For example in Question 3 of the *Summa Theologica*, we see him committed to the teaching that creatures are made of matter and form, as opposed to God, who is simple.[100] God is not made of essence and existence; they are one and the same in Him.[101] Immutability is equitable to

Edward A. Synan (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 19.

[97] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. I. Litzinger (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1964), Lesson 6 and *ST* I.44.1.

[98] See: Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles: Book Two, Creation*, trans. James F. Anderson (New York: Hanover House, 1955). II.53. "Now, from the foregoing it is evident that in created intellectual substances there is composition of act and potentiality. For in whatever thing we find two, one of which is the complement of the other, the proportion of one of them to the other is as the proportion of potentiality to act; for nothing is completed except by its proper act."

[99] "[I]n the field of metaphysics Thomas developed the theory of transcendental concepts and demonstrated as the central thesis of metaphysics the real distinction, in all created beings, between their act of being (their existence) and their essence." Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors*, 29.

[100] John Lamont, "Aquinas on Divine Simplicity," *The Monist*, (80/4): 521–38. Augustine, *The City of God*, "There is, accordingly, a good which is alone simple, and therefore alone unchangeable, and this is God." 2:210. XI.10.

[101] Augustine, "How much more therefore is this the case in that unchangeable and eternal substance, which is incomparably more simple than the human mind is? . . . But in God to be is the same as to be strong, or to be just, or to be wise, or whatever is said of that simple multiplicity, or manifold simplicity, whereby to signify His substance." *On the Trinity*, 3:100, VI.4.6. The attributes do not make up God, they are one and the same as the essence and thereby one and the same *ad intra* God Himself.

the divine name.[102] Augustine is responsible for connecting pure actuality and aseity to immutability such as few of his predecessors had done. He explained that if something changes, then that which causes the change in something else has independent life or actuality (or potency) outside of the thing changed.[103] All of the same themes are clearly present in Aquinas.[104]

Thomas Aquinas's contributions on the Trinity are many but are found predominantly in *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.1–26 and *Summa Theologiae* I.27–43. Aquinas built upon Augustine's relational development of the hypostases, as well as the key doctrines of simplicity and immutability. Building on the "accidental" and "essential" qualities treated by Augustine, Aquinas helpfully deduced the doctrine of pure actuality, meaning God has no passive potency. He clarified that because God is act, he is active potency, which is the ability to do other things; but he does not have a potential that is passive and might be actualized. Because of the paradigms and vocabulary supplied to us through the concepts of simplicity—that God is not composed of parts—and pure actuality—that he has no passive potency—we can better articulate the reflexive relations between the three persons. That is, the Word eternally generated by God is a *hypostasis*,[105] which shares the essence of God but is nonetheless "relationally distinct." Note how this harkens back to Basil's observations.

For Aquinas, the relations *begetting*, *begotten*, and *proceeding*, are real and distinct "in" God. Drawing from Augustine and Basil, Aquinas said that the persons are distinct *per relationes* (as to their relations with one another) but not

[102] Augustine, "But there can be no accident of this kind in respect to God; and therefore He who is God is the only unchangeable substance or essence, to whom certainly Being itself, whence comes the name of essence, most especially and most truly belongs." *On the Trinity*, 3:88. V.2.3. One important clarification should be made here, while this is true for Augustine, Aquinas adds a deeper level of meaning through his doctrine of *ipsum esse subsistens*. As Gilson explains: "We come now to that divine attribute which St. Augustine so rightly emphasized but which no one before St. Thomas really grasped—the divine immutability. To say that God is immovable was, for St. Augustine, to have reached the ultimate hidden depths of the divine nature. For St. Thomas there is something still more ultimate, the very reason for this immutability. To change is to pass from potency to act: now God is pure act. He can, accordingly, in no way change." E. Gilson, *The Christian Philosophy of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 102.

[103] Augustine, "Behold, the heaven and earth are; they proclaim that they were made, for they are changed and varied. Whereas whatsoever hath not been made, and yet hath being, hath nothing in it which was not there before . . . . They also proclaim that they made not themselves . . . . Thou, therefore, Lord didst make these things." *The Confessions of St Augustine*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series. Philip Schaff, trans. J. G. Pilkington (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1956), XI, 4.6.

[104] Elders, *Thomas Aquinas and His Predecessors*, 112. Cf., "*Deus movet per tempus*," a text repeatedly quoted (Augustine, *De Gen, ad litt.*, 8, 2).

[105] This is the notion Aquinas borrows from Aristotle, for what he would call a first substance.

different *per essentiam* (as to their *ousia* or essence).[106] So if the persons are not different from the essence (they are not something other than God) but they are distinct from one another, how does one avoid falling into modalism? If the Father (person) is identical to God (ousia), and the Son (person) is identical to God (ousia), how is the Father not also the Son?

To answer these issues, Aquinas, in *Summa Thelogica* Q.28 and 29, utilizes the medieval concept of sameness, *identitas*. For Aquinas there is a difference between *secundum rem* (sameness of thing) and *secundum rationem* (sameness of concept)—different kinds of "sameness" that are mutually exclusive from one another. God is one (*secundem rem*) in one respect (essence) and three (*secundum rationem*) in a different respect (person). This explanation helps avoid modalism and other Trinitarian issues because the persons are categorically distinguished from the essence.[107]

Aquinas raised the same question posed to Aristotle: "Is the road to Thebes the same as to Athens?" Thomas answers yes, in that they have the same properties, but they have those properties differently. For example, the route may be uphill one-way, and downhill the other, yet they are not two roads but one. So the persons of the Godhead have the same properties, but they have them distinctly, according to their mode of subsistence. The Father possesses the essence as Father, the Son as Son, and the Spirit as Spirit.

Conclusion

There is a well-documented, longstanding continuity of Trinitarian grammar among Christians dating back to the earliest centuries of the church, which has enabled each subsequent generation to both safeguard and further develop its biblical fidelity and precision, especially regarding its doctrines of God. What kind of Christian would throw away this rich heritage and try to reinvent their own concept of the Trinity?

The church today needs to retrieve her historic doctrines. It needs to embrace them more than intellectually but with a commitment that holds no quarter for pagan concepts of God creeping into her confession. We see how the Reformers and puritans combated these issues all throughout their ministries without

[106] Christopher Hughes, "[For Aquinas,] relations both constitute and distinguish the divine persons: insofar as relations are the divine essence (*secundum res*) [i.e. they're the same thing], they constitute those persons, and insofar as they are relations with converses, they distinguish those persons." Christopher Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God: An Investigation in Aquinas Philosophical Theology* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 217.

[107] *ST* #27–43 and *Summa Contra Gentiles* #1–26. But Hughes seems to reject this; Hughes, *On a Complex Theory of a Simple God*, 217–40.

an ounce of equivocation before the interlopers who were trying to pull down the guardrails of Trinitarian doctrine.

Martin Luther stands as a reminder of the importance of these issues and the need for commitment to these truths. Luther did not throw everything out at his conversion; rather, he maintained a commitment to truth regardless of what his theological and political friends or enemies believed. He never rejected the true doctrine of God merely because Roman Catholics affirmed the same doctrines and confessions. At a time when abandoning creeds was the swelling tide of the age, the Reformer refused to follow the current. Instead, he saw a vital place for creeds in the church. It has been said that regarding the Athanasian Creed, "Luther was disposed to regard it as 'the most important and glorious composition since the days of the apostle.' "[108] Thus it is natural to see that creed included along with the Apostles' and Nicene creeds in the Book of Concord. The modern-day church could learn much from its principal reformer.

It is readily observable that the Athanasian Creed embodies the most mature form of Nicene orthodoxy. While Athanasius did not write the creed,[109] it bears his name because it was an accurate and full-orbed articulation of Trinitarian orthodoxy flowing out of his battle with Arius. Many church traditions use it still. A portion of it reads, "Whoever wants to be saved should above all cling to the catholic faith. Whoever does not guard it whole and inviolable will doubtless perish eternally. Now this is the catholic faith: We worship one God in trinity and the Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the divine being." These early Christian creeds are trustworthy guides. If a Christian pastor, scholar, or teacher cannot affirm the simple words of the orthodox Trinity, he should be wary to call the God of his own imaginings and expressions the one true God.

[108] Philip Schaff, *Creeds of Christendom with Historical and Critical Notes: The History of Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1919), 1:41. See note 1.

[109] For a long time it had been rumored that Athanasius authored the creed, and that he wrote it during one of his many exiles and presented it to Pope Julius I. The first critical review of the authorship has been attributed to Dutch reformed Theologian Gerardus Vossius in 1642. Michael O'Carroll, "Athanasian Creed," *Trinitas* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1987); Frederick Norris, "Athanasian Creed," ed. Everett Ferguson, in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, Second Edition (New York: Garland, 1997); see also Herbert Richardson and Jasper Hopkins, "On the Athanasian Creed," *The Harvard Theological Review*, 60/4 (October 1967): 483–4.