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*A Quarterly Journal for Church Leadership*  
Volume 10 • Number 3 • Summer 2001

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## THE FORMATION OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

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*David F. Wright*

The Athanasian doctrine of the Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity does not presuppose any precise definition of the relation of the three Divine Persons to see the One Being of God or vice versa, but rests on the one Self-revelation of God the Father which is given us through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit who are wholly and eternally consubstantial with him. This has the effect of cutting away any differentiation between the Persons of the Son and the Spirit as "derived Deities" from the Person of the Father as "underived Deity," and certainly the idea that the existence of the Son and of the Spirit is "caused" by the Person or Hypostasis of the Father, the Basilian idea to which both Gregory Nazianzen (eventually, after some initial agreement with Basil) and Cyril of Alexandria objected so strongly. It also has the effect of safeguarding the doctrine of the Trinity today from any existentialising reinterpretation through the damaging idea that "existence" precedes "essence."

THOMAS F. TORRANCE,  
*TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVES*, 19.

The doctrine of the Trinity requires explanation. Over almost two millennia and throughout the world it has been one of the most central and distinctive elements of Christian faith. Yet the word "Trinity" does not appear in the Bible, and for that reason pastors who follow a rigidly expository method in their preaching may never find themselves preaching on the Trinity. Churches that observe the framework of the Christian year should hear about the Trinity annually when Trinity Sunday comes around. Nevertheless, many churches that cordially assent to the historic creeds as well as Reformation and post-Reformation confessions appear to have a tenuous awareness of this fundamental doctrine.

One reason for this comparative neglect undoubtedly lies in the challenge the doctrine presents to the Christian understanding. It is not an easy doctrine to get one's mind around. It would be fair to describe it as intrinsically difficult, but the difficulty is often compounded by a lack of awareness of how it developed in the first four or five centuries of the church. This article is presented in the conviction that one of the most helpful ways into a better understanding of the doctrine of the Trinity is by tracing its development in the thinking and writing of the fathers—the teachers and leaders—of the early church. We call both this period of the church and these theologians and their work "patristic," from the Greek and Latin words for "fathers."

The word “Trinity” is a compound formed from the Latin words for “three” and “one.” It captures the Christian belief that God is tri-unity, that he is in one sense three, and in another sense one. To use more technical language, the one indivisible Godhead—God in his “God-ness,” his essential being—exists, is known and is active in three eternally distinct “persons,” Father, Son, and Spirit. This very brief explanation must suffice at this stage. Clarifications will emerge as we proceed to follow the main lines of developing understanding among the fathers.

### BUILDING ON MONOTHEISM

The first clarification is that the doctrine of the Trinity is not a denial or abandonment of monotheism. “We know . . . that ‘there is no God but one,’ ” says Paul (1 Corinthians 8:4; see also Acts 17:24-29). In this conviction the early Christians shared the faith of their fellow Jews, for of course nearly all the first generation of believers in Jesus were Jews. They were distinguished from other Jews by what they believed about Jesus—that he was the Messiah or Christ and indeed could be spoken of as Lord, the Son of God in a special sense. In whatever ways God had revealed himself to the people of Israel over the centuries, “in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son,” through whom God had created the worlds and who was “the exact imprint of God’s very being” (Hebrews 1:1-3; see also Acts 2:36; Romans 1:2-4). Furthermore, the Holy Spirit given by God the Father whose coming brought the church to birth was the Spirit of God or the Spirit of Christ (see John 7:39; Romans 8:9, 14). Under the impress of what they experienced and in the light of their reflections on the Scriptures, i.e., the Old Testament, believers in Jesus came to confess both Christ and the Spirit as Lord, and even to ascribe to them designations and activities which in the Old Testament applied solely to the God of Israel, *Yahweh*.

This progressively clearer and bolder understanding about Jesus on the one hand and the Spirit (less explicitly) on the other can be observed in various ways and at various points in the apostolic writings. Jewish critics of Jesus were rightly indignant when Jesus forgave sins, for no one but God could forgive sins (Mark 2:5-7). Paul was led to declare that in Christ “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Colossians 2:9). He is “our great God and Savior,” whose future glorious manifestation we await (Titus 2:13). Rarely do we find in the New Testament unambiguous confessions like that of Thomas, “My Lord and my God!” (John 20:28) or of John the Evangelist, “the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (John 1:1). Nevertheless, from the apostolic Scriptures as a whole there is no doubt of the shape that early Christian conviction was taking.

At the same time, we should not be surprised that the New Testament is not more emphatically and unambiguously definite on the matter. The same gospel of John presents Jesus, in prayer to his Father, distinguishing between “you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (John 17:3). First Timothy similarly identifies “one God” and “one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human” (1 Timothy 2:5). We need to remember that the whole ordering of our redemption through Jesus was inseparably embedded in the historical experience and human biographies of first-century Palestine. Have you ever reflected on the fact that the so-called *Apostles’ Creed* privileges one man above all others—“under Pontius Pilate”? Mary ranks a mention, but not Paul or Peter. (Surely the *Creed* might have given the name of the Roman emperor—“under Caesar Tiberius”—instead of some third-rate provincial governor!)

The point is that human, even apostolic human, apprehension of the unique status of Christ the Lord and the Lord Spirit (see 2 Corinthians 3:17-18) could only come

gradually for Jesus Jews (it is truer to call the first believers Christian Jews than Jewish Christians), who in a world of "many gods and many lords" knew above all else that "there is one God, the Father." It took time for a Jewish monotheist (which Paul never ceased to be) to work out the implications of setting alongside this "one God" "one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist"—as he did here in 1 Corinthians 8:4-6.

### EARLY CONFESSITIONAL FORMULAS

In several places in the New Testament writings we can glimpse brief statements that already look confessional or creedal in nucleus. Some are more formalized than others. Some are twofold—bipartite or binitarian in more scholarly language—such as Paul's greeting to the Galatians, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Galatians 1:3; see also 2 John 3), and his prayer for the Thessalonians, "Now may our God and Father himself and our Lord Jesus direct our way to you" (1 Thessalonians 3:11). We have already noted 1 Timothy 2:5-6 and 1 Corinthians 8:6.

Others are threefold in pattern, embryonically Trinitarian, we might say, such as Ephesians 4:4-6; "There is one body and one Spirit, . . . one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all." In the same order Paul declares, "Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God" (1 Corinthians 12:4-6). Clearest and briefest are two formulas from different contexts of worship: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with all of you" (2 Corinthians 13:13), and "Go . . . make disciples . . . baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19). Elsewhere in the New Testament are discernible

both shorter and more extended stretches of teaching which reflect incipiently a Trinitarian framework of belief: for the former see 1 Peter 1:2; for the latter see Ephesians 1:3-14.

### THE APOSTOLIC FATHERS

The writings that make up our New Testament issued not from the study-rooms of systematic theologians nor from divinity schools or seminaries nor from the chambers of ecclesiastics in council, but from the multifarious activities of small communities of Christians. The same was largely true of the earliest group of Christian writings outside the New Testament known as the apostolic fathers, spanning roughly A.D. 90-150. Hence they mark little significant advance in the systematizing of Christian teaching in this area. We find two-part and three-part formulas side-by-side, and also a sharper explicitness in naming Christ as God—"God incarnate," "God made manifest in human flesh," as Ignatius put it (Ephesians 7:2; 19:3). For some Christians belief in the divinity of Christ was so overmastering that in one way or another they denied or limited the reality of his full humanity. The concerns of the apostolic fathers largely centered on the internal ordering of church life. On the whole they do not strike one as over-endowed theologically. This is evident in the following extract from Ignatius, theologically the most ambitious of them all. It is probably the first attempt at an analogy of the Trinity by a Christian writer.

You were like stones for the Father's temple, prepared for the building of God the Father, hoisted aloft by means of the crane of Jesus Christ, that is the cross, using as a cable the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 9:1).

But the lack of sophistication should not blind us to the naturalness with which the apostolic fathers linked together Father, Son and Spirit in prayer and in the dynamics of sal-

vation and spirituality—which is where faith in the Trinity finds its true anchorage.

### THE APOLOGISTS: LOGOS THEOLOGY

Far more significant in attempting more developed explanations of the relations of one and three—or more often one and two, since the Spirit was not centrally in the frame until some time later—was the next major group of writers, whom we call the apologists, mostly working in Greek, whose activity focused on the later second century and into the third, especially ca. 150-200. They are sometimes referred to as the first Christian theologians, with Justin Martyr, a Samaritan who taught at Rome, the most important among them. Their designation as apologists reminds us, however, that they set out to correct misunderstanding, refute hostile misrepresentations and commend Christianity to minds reared in Graeco-Roman culture or Judaism. Jewish critics charged that Christian reverence for the Lord Jesus Christ was incompatible with monotheism, while the assumptions of Greek philosophical theology read creation and incarnation as inconceivable for true divinity, which was by definition changeless and uncompromisingly transcendent.

Central to the efforts of these Greek apologists (who must not be criticized anachronistically as poor systematic theologians) was a portrayal of a plurality within the God-head that came forth in sequence, as a human being's visible actions express his or her mind and spirit. Their teaching, which, for all their differences, does permit summarizing fastened on the concepts of God's logos, his word or mind or reason, suggested by John 1, and his wisdom, inspired by Proverbs 8:22-31 in particular. Hellenistic thought, in Stoicism and Philo, for example, had already used such notions in speculating on divine powers of providential harmony intermediate between the transcendent God and

the world. The apologists drew on this reservoir of secular or Jewish reflection in setting out their own understandings in terms meaningful to thoughtful contemporaries.

### ECONOMIC TRINITARIANISM

The pattern of Trinitarian teaching that the apologists promoted has come to be called "economic," because they stressed the successive manifestations of the divine Word or Wisdom and Spirit (they generally identified Word and Wisdom, and sometimes confused Word and Spirit) in the course of the "economy" (from the Greek *oikonomia*), the unfolding plan of God in his dealings with the world in creation, providence, judgement, revelation and incarnation. Theophilus of Antioch (ca. 180) was the first to use the Greek word *trias* in this context. His "triad" were God, his Word and his Wisdom. In general, the apologists portrayed the divine Logos as eternally in or with the Father as his mind or wisdom, emitted or generated as active Word or more personal Son for the purposes of creating, ordering, or saving the world of humankind.

This account had undoubtedly apologetic value. Not only was the eternity of God's Reason-Word vindicated, but also no change or division in God was implied in his mind's being expressed or uttered as word in engagement with the cosmos. Nor was God thereby diminished. In a favorite image of such writers, the streaming forth of heat and light did not lessen the sun. Theophilus openly used a Stoic distinction between the immanent and the sent-forth or expressed *logos*. This Greek word was latent with a range of meanings—reflected in numerous derivatives in English, such as logic, (mono)logue, (psycho)logy and the like.

But this nascent economic Trinitarianism had its weaknesses also. It was imbued with a marked flavor of divine rationality—partly because the Hellenistic milieu contemplated intermediary principles of cosmic order. Even Justin,

who once wrote that the Logos was “another who is, and is called, God and Lord” (*Dialogue with Trypho* 56:4), sometimes seemed unclear about the personal identity of the Word eternally with God. The apologists tended to envisage the divine wisdom being generated as Son only prior to creation or in the incarnation. But, for all their limitations, the apologists pointed the way forward. Justin was not alone in talking, for the first time in Christian theology, of “three” divine realities.

Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons in the last decades of the second century, moved broadly within a similar “economic” framework of thought but with a markedly stronger biblical input. He presented the Word and the Spirit as “the hands” of God, and generally gave greater prominence to the Spirit. Irenaeus made little contribution to a more precise account of Trinitarian relationships, but he seems to have believed that the Son was generated from the Father from eternity. Overall his more biblical theology represented an important advance in rebutting gnostic heresies and clarifying church doctrine.

### REFUTING MONARCHIANISM

In the first half of the third century, the task of Christian theology recruited the energies of some of the sharpest minds of the day. Chief among these were Tertullian of Carthage (near modern Tunis), who flourished ca. 195 to ca. 220, the first Christian writer to make extensive use of Latin, and Origen of Alexandria and later of Caesarea in Palestine (ca. 185-ca. 251). Together with others such as Hippolytus of Rome and Novatian of Rome, they agreed in resisting Monarchianism of one kind or another but themselves presented no tidily uniform understanding. By the middle of the third century, the Greek East and the Latin West were recognizably pursuing different emphases in their Trinitarian teachings. At the same time the limitations

of an “economic” approach were largely but by no means wholly overcome.

Monarchian views were widely popular in the late second and early third centuries, especially in the West. They all sought to safeguard the “single principle/source/rule” (Greek *monarchia*) of God’s being, by excluding the real distinctness of the Word and the Spirit. In various ways they espoused a reactionary monotheism, perhaps concerned lest “economic” theology lead to two or three Gods. Modalist Monarchians (Noetus of Smyrna, the obscure Praxeas, and Sabellius, who largely gave his name to the movement in the East) conceived of a single God changing names—now Father, now Son, now Spirit—according to his changing roles or “modes.” Sabellius probably held a more refined notion of three successively manifested energies of the divine monad, but the effect was the same: Father, Son and Spirit denoted not three permanently or eternally distinct beings, but phases or facets of God who in the strictest sense was only ever one. Author of an important work *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian portrayed him as a Patripassianist, teaching that “the Father suffered” on the cross.

The so-called “dynamic” Monarchians are more helpfully described as adoptionists, since they held that Christ was an ordinary human being indwelt or inspired by divine power (Greek *dynamis*) from his baptism on. Yet they were lumped together with modalists because they were animated by a like zeal for the divine “monarchy,” while also appearing to secure Christ’s divinity—none other than the Father’s as simply as could be.

### “TRINITAS” IN TERTULLIAN

Tertullian deserves high praise as the first theologian of the Trinity. Not only was he the first to use the Latin word *trinitas* (*Against Praxeas* 3), but more importantly he laid lasting foundations for Western Trinitarianism by the subtlety of

his analysis and his more precise terminology. The Godhead was a single *substantia*, while Father, Son and Spirit were three *personae*, differentiated from each other not in their basic power or quality, but in what he called *gradus* (sequence), *forma* (aspect), and *species* (manifestation). The "economic" assumptions are still discernible, so that, although he placed the Son's generation prior to creation, it was still not eternal. Later theologians in the Latin tradition would fill Tertullian's vocabulary with more adequate content, but it was his genius to give the doctrine its basic shape in the West.

The first treatise, *The Trinity*, was the work of Novatian of Rome before 250. (It was also the earliest Christian writing in Latin to be produced in Rome.) Despite its traditional title, it never uses the word *trinitas* and displays its conservatism also by focusing largely on the Father and the Son. It did, however, insist that since the Father was always Father, he always had his Son—although the Son was "in the Father" before he was "with the Father" (16, 31). This was a significant clarification, but it was Tertullian's linguistic creativity that laid a solid foundation for subsequent Trinitarian thought in the Latin West.

But confusion would soon surface between the two main language areas of the church in the Roman empire. Tertullian fixed *substantia* as the term for the single being of the Godhead. Its precise etymological equivalent in Greek—the word a translator would instinctively provide—was *hypostasis*. Not long after Tertullian, his younger contemporary, the brilliant but speculative Origen, would be teaching Eastern churchmen that there were three *hypostaseis* in the Godhead. Tertullian had expressed this emphasis as three *personae*, but the Greeks disdained *persona* as a weak word (it originally meant "mask"). If Tertullian's "one *substantia*" were put straight into Greek, one got "one *hypostasis*"—which spoke immediately of the dreaded Monarchianism.

Unravelling the confusion of tongues would take a century or more.

### ORIGEN: COMPLICATED GENIUS

A story like this keeps chalking up "firsts." Origen is commonly depicted as the first systematic theologian of the Christian church, in the light of his *First Principles*. Yet his contributions to Trinitarian elucidation tended in different directions. On the one hand against the Monarchians he insisted that Father, Son, and Spirit were three eternally distinct *hypostaseis*. Eastern theologians learned this lesson well, and always regarded Sabellianism as a bogeyman. Moreover, all subsequent Trinitarianism has been indebted to Origen for his exposition of the "eternal generation" of the Son. This clarification illustrated Origen's awareness of the analogical function of language applied to God: "Father" did not imply what it did of a human father, that he existed before his son. The Son of God was co-eternal with God the Father. Furthermore, Origen had no doubt that the Son fully shared the divine nature of the Father, and the same was true of the Spirit.

The more problematic aspects of Origen's teaching bore the stamp of the Platonic cast of his mind, which led him to grade realities of various kinds on descending scales. Thus the Father alone was God in an absolute sense (*autotheos*), alone "the God" (*ho theos*) rather than merely "God" (*theos*; *Commentary on John* 2:2-3). He openly called the Son "secondary God" (*Against Celsus* 5:39). The Father's sphere of activity extended to the whole cosmos, the Son's solely to rational beings, the Spirit's to the sanctified alone. Because the Son derived from the Father (which was part of the import of the Father-Son analogy), and the Spirit in turn likewise through the Son, the common divinity of all three *hypostaseis* was clearly safeguarded, but they existed, as it were, at three different levels. Derivation in

the mind of a Middle Platonist like Origen betokened inferiority.

As a result, Origen's Trinitarian theology was unmistakably subordinationist. In reality, the same had been true of all attempts hitherto to fix the relationship of the divine Son to the Father God. But in Origen it stood out with unequalled starkness, partly because of the advances he achieved on other issues but chiefly because of his own explicitness. So Origen's Trinitarian legacy, simply because it carried potential for divergent developments, proved troublesome as well as enriching for the church in the East.

Less than a decade after Origen's death, an exchange between two bishops named Dionysius of Rome, and Alexandria, exposed the contrasting emphases of Latins and Greeks. When the Alexandrian insisted sharply on the three distinct *hypostaseis* of Father, Son, and Spirit while rebutting Sabellianism, he seemed to his fellow-bishop in Rome almost to propound tritheism—three Gods, rather than three-in-one. Dionysius of Alexandria, a pupil of Origen, defended himself in a manner that revealed not only how fertile this ground was for terminological misunderstanding but also how instinctively he majored on a pluralist approach while his Western colleague highlighted the oneness of the Godhead. Already, it seems, the Greek word *homoousios* was a minor bone of contention. Origen had probably used it to indicate that Father and Son shared the same nature, like two members of a family. In the fourth century it would experience a far more controversial history.

### THE ARIAN CONTROVERSY

The fourth century proved to be the decisive period for the Fathers' definition of the doctrine of the Trinity. Decades of dispute led to the formulation of the *Nicene Creed* approved by a synod of bishops at Constantinople in

A.D. 381. Undergirding the *Creed* lay an understanding of God's threeness-in-oneness which has remained fundamental for virtually all mainstream Christian churches to the present day. The *Creed* itself enjoys wider official recognition than any other statement of Christian belief (more than the so-called *Apostles' Creed*), and is used in worship in major traditions worldwide.

But the path to the council of A.D. 381 was tortuous and strewn with obstacles. A long-lasting spate of controversy broke out ca. 318 over the teaching of a senior presbyter in Alexandria named Arius. He propounded what can be called a monotheism of the Father—that is to say, only the Father was truly God, and his Son or Word was not eternal and did not possess by nature any of the perfections of divinity. He was in fact a creature, even though unique, since through him was brought into being the rest of creation. Arius appealed to verses such as John 17:3, Colossians 1:15 and Proverbs 8:22. This Son of God, created even before time (for time was a dimension of the created order), might be called God out of honor, and was in reality granted sufficient of the divine attributes to enable him to fulfil his saving mission. But Arius left his Christ quite clearly in a different category of being from that of the Godhead.

After being condemned for his views in a local synod in Alexandria, Arius won support further afield, and dispute disturbed the wider Eastern church. The emperor Constantine called a council of the whole church to restore unity. This council met in A.D. 325 in Nicaea, a small town not far from Constantinople across the Bosphorus. About 200 bishops agreed almost unanimously to depose Arius, and approved a creed which unambiguously rejected his teaching. It affirmed that the Son was "begotten, not made," "God from God," "true God from true God," "begotten from the substance of the Father," and "of one substance with [*homoousios*] the Father." The creed did no

more than mention the Holy Spirit, and ended with a series of anathemas against positions adopted by Arius, such as "Before being born [the Son] was not." This creed is not the *Nicene Creed* referred to above—but the confusion is understandable!

#### HOMOOUSIOS: A DIFFICULT WORD

This creed undoubtedly debarred the heresy of Arius, and the council that endorsed it came in time to be recognized as the first ecumenical—general or universal—council of the Christian church. But it soon became apparent that the terms in which it excluded Arianism aroused widespread unhappiness among Eastern churchmen. Non-theological factors, such as the role played by Constantine, may have been partly responsible, but the discontent focused on *homoousios*. It was the first non-biblical word to hold such a key place in a Christian creedal statement. Furthermore, it had a rather murky pre-history, having been used by gnostics, for example. It was also ambiguous. It was probably intended as equivalent to homogeneous, declaring the Son to be divine as the Father was—but this left open how the two were one God. In the absence of a treatment of the divine unity, some church leaders in the East feared that it implied a splitting of the Godhead into two, while yet others suspected it of tending toward Sabellianism, that is, of collapsing the distinct divine *hypostaseis* into a single divine substance.

So an anti-Nicæa reaction got under way, and several decades of argument, confusion, hostilities, and divisions ensued. Different factions competed for the emperor's ear, as the resolution of church disorder came to be increasingly entangled with imperial policies. Various shades of doctrinal parties emerge into view—semi-Arians, old Nicenes, new Nicenes, extremists who dared say that the Son was "unlike" the Father, others who wanted to say, pathetically,

only that he was "like the Father in all things." Numerous synods were held, and several rival creeds were compiled. While some were very close to what Nicæa affirmed in A.D. 325, none used what had become the bone of contention, *homoousios*. But around the middle of the century, a slight variant, *homoiousios*, "of like substance," gained support in an encouraging reconstructive movement.

A major heroic figure in the controversy was Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria 328–373. He opposed any and every compromise with all shades of Arianism, and for his pains was five times sent packing into exile from Alexandria. He showed that at issue was the heart of Christian faith and hope in salvation, for in Jesus Christ the very Son of God reunited humanity with God. He taught that the Son fully shared the Father's divine substance, and that, since the divine nature was indivisible, the Godhead of Father and Son was a single entity. Although he knew better than to highlight *homoousios*, he unreservedly supported it in its strongest sense—that the Son and the Father were one numerically identical divine *ousia*.

Athanasius also brought the Holy Spirit fully into the debate when some Egyptians, supporters of Nicæa, nevertheless treated the Spirit as created out of nothing. His *Letters to Serapion* (ca. 360) argued in terms parallel to those used concerning the Son. Only a divine Spirit can bestow divine life on human beings. His case was constructed carefully out of the Bible's close association of the Spirit with the Father and the Son, in creation, in inspiring the prophets, in incarnation and in vivifying the church. At last the threeness of the Godhead was in central focus.

#### AFTER ATHANASIUS: THE CAPPADOCIANS

For all his strengths as a theologian, Athanasius was no plaster saint. His rough-house methods meant that sundry personal antagonisms, on top of local disunity in major

church centers such as Antioch and Constantinople, frustrated theological rapprochement. But in his latter years the Alexandrian patriarch mellowed somewhat, and he welcomed contributions by Basil of Ancyra (today Ankara, capital of Turkey) and Hilary of Poitiers, almost alone as a Westerner in playing a significant part in the debate, which moved toward recovering what Nicaea had confessed—without yet being comfortable with *homoousios* itself. A helpful synod under Athanasius in Alexandria in 362 clarified the use of key terminology, with those who, in the tradition of Origen, took the three *hypostaseis* as their starting point and those who insisted on the one *ousia* of God each acknowledging the truth of the others' position.

In some of the theologians of this era of controversy in the Eastern church (the West was almost undisturbed, building as it could on Tertullian's firm foundation), the reality of developing understanding is sometimes remarkably visible. Even Athanasius held back from calling the Holy Spirit "God" without reservation. The *Nicene Creed*, which most scholars accept as issuing from or approved by the council of Constantinople of 381, is similarly circumspect in its confession of the Spirit as

The Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is jointly worshiped and jointly glorified, who spoke through the prophets.

This carefully restrained wording should be compared with the *Creed's* more explicit statement about the Son, which is close to what the Council of Nicaea set forth in A.D. 325:

One Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things came into existence.

Despite the near identity at this point between the two creedal statements, it is inaccurate to regard the *Nicene Creed*—which scholars often label the *Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*—as simply part revision, part expansion of the creed produced by the council of Nicaea. Although the origins of the *Nicene Creed* of 381 remain obscure, it embodies fresh thinking and reflects new initiatives which had in mind something more than simply repriminating an earlier creed. Nevertheless, it is largely fair to view the council of Constantinople as reaffirming the essence of what Nicaea had declared, while at the same time moving beyond it. This is most easily evident in its clause about the Holy Spirit, but behind the achievement of the 381 council, which effectively brought to an end half-a-century of disruptive doctrinal strife in the church of the East, lay chiefly the work of a gifted and diverse group of Greek theologians known as the Cappadocians, from their home territory in eastern Turkey. Their leading figures were Basil of Caesarea, his brother Gregory of Nyssa and their friend Gregory of Nazianzus. They were themselves acutely conscious of development in their understanding, especially concerning the Holy Spirit, on whom Basil wrote an important treatise *On the Holy Spirit* (A.D. 375).

The evidence that Basil presented in this work was sufficient, in the view of Gregory of Nazianzus, to justify calling the Spirit "God" and describing him, like the Son, as *homoousios* with the Father. Basil himself, however, hesitated to take this step, although he demonstrated the intimate relations in Scripture among the Father and Son and the Spirit, and emphasized the place given to the divine triad in baptism and worship. This undoubtedly warranted for Basil recognition of the Spirit's divinity, even if he held back from naming him "God."

### PROCESSION —AND “FILIOQUE”

But if words such as “generation” and “begotten” by analogy related the Son to the Father, how should the Spirit’s relation be spoken of—and to Father and Son alike? It was Gregory of Nazianzus who developed the notion of “procession” from John 15:26, and Gregory of Nyssa who paved the way for what became the standard Eastern, and Orthodox, doctrine that the Spirit proceeded *from* the Father *through* the Son. The *Nicene Creed* stated only “proceeds from the Father.” Had it added “through the Son” it might have precluded the later Western addition “and from the Son,” usually referred to by the original Latin *Filioque*. This feature of the Western form of the *Nicene Creed* was inserted in Spain probably in the seventh century. Although increasingly used, and championed by emperor Charlemagne, it was not adopted in Rome itself until after 1000.

It remains a fundamental cause of discord between the churches of the West, both Roman Catholic and Protestant, and the Orthodox churches. The latter object to it both as an intrusion into a sacrosanct creed that bears the authority of the second ecumenical council of the church (Constantinople, A.D. 381) and on dogmatic grounds.

These grounds focused centrally on the damaging implications for the Father’s position, in the belief of the Greek fathers, as the sole fount of divinity. To portray the Father as the “cause” or “principle” (*arche*) of the Godhead was held to respect the implications of the language of sonship and now too of “procession.” Placing the Son alongside the Father with the Spirit proceeding from both threatened the unique status of the Father within the eternal relations of the Godhead. His divinity guaranteed the divinity of the Son and the Spirit, as well as the unity of the three. The Spirit’s special relation to the Son, evident in John’s gospel in particular (see 14:16-17, 26; 15:26; 16:14-15), belongs not to the inner life of the Godhead in eternity—so

Eastern churchmen argued—but to the economy of salvation, in which the coming of the Spirit followed the exaltation of the Son.

We have already gone beyond the chronological bounds of this article in this brief excursus about the *Filioque*. Nevertheless, it helpfully illustrates not only continuing differences in spelling out the doctrine of the Trinity between East and West, but also the unfinished business left by the considerable achievement of the Cappadocian theologians, whose teachings undergirded the *Nicene Creed* of 381. Agreement was reached at last on the formula “one *ousia* in three *hypostaseis*,” which combined the characteristic Eastern emphasis on the three eternally distinct *hypostaseis*, traditional since Origen, with the more Athanasian stress on the single *ousia* of the Godhead. Despite its approval of *homoousios*, a compound of *ousia*, the Council of Nicaea in 325 apparently used the two Greek terms interchangeably. Not until the 360s did an agreed differentiation of usage emerge. It was an important advance.

The Cappadocians’ own presentations tended to highlight the distinct identities of the three persons. Yet while setting “procession” alongside “generation,” they acknowledged our human inability to penetrate to the divine realities which the scriptural revelation obliged us to confess in these terms, and no less in “Son” and “Spirit” also. Their shared Platonic assumptions made it natural for them to compare the three *hypostaseis* of God to three particulars of a universal, like three human beings. This exposed them to charges of tritheism, since the numerical identity of one humanity seemed less obvious in this analogy than the plurality of the three. Yet Platonic thought always regarded the universal (the form or “idea”) as more ultimate and perfect, and even more real, than the particulars which embodied or expressed it. The particulars in turn existed only so far as they partook of the reality of the universal. The Cappado-

cians undoubtedly held that the Godhead was one indivisible being. Of that one God the *hypostaseis* were three distinct—eternally and simultaneously distinct—existences, modes of being and forms of objective presentation.

It seems strange that the Cappadocians were also suspected of Sabellianism—the error at the opposite pole from tritheism. Ever since Origen it had been the heresy to the merest sniff of which Eastern Christians reacted with ultra-sensitive horror. A truer reading of the Cappadocians' doctrine noted that the accent fell markedly on the three distinct subsistences. Two further contributions confirm this interpretation. They expounded what later came to be called *perichoresis*, in Latin *circumincepsio* (or *circuminsessio*), the mutual co-inherence or interpenetration of the three persons. This was suggested particularly by John's gospel where Jesus the Lord says, for example, "I am in the Father and the Father is in me" (14:10-11). If this related to the inner life of the Godhead, the "inseparability" of the works of the Trinity spoke of their activity toward and in the world. While each was credited with distinctive functions or works, each acted always in inseparable conjunction with the other two *hypostaseis*, the Son never independently of the Father and the Spirit, and so on.

### FINDING ANALOGIES

Part of the difficulty of the doctrine of the Trinity for present-day believers lies in the elusiveness of satisfactory analogies. The Cappadocians' illustration of three human beings will not pass muster because we do not share their Platonic assumption that the universal—humanity, humanness—is a single ultimate reality. A common comparison heard from many a pulpit turns out to be the heresy of Monarchianism (Sabellianism). The human being who at the workplace is a manager, at home is a parent and at the golf club is the team captain is but one entity changing

from one role to another and from one name to another (Mr. Perkins, Dad, Bill). The best illustration I have come across is immediately deficient because it is impersonal, but I will summarize it nonetheless. A mountain with three faces is permanently (not quite eternally!) possessed of the three objective presentations of itself. Each face presents not a third of the mountain but the whole mountain. (It is perhaps one of the most instinctive misconceptions of the doctrine of the Trinity on the part of ordinary Christians that in some way it means that God is divided into three—into thirds. No error was ever further from the unanimous mind of the early church fathers than this.) While only one face of the mountain may be presented at any one time, it is inseparable from the other two faces, which have their own distinct physiognomies—yet each reveals and objectifies the whole single mountain, and all three do so permanently and simultaneously. Think about it—and about more satisfying analogies.

### AUGUSTINE IN THE WEST

We have spent some time on the *Nicene Creed* and the work of its theological foundation-builders. It is to them that the Christian church is indebted for what deserves to be called the classic formulation of the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. It has enjoyed in recent decades in Western Trinitarianism something of a revival with the emphasis on social or communal models of the Trinity. The tradition in the Latin and Western church was decisively shaped by Augustine of Hippo (354–430), who may still be regarded as the most influential Christian ever since the time of the apostles. As earlier sections of this article would lead us to expect, his exposition maintained the Western emphasis on the unity of God, but it was original in a number of respects.

His teaching was set out in *On the Trinity*, which was not

occasioned by any outbreak of controversy and hence could take on the character of spiritual meditation as much as of speculative dogmatics. It built on the consensus fostered in the Greek church by the great fourth century fathers, but gave a more confident account of the complete equality of the three, with each identical with the *essentia* of God. He preferred this word to *substantia*, which Tertullian had provided Latin-speaking Christians two centuries earlier, to preclude any suggestion that, against a background of Aristotelian usage, substance might be distinguishable from attributes in God.

Augustine also disliked another of Tertullian's key terms, *persona* (plural *personae*), because it implied that the three were separate individuals. He even seemed to resolve what the Greeks expressed in terms of distinct *hypostaseis* into the relations between the three, so that the Father's identity lay in his begetting, the Son's in being begotten and the Spirit's in proceeding. This reflected his concern not to divide the Trinity. Along earlier lines he emphasized the co-inherence of the three and the inseparability of their works. Another original insight, which was connected with his ecclesiology, identified the Spirit as the mutual love or communion between the Father and the Son. This implied that the Spirit was related in similar ways to both Father and Son, and made Augustine in effect the first major theologian of the *Filioque*—the Spirit's proceeding "from the Father and the Son."

Augustine's exposition is profound and subtle. That his interest focused more on the internal, immanent relationships within the Trinity and hence on the unity of the Godhead became inescapable when he turned to analogies of the Trinity. He took seriously the teaching of Scripture that the human being was made in the divine image: "Let us make humankind in *our* image" (Genesis 1:26). Augustine concentrated on the inner person, on mind or soul, and

fixed on the most satisfying analogy of the divine triad in the human mind as remembering, knowing and loving God. A brief sketch can give little indication of the suggestiveness and spiritual depths of Augustine's exposition, which, far from making this triad of mental operations an objective model, corresponding one-to-one to the divine Trinity, posits our advance in being mindful of, understanding and loving God as the context and even condition for our growing apprehension of God as three-in-one. Theological progress is inseparable from movement toward sanctification. The mystery of the Trinity and the mystery of human being illuminate each other.

The Augustinian legacy in the West is evident in the so-called "*Athanasian*" Creed (sometimes referred to by its first words in Latin as *Quicunque vult*). It has nothing to do with Athanasius, being compiled in southern Gaul (France) ca. 500. Its sonorous formulas summed up patristic thought in the West.

We worship one God in Trinity and Trinity in unity, neither confusing the persons nor dividing the substance. . . . The Godhead of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is one, their glory is equal, their majesty coeternal. . . . In this Trinity there is nothing before or after, nothing greater or less, but all three persons are coeternal and coequal with each other.

### THE TRINITY WORSHIPED

It is often said, and wisely, that the early Christians knew the Trinity and worshiped the Trinity before they could express the truth of it with much theological adequacy. Father, Son and Spirit were invoked together in baptism and benediction long before Trinitarian-shaped creeds were formulated. Here we observe at work the principle *lex orandi lex credendi*, literally "the law of praying [is, becomes] the law of believing." Christians at worship could be said to

have "lived" the Trinity more happily than they proved capable of explicating the doctrine. They found themselves wrestling with the limitations of human language and human concepts in attempting to spell out the ineffable. The doctrine of the Trinity remains a doctrine of faith, which means among other things that believing it, and believing in the triune God, is not conditional on understanding it fully. Augustine was the first to emphasize that we believe in order to understand. Not least is this true of the Trinity of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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