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The Trinity in the Patristic Era, AD 100-500

How do the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit relate to each other?

Sections of the Nicene Creed ~

I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages.

God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; through Him all things were made....

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets.

R. Lucas Stamps in *Historical Theology For The Church* ~

“If the Son is *sent from* the Father in the incarnation, it is only because he is *eternally from* the Father in his eternal generation. If the Spirit is *sent from* the Father and Son on the day of Pentecost, it is only because he is *eternally from* the Father and Son in his eternal procession” (48).

Biblical Articulation of the Trinity by Tertullian (ca. 160-220)

- *Matthew 11:27* – “All things have been handed over to me [Jesus] by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”
- *John 1:1* – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”
- *John 1:18* – “No one has ever seen God [the Father]; the only God [the Son], who is at the Father’s side, he has made him known.”

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- *John 6:38* – “For I have come down from heaven, not to do my own will but the will of him who sent me.”
- *John 8:26* – “I have much to say about you and much to judge, but he who sent me is true, and I declare to the world what I have heard from him.”
- *John 10:30* – “I and the Father are one.”
- *John 14:11* – “Believe in me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me, or else believe on account of the works themselves.”
- *John 14:16* – “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever.”
- *1 Corinthians 2:11* – “For who knows a person’s thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God.”

“Now, observe, my assertion is that the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other I am, moreover, obliged to say this, when they contend for the identity of the Father and Son and Spirit, that is not by way of diversity that the Son differs from the Father, but by *distribution*: it is not by division that He is different, but by *distinction*; because the Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their being.”¹

Biblical Articulation of the Trinity by Augustine (354-430)

- *Matthew 3:16* – “And when Jesus was baptized, immediately he went up from the water, and behold, the heavens were opened to him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and coming to rest on him.”
- *Matthew 17:5* – “He was still speaking when, behold, a bright cloud overshadowed them, and a voice from the cloud said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased; listen to him.”

¹ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 4.1 (ANF 3:604).

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- *Mark 1:11* – “And a voice came from heaven, ‘You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased.’”
- *John 12:28* – “Father, glorify your name. Then a voice came from heaven: ‘I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again.’”
- *Acts 2:2, 4* – “And suddenly there came from heaven a sound like a mighty rushing wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting... And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance.”

“The Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit intimate a divine unity of one and the same substance in an indivisible equality; and therefore that they are not three Gods, but one God. Although the Father hath begotten the Son, and so He who is the Father is not the Son; and the Son is begotten by the Father; and the Holy Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son, but only the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, Himself also co-equal with the Father and the Son, and pertaining to the unity of the Trinity. Yet not that this Trinity was born of the Virgin Mary, and crucified under Pontius Pilate, and buried, and rose again the third day, and ascended into heaven, but only the Son.”²

Biblical Articulation of the Trinity by Gregory of Nazianzus (ca. 329-390)

- *John 1:1* – “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”
- *John 15:26* – “But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me.”
- *1 John 1:1-3* – “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life— ² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— ³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.”

“Monotheism, with its single governing principle, is what we value – not monotheism

² Augustine, *On The Trinity* 1.4 (NPNF1 3:20).

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defined as the sovereignty of a single person... but the single rule produced by equality of nature, harmony of will, identity of action, and the convergence toward their source of what springs from unity – none of which is possible in the case of created nature. The result is that though there is numerical distinction, there is no division in the substance.”³

Further Discussion Questions

Is it legitimate to use extrabiblical terminology to define and defend the doctrine of the Trinity? Is it sufficient just to stick to the language of Scripture?

What if heretical positions also cite scriptural support? How does the church determine which interpretation is correct?

What are the practical implications of the doctrine of the Trinity? How did this doctrine matter for the church today?

³ Gregory of Nazianzus, *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*, (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 70.

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Key Terms

- *Homoousios* – Greek terms to mean of the same nature or essence
- *Modalistic Monarchianism* – the belief that holds the unity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit by denying their real personal distinction. For modalism, the names Father, Son, and Holy Spirit only describe the manners of modes according to which the same God, in himself without distinction, acts in the world.
- *Divine Appropriations* – when an essential reality or a divine action is attributed to one person of the Godhead in a special way in order to manifest better the divine persons to the mind of believers.
- *Inseparable Operations* – The works of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are undivided. When the Father works, the Son and the Spirit are also working. When the Son works, the Father and the Spirit are also working. When the Spirit works, the Father and the Son are also working. The works of creation or redemption belong to all three persons of the Godhead because God is one.
- *Subsistence* – Another way to refer to a divine person. The one, simple divine essence subsists or exists in three persons. Each person is a subsisting relation of the divine essence. The divine essence has three modes of subsistence.

Preparation For Next Week:

Read article – <https://jgduesing.com/theology-in-the-patristic-era-stephen-o-presley-on-scripture-and-tradition/> (It's also attached to this document.)

Resources for Further Study:

Augustine. *On The Trinity*. In vol. 3 of *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*. Series 1. Edited by Philip Schaff. Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004.

Duesing, Jason and Nathan Finn. *Historical Theology For The Church*. Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2021.

Litfin, Bryan. *Getting to Know The Church Fathers: An Evangelical Introduction*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016.

Nazianzen, Gregory. *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius*. Popular Patristics 23. Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002.

Tertullian. *Against Praxeas*. In vol. 3 of *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*. Edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2004.