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Trinity: The Doctrine of God

(in the Early Church)

NARRATIVE SUMMARY

- The early Church baptised people in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They worshipped Jesus as God even though their faith commanded them to worship only one God.
- The most obvious solution was that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were all the same person. This position was called Modalism.
- However, Modalism could not explain why Jesus prayed to the Father, or how all three persons could appear at once (e.g. at Jesus' baptism). Therefore, the Church rejected Modalism and insisted that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct persons.
- But how are Father, Son, and Holy Spirit distinct? One clear way to distinguish them is to make a hierarchy: the Son and the Holy Spirit are inferior to the Father because they were produced by the Father. They are divine because they share in the Father's being, but they are not as great as the Father. This position is called subordinationism.
- The Council of Nicaea rejected subordinationism and insisted that Father and Son are "one in being," meaning that the Son is not inferior to the Father.
- But the Council was suspected of Modalism because it did not explain the distinctions between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- Alexander and Athanasius defended the Council by developing the language of "one being, three persons" to clarify both the unity and the distinction.
- Athanasius also defended the use of non-scriptural language in the Creed, the divinity of the Holy Spirit which was not explicitly declared in the Creed, and grounded all of his arguments in a humble awareness of the limitations of the human intellect when contemplating the mystery of the transcendent God.

INTRODUCTION

The development of trinitarian doctrine is the key to its meaning.¹

The most famous painting of the Christian God is a fifteenth-century icon by a Russian artist named Andrei Rublev. It is titled “The Hospitality of Abraham” and depicts a scene from Genesis 18. In the story, which opens with the words “the LORD [Hebrew *YHWH*] appeared to Abraham,” three strangers visit Abraham who welcomes them and serves them a meal, all the time addressing them as “my Lord” (Hebrew *adonai*) in the singular.² From early on in Christian history, theologians have interpreted this story as a *theophany*, an appearance of God.³ The painting by Rublev belongs to this tradition of interpretation. It depicts three figures seated at a table: God the Father on the left, Jesus Christ in the middle, and the Holy Spirit on the right.⁴

How can this be a painting of God if it shows three people? Christians have always held firmly to the belief that there is only one God, the creator of all things, who alone is to be worshipped. Yet the early Christians also clearly believed that this one God exists in three persons, all of which are fully and equally divine.

This is the famous doctrine of the Trinity, which most people know is a core Christian belief. It may come as a surprise to some that the word does not appear in the Bible.⁵ Yet despite this, Trinitarian faith came to be the hallmark of Christianity within a few centuries of the birth of the Church. Christians were convinced that even if the word “Trinity” was absent in the New Testament, the reality of three persons in one divine substance was clearly there.

From its very beginning, the doctrine was plagued with misunderstandings. Many people have accused it of violating basic logic and mathematics, making nonsense out of the claim that Christians are monotheists. How can there be only one God, and at the same time three people who are God? For some, it is a clear example of theology professors dreaming up overly complicated puzzles that have no connection to the lived experience of ordinary people. So how did this doctrine become so unavoidably central to Christian identity and belief?

The short answer is that it seemed to the early Christians to be the only logical way to make sense of everything Jesus had said about himself and the apostles had said about him. Many other ways were tried that were simpler and easier to understand, but which failed to account for something recorded in the New Testament. The conclusions of the early Church regarding the incomprehensible Trinity can be compared to many of the conclusions of modern physics that are equally hard to grasp yet equally unavoidable in the face of the evidence, like string theory, dark matter, or the idea that light is both a wave and a particle at the same time. These are not neat and tidy theories that make you feel mentally at rest, as if you’d figured it all out perfectly. Rather, they are brave attempts to rationalise all the evidence available even when this stretches or perhaps breaks our usual categories and ways of thinking.

Apart from its confusing nature, the other accusation levelled against the Trinity is that it is impractical and irrelevant. Immanuel Kant famously said that the Trinity has “no practical relevance” and his words resonate with many people today. What does it matter whether there are one, three, five, or five million persons in

¹ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Baker Academic, 2011), xv.

² Unless otherwise noted, Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible © 1989 or NRSV.

³ For the details of this, see Bogdan G. Bucur, ‘The Early Christian Reception of Genesis 18: From Theophany to Trinitarian Symbolism’, *Journal of Early Christian Studies* (BALTIMORE) 23, no. 2 (2015): 245–72. On the challenges of reconciling this with modern exegetical methods, see Francis Watson, ‘Abraham’s Visitors: Prolegomena to a Christian Theological Exegesis of Genesis 18–19’, *Journal of Scriptural Reasoning* 2, no. 3 (2002).

⁴ For more on the Trinitarian imagery in the Rublev icon, see Gabriel Bunge, *The Rublev Trinity: The Icon of the Trinity by the Monk-Painter Andrei Rublev*, trans. Andrew Louth (St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2007).

⁵ In fact, our earliest preserved attestation of the word “Trinity” (Greek “*Τριάδος*”) comes from St. Theophilus of Antioch writing around A.D. 170. He writes “The three days prior to the luminaries are types of the Trinity of God and his Word and his Wisdom” (*To Autolycus* II.15). Translation modified. Greek: “*Ὡσαύτως καὶ αἱ τρεῖς ἡμέραι πρὸ των φωστῆρων γεγεννηται τύποι εἰσὶν τῆς τριάδος, του θεου καὶ του λόγου αὐτου καὶ τῆς σοφίας αὐτου.*”

the Godhead? How does it affect my daily life and spirituality? The answer is that the doctrine of the Trinity arose not to satisfy idle intellectual curiosity, but to help ordinary Christians make sense of the scriptural passages they heard and sang Sunday after Sunday in worship. It was those who were living the Christian life and worshipping the Christian God who most wanted to understand who this God was. The Trinity is more lived than understood. It is lived by the church who baptises new members “in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” It is lived by the child who prays to Jesus on the same day that she reads in the Gospels that Jesus prayed to the Father. It is lived by Pentecostal and Charismatic communities who ask God to “fill us with your Spirit.” It is lived, above all, by all Christians whose deepest longing is to be caught up into the divine life and immersed in the Love that loved before the world was made, the perfect love between Father and Son that was never, for all eternity, by itself without anything to lavish with love.

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS FOR EARLY CHRISTIANITY

Two religious backgrounds are important contexts for early Christianity: Greco-Roman, and Jewish. The Greco-Roman background, into which Christianity was born, had no problem with multiple deities. The Romans were happy pluralists. They had multiple religions and worshipped multiple gods, and saw no problem with that. Adding a few more gods would not have been a problem.

But Judaism is the more crucial background for Christianity. The first Christians were all Jewish and did not think they were starting a new religion. They believed instead that in Jesus, Judaism had found its promised and long-awaited messiah, and that this meant a transformation of the Jewish faith into a new stage of its history.

Judaism was unlike other religions in the Greco-Roman world. It demanded exclusive worship of the Jewish God alone. Worship of anyone or anything other than the one God of Israel was considered the highest blasphemy. That is why when the early Christians were found to be worshipping Jesus, it was such a scandal. Either they had completely lost their minds, or else they were saying that Jesus was not only the Jewish Messiah, but the Jewish God, who alone is to be worshipped.

EARLY TESTIMONIES TO JESUS' DIVINITY

The New Testament

Why would Christians start worshipping Jesus as God? The only possible reason is that they believed Jesus had identified himself with God, in things he said and did, and in what his closest followers said about him. The Gospel of John opens with the words, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ... And the Word became flesh and lived among us” (John 1:1). Jesus says, “before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58), applying to himself the most holy name of God given in Exodus 3:14. This was so blasphemous to the Jewish people that they immediately tried to stone him to death (John 8:59). Not long afterwards he says, “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30), and “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). When he appears, risen from the dead, to his disciples, one of them cries out “My Lord and my God” (John 20:28) and Jesus affirms his belief. Jesus also behaves in ways that everyone recognises as a claim to being divine, which is why people keep accusing him of blasphemy (Matthew 9:3, 26:65-66; Mark 2:7, 14:63-64; Luke 5:21; John 10:33, 19:7).⁶ When Jesus calms the storm (Matthew 8:23-27; Mark 4:35-41; Luke 8:22-25), the disciples do not react the way they do with other miracles of Jesus. This was no typical miracle

⁶ The detail for why this counts as claims to divinity is discussed in Chapter 5 of Brant Pitre, *Jesus and Divine Christology* (Eerdmans, 2024). A shorter version is available in Brant Pitre, ‘Jesus’s Divinity and the Quest for the Historical Jesus’, *Church Life Journal*, 4 February 2025.



like ones in the Old Testament, performed with God's power through a mere human being. Rather, the disciples are in utter shock: only the creator has such authority.⁷

ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Belief in Jesus' divinity was continued by the earliest Christians writing after the New Testament. Near the beginning of the second century, St. Ignatius, the bishop of Antioch, wrote to the church in Ephesus that it is chosen "by the will of the Father and of Jesus Christ, our God."⁸ Later in the same letter he says

There is one physician, both fleshly and spiritual, born and unborn, God come in the flesh, true life in death, from both Mary and God, first subject to suffering and then beyond suffering, Jesus Christ our Lord.⁹

Ignatius doesn't try to explain how Jesus can be both "God come in the flesh" and "from God" at the same time. Ignatius's goal is not to give precise explanations for how Christian faith makes sense, but to proclaim to Christians what they were to believe in order to receive the life-giving grace that comes from Jesus.

ST. JUSTIN MARTYR

The desire to explain and understand went one step further when a philosopher called Justin converted to Christianity a couple of decades later. He was eventually martyred for his faith, which is why we now call him St. Justin Martyr. He wrote several important works explaining and justifying the Christian faith: some addressed to the Romans, and one to the Jewish people which takes the form of a long conversation with a

⁷ See the full argument for this in Pitre, *Jesus and Divine Christology*, 47–66.

⁸ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* preface. Greek: "ἐν θελήματι τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, τοῦ θεοῦ ἡμῶν."

⁹ St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Ephesians* 7. Greek: "εἷς ἰατρός ἐστιν, σαρκικός τε καὶ πνευματικός, γεννητὸς καὶ ἀγέννητος, ἐν σαρκὶ γενόμενος θεός, ἐν θανάτῳ ζωὴ ἀληθινή, καὶ ἐκ Μαρίας καὶ ἐκ θεοῦ, πρῶτον παθητὸς καὶ τότε ἀπαθής, Ἰησοῦς Χριστὸς ὁ κύριος ἡμῶν." See also Ignatius' letter to the Smyrnaeans in which he says "I give glory to Jesus Christ, the God who has made you so wise" (*Epistle to the Smyrnaeans* 1). Greek "Δοξάζω Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν τὸν θεὸν τὸν οὕτως ὑμᾶς σοφίσαντα."

Jewish man called Trypho. He tells Trypho that every theophany in the Old Testament – every time God appears to someone – it is actually Jesus in pre-incarnate form. When God appeared to Moses in the burning bush (Exodus 3), when God wrestled with Jacob (Genesis 32), when three men appear to Abraham (Genesis 18), when God closed the door to the Ark (Genesis 7) – in these and all other theophanies, it was always the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was showing himself and acting in the world, who is rightly recognised as God.

Why does Justin believe that it was the Son and not the Father who did all those things? He bases his argument on a careful reading of scripture. The Gospel of John says that Isaiah saw the glory of Jesus (see John 12:36-41), which seems to be talking about Isaiah's famous vision in which he "saw the LORD" (Isaiah 6:1). John the Evangelist set a precedent for interpreting appearances of God in the Old Testament as appearances of Jesus.

But more than that, Justin has a theological basis for extending this idea to every appearance of God. He argues that God the Father cannot appear to anyone, since he is invisible. He gets this from John 1:18 which states: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known." This is backed up by the Apostle Paul's teaching that "there is one God; there is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus" (1 Timothy 2:5). This means that the only access anyone has to God the Father is through God the Son, Jesus Christ, the only true mediator between God and human beings.

Therefore, Justin concludes, whenever it says that God came down to earth or showed himself or did anything, it must have been the Son, not the Father.

You should not imagine that the Unbegotten God Himself descended or ascended from any place. For, the Ineffable Father and Lord of all neither comes to any place, nor walks, nor sleeps, nor arises, but always remains in His place, wherever it may be, acutely seeing and hearing, not with eyes or ears, but with a power beyond description. ... How, then, could He converse with anyone, be seen by anyone, or appear in the smallest place of the world? ... Thus, neither Abraham, nor Isaac, nor Jacob, nor any other man saw the Father and Ineffable Lord of all creatures... but they saw Him who, according to God's will, is God the Son, ... Him who, by His will, became man through a virgin.¹⁰

Yet contained in this interesting theological idea is the implicit assumption that Jesus is God, since the Old Testament always refers to those appearances as appearances of God. That is why, Justin tells Trypho, "if you had understood the words of the Prophets, you would not deny that he is God, Son of the One, Unbegotten, Ineffable God."¹¹

¹⁰ St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 127. Greek: "μη ηγεϊσθε αυτον τον αγεννητον θεον καταβεβηκεναι η αναβεβηκεναι ποθεν. Ο γαρ αρρητος πατηρ και κυριος των παντων ουτε ποι αφινεται ουτε περιπατει ουτε καθευδει ουτε ανισταται, αλλ εν τη αυτοου χωρα, οπου ποτε, μενει, οξυ ορων και οξυ ακουων, ουκ οφθαλμοις ουδε ωσιν αλλα δυνامي αλεκτω ... Πως αν ουν ουτος η λαλησει προς τινα η οφθειη τινη η εν ελαχιστω μερει γης φανειη ... Ουτε ουν Αβρααμ ουτε Ισαακ ουτε Ιακωβ ουτε αλλος ανθρωπων ειδε τον πατερα και αρρητον κυριον των παντων απλως ... αλλ εκεινον τον κατα βουλην την εκεινου και θεον οντα, υιον αυτοου" (St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, ed. Georges Archambault [Librairie Alphones Picard / Trustees of Tufts University, 1909], chap. 127).

¹¹ St. Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 126. Greek: "Επει ει νενοηκατε τα ειρημενα υπο των προφητων, ουκ αν εξηρνεισθε αυτον ειναι θεον, του μονου και αγεννητου και αρρητου θεου υιον" (Martyr, *Dialogus cum Tryphone*, chap. 126).



EARLY TRINITARIAN FORMULAS

But what about the Holy Spirit? Isn't the Trinity meant to be about three divine persons, not just two?

Indeed it is. It took a little longer for theologians to agree how precisely to describe the divinity and personhood of the Holy Spirit. But that does not mean the Holy Spirit was absent from the Church's life and worship. For the early Christian tradition theology *followed* the Church's practice rather than determining it. This is the idea behind the Latin phrase *lex orandi, lex credendi*, translated "the law of what is prayed [or worshipped] is the law of what is believed." What this phrase means is that *first* Christians did things that Christ and his apostles instituted in their worship, prayer, and daily lives, and *then* theologians came along and explained them, building an integrated system of thinking to make sense of it all. The Trinity is a great example of this principle at work. We first of all see what we call "Trinitarian" / "Triadic" formulas, meaning formulas that name all three persons of the Trinity together. Some of these were used in worship or in baptismal rites. For example:

- Jesus commanded his disciples to baptize people "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 28:19).
- When Jesus himself was baptized, the three persons are all present (Matthew 3:16-17).
- In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul weaves the Trinity into his rhetoric about unity and diversity in the Church (1 Corinthians 12:4-6):

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same **Spirit**;
and there are varieties of services, but the same **Lord** [Jesus];
and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same **God** who activates all of them in everyone.

- Similarly Paul closes his second letter to the Corinthians with the words "The grace of the **Lord Jesus Christ**, the love of **God**, and the communion of the **Holy Spirit** be with all of you."
- Paul's letter to the Ephesians contains a similar Trinitarian format (Ephesians 4:4-6):

There is one body and **one Spirit**, just as you were called to the one hope of your calling, **one Lord**, one faith, one baptism, **one God and Father** of all, who is above all and through all and in all.

- Peter's famous Pentecost speech has a Trinitarian ring to it (Acts 2:32-33):

This **Jesus** God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being therefore exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from **the Father** the promise of the **Holy Spirit**, he has poured out this that you both see and hear..

None of these "Trinitarian formulas" explains or systematises the doctrine, nor does any of them "prove" the Trinity in any undisputable way. But anyone who prays this way every day will find themselves led in a

“triadic” direction in their way of thinking. It is natural for questions to occur to those living the Christian life on a daily basis about how to rightly understand what they are praying; what is the status of these three beings I keep invoking in worship, and how do they relate to each other?

ST. IRENAEUS OF LYON

Theologians were aware of these Trinitarian phrases even though their focus was on the relationship between Father and Son. For example, St. Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyon in modern-day France, described a creed in A.D. 180 which he said was used by all Christians everywhere:

The Church, indeed, though disseminated throughout the world, even to the ends of the earth, received from the apostles and their disciples the faith in **one God the Father Almighty**, the Creator of heaven and earth and the seas and all things that are in them; and in the **one Jesus Christ, the Son of God**, who was enfleshed for our salvation; and in the **Holy Spirit**.¹²

This creed does not explicitly claim that Jesus and the Holy Spirit are God, but it does give equal importance to all three. A couple of decades later he makes the Trinitarian shape of the Christian faith even more explicit:

This is the order of our faith, the foundation of the edifice and the support of our conduct: **God, the Father, uncreated, uncontainable, invisible, one God, the Creator of all**: this is the first article of our faith. And the second article: **the Word of God, the Son of God, Christ Jesus our Lord**, who was revealed by the prophets according to the character of their prophecy and according to the nature of the economies of the Father, by whom all things were made, and who, in the last times, to recapitulate all things, became a man amongst men, visible and palpable, in order to abolish death, to demonstrate life, and to effect communion between God and man. And the third article: **the Holy Spirit**, through whom the prophets prophesied and the patriarchs learnt the things of God and the righteous were led in the path of righteousness, and who, in the last times, was poured out in a new fashion upon the human race renewing man, throughout the world, to God.

For this reason the baptism of our regeneration takes place through these three articles, granting us regeneration unto **God the Father through His Son by the Holy Spirit**: for those who bear the Spirit of God are led to the Word, that is to the Son, while the Son presents them to the Father, and the Father furnishes incorruptibility. Thus, without the Spirit it is not possible to see the Word of God, and without the Son one is not able to approach the Father; for the knowledge of the Father is the Son, and knowledge of the Son of God is through the Holy Spirit, while the Spirit, according to the good-pleasure of the Father, the Son administers, to whom the Father wills and as He wills.¹³

¹² St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* I.10.1. Bold added. Greek: “Ἡ μὲν γὰρ Ἐκκλησία, καίπερ καθ’ ὅλης της οἰκουμένης ἕως περάτων της γης διεσπασμένη, παρὰ τε των ἀποστόλων καὶ των ἐκείνων μαθητων παραλαβουσα την εἰς ἓνα Θεὸν Πατέρα παντοκράτορα "τὸν πεποικῶτα τὸν οὐρανὸν καὶ τὴν γην καὶ τὴν θάλασσαν καὶ πάντα τὰ ἐν αὐτοῖς " πιστιν, καὶ εἰς ἓνα Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν τὸν Υἱὸν του Θεου τὸν σαρκωθέντα ὑπὲρ της ἡμετέρας σωτηρίας, καὶ εἰς Πνεῦμα ἅγιον τὸ διὰ των προφητων κεκηρυχὸς τὰς οἰκονομίας.”

¹³ St. Irenaeus, *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 6-7. Bold added; square brackets and Greek removed.

Now, you might want to ask Irenaeus a few questions about how this all fits together. Does calling Jesus the Son of God imply that Jesus is God? Does adding the Holy Spirit to them imply that the Holy Spirit is God? How does that square with his insistence that there is only one God?

Irenaeus does not answer all these questions for you - you will have to wait until later in the story for that. But Irenaeus does say that the Son and the Spirit were always with the Father through all eternity. In other words, they were not created like everything else in reality. If everything that is not created is the Creator, as Irenaeus taught,¹⁴ then it follows logically that the Son and the Spirit are also God. Irenaeus calls the Son the “Reason” of the Father (from John 1:1 – the Greek word “Logos” is often translated “Word” but could equally be translated “Reason”), and he calls the Spirit the “Wisdom” of the Father. He points out that God cannot be imagined as existing without reason or wisdom. Surely if God was always rational and always wise, then the Son and the Spirit must have always existed from all eternity with him, and if so, they must be uncreated: “For the Logos is always with Him, and Wisdom also, that is, the Son and the Spirit, by whom and in whom He made all things freely and spontaneously.”¹⁵

MODALISM AND ITS OPPONENTS

Very well, then. The early Christians all identified Jesus as God, and the New Testament has many phrases which name Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Early creeds like the one Irenaeus records have the same triple formula in them. How do we reconcile this with the strong Jewish insistence that only one God is to be worshiped, the Creator of all things?

The simplest solution is to say that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are different forms God takes when interacting with human beings. If there is only one God, then there must be only one *person* who is divine who appears and speaks to us in three modes.

This position is called various things: Modalism (from the idea of God having three “modes”), Monarchianism (from the idea that there is only one ruler of the Universe), or Sabellianism, after a third-century theologian called Sabellius. Its proponents based it on Bible verses like “you shall have no other gods before me” (Exodus 20:3); “besides me there is no god” (Isaiah 44:6). To show that Jesus is identical to the Father, they pointed to the passages we looked at earlier, like Jesus saying “The Father and I are one” and “whoever has seen me has seen the Father.”



¹⁴ M. Steenberg, *Irenaeus on Creation: The Cosmic Christ and the Saga of Redemption*, 1st ed., vol. 91, *Vigiliae Christianae, Supplements* (Brill, 2008).

¹⁵ St. Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.20.1. Translation modified. Greek: “ἀεὶ γὰρ συμπάρεστιν αὐτῷ ὁ Λόγος καὶ ἡ Σοφία, ὁ Υἱὸς καὶ τὸ Πνεῦμα, δι’ ὃ καὶ ἐν οἷς τὰ πάντα ἐλευθέρως καὶ αὐτεξουσίως ἐποίησε.”

Modalism (or Monarchianism) offers a nice straightforward answer that we can all get our minds around without too much difficulty. It's logical, and it seems to keep everyone happy. Nobody wants to say that there is more than one God, but equally nobody wants to deny that Jesus is God. So the easiest way forward is to say that there is one God and we should worship only him. We worship Jesus because he is God. The Holy Spirit is also God. God merely shows different faces of himself to us. Perhaps its simplicity is why this position rapidly gained popularity among third-century Christians.

Simple, easy-to-grasp explanations for things rarely account for all the evidence available. This is as true in theology as it is in politics, economics, physics, health and almost every other area of life. In this case, by denying that the Son is distinct from the Father, the Modalist Monarchians had left out certain important pieces of the puzzle. Jesus *prays* to the Father (e.g. Matthew 11:25-27; John 17; Luke 22:42), and tells people about how much the Father and the Son love each other (John 3:35; 5:20). These are not activities that a single person can reasonably do. In these ways Jesus shows signs that he has a relationship with the Father of the kind that can only be had with another real person.

ST. HIPPOLYTUS

A bishop in Rome called St. Hippolytus was one of the first to raise concerns about Modalism.¹⁶ He first points out some of the oddities that the Modalist position entails. It means believing that the Father is not really a Father of anyone, and likewise the Son is not really a Son. Instead, the Father became his own Son when he was born as a human being. If the Father doesn't really have a Son, this makes nonsense of all the New Testament passages which call Jesus the Son of God.¹⁷ These passages, he says, can only mean that Jesus was produced by the Father and is therefore not identical to him.

So what *does* it mean that Jesus is the Son of God, then? Hippolytus takes his cue from places in the New Testament which call Jesus, not only the Son of God, but God's "only begotten" (Greek: *monogenes*) Son (John 1:14,18;3:16,18; Hebrews 11:17; 1 John 4:9). His argument hangs on the fact that to call Jesus *begotten* is not the same as calling Jesus *created*. The difference between creating and begetting, Hippolytus says, is that created things are not made of the same material as the creator. This is also true when human beings make things. A carpenter uses wood to make tables and chairs. A builder uses bricks to make a house. A potter uses clay to make jars. They don't use their own bodies. When they do use their own bodies in procreation, we call it begetting, and what they produce is the same kind of thing as themselves. A fox begets another fox; an eagle begets another eagle; and a human begets another human. Therefore, Hippolytus says, when God begets, he uses his own being and the result is also God. On the other hand, when God creates, he creates from nothing and the result is things that are not God. These are the words he uses to develop this argument:

There is one God: the primal God, who is the single maker and lord of all. He has nothing coeval with himself, neither boundless chaos, nor measureless water, nor solid earth, nor dense air, nor hot fire, nor subtle spirit, nor the azure roof of great heaven. No. He is one, alone by himself. When he willed, he made things that exist, since nothing existed before he desired to make.¹⁸

Hippolytus makes it abundantly clear that he is a monotheist and is not denying that there is only one God. This one God is the only uncreated being, and thus the only Creator of everything that exists. Hippolytus reflects the church's awareness that there is an infinitely huge chasm between Creator and created and that

¹⁶ It's not clear whether the writings attributed to Hippolytus were written by him or by his disciples. To keep it simple, I'm going to talk about all of them as if Hippolytus wrote them.

¹⁷ You can find these arguments in St. Hippolytus, *Against Noetus*. See helpful commentary in Samuel Fernández, *Nicaea 325* (Brill, 2025), 31–34.

¹⁸ St. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 10.32. Greek: "Θεός εις, ὁ πρῶτος και μόνος και πάντων ποιητής και κύριος, σύγχρονος ἑσθεν οὐδέν · οὐ χάος ἀπειρον, οὐχ ὕδωρ ἀμέτρητον, οὐ γην στερεάν, οὐκ αἶρα πυκνόν, οὐ πῦρ θερμόν, οὐ πνεῦμα λεπτόν, οὐκ οὐρανοῦ μεγάλου κυανέαν ὀροφήν· ἀλλ' ἦν εις, μόνος (ἐφ') ἑαυτου. δις θελήσας ἐποίησε τὰ ὄντα, οὐκ ὄντα πρότερον πλην ὅτε (αὐτός) ἤρξατο ποιεῖν."

everything that is not God is created. The story of how Christians arrived at the doctrine of “creation out of nothing” will be covered in a future dossier. Here the important thing is which side of this chasm Jesus is on.

Like Irenaeus, Hippolytus’s favourite term for Jesus is the one found in John 1:1, the Logos. This Logos is the only being who was not produced out of nothing. But since apart from nothing there was only God, then if the Logos was made out of “something” the only something available is God himself!

This singular and universal God first conceived of and fathered a Word [Greek: *Logos*], a Word not like a voice, but the immanent Reason of the universe. Now he gave birth to him exclusively from existing things. The Father himself is Being, and from Being came the offspring.¹⁹

The Logos, i.e., Jesus, is the only being who was produced from something that already existed. The only thing that already existed before creation was God. Therefore to say that Jesus was produced from something existing is the same as saying he is produced from God. Anything that’s produced from God must also be God:

The Logos alone is generated from God himself. Thus he is God, existing as a divine substance. But the world is made from nothing, and so it is not God.²⁰

That’s the difference between Jesus and the creation, says Hippolytus. Because Jesus was produced from God’s own being, that means Jesus is God. Creation, on the other hand, was brought into being from nothing, which is why creation is not divine. This is how Jesus can be God, and also distinct from the Father, without threatening the oneness of God, according to Hippolytus.

TERTULLIAN

But Hippolytus was not the first to refute Modalism. An African Christian named Tertullian had already written a vigorous treatise a couple of decades previously. Tertullian was a lawyer who converted to Christianity after being impressed by the courage of Christian martyrs in the face of death. After becoming a Christian, he started to write prolifically in Latin, defending orthodox Christianity against all kinds of false teaching.

Tertullian gradually became associated with a group called the Montanists who placed a huge emphasis on the gifts of the Holy Spirit, especially prophecy. Eventually this group began to claim that their prophecies had equal authority to the Bible.²¹ At that time the Church leadership decided that they had gone too far and their teachings were condemned. But their emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit was not why they were condemned,²² and this emphasis may have helped Tertullian to remember the place of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead and not to focus exclusively on the Father-Son relationship.

The way Tertullian put things was so clever and articulate that many of them became the standard way to talk about the Trinity. For example, he points out that we need to distinguish between the words we can use to describe God’s oneness and the words that describe God’s threeness. The problem with Modalism, he says, is that it

¹⁹ St. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 10.33. Greek: “Οὗτος οὖν μόνος καὶ κατὰ πάντων θεὸς λόγον πρωτοῦ ἐννοηθεὶς ἀπογεννᾷ, οὐ λόγον ὡς φωνήν, ἀλλ’ ἐνδιάθετον τοῦ παντὸς λογισμὸν. Τοῦτον μόνον ἐξ ὄντων ἐγέννα· τὸ γὰρ ὄν αὐτὸς ὁ πατήρ ἦν, ἐξ οὗ τὸ γεννηθέν.”

²⁰ St. Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, 10.33. Greek: “τούτου (δέ) ὁ Λόγος μόνος ἐξ αὐτοῦ· διό καὶ θεός, οὐσία ὑπάρχων θεοῦ. Ὁ δὲ κόσμος ἐξ οὐδενός· διὸ οὐ θεός.”

²¹ See Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 72.

²² Nor was it as unique or innovative as is often thought. Kyle Hughes writes that “the Montanists were perhaps not as innovative in their appeal to continued prophecy as often thought” and that this “challenges any neat account of the ‘decline’ of the experience of the Spirit or of the gifts of the Spirit” (*How the Spirit Became God: The Mosaic of Early Christian Pneumatology* [Cascade Books, 2020], 62). He cites J.E. Morgan-Wynne writing that “In ‘popular’ Christianity of the mid-second century the experience of the Holy Spirit was part of the life and discipleship of Christians. Far from playing a negligible role, the Spirit was an important ingredient in the life of the church” (*Holy Spirit and Religious Experience in Christian Literature ca. AD 90-200* [Paternoster, 2006], 169–70).



thinks it impossible to believe in one God unless it says that both Father and Son and Holy Spirit are one and the same: as though the one God were not all these things in this way also, that they are all of the one, namely by unity of substance, while none the less is guarded the mystery of that economy which disposes the unity into trinity, setting forth Father and Son and Spirit as three, three however not in quality but in sequence, not in substance but in aspect, not in power but in its manifestation, yet of one substance and one quality and one power, seeing it is one God from whom those sequences and aspects and manifestations are reckoned out in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.²³

This long sentence is a carefully worded and balanced attempt to do justice to both the “oneness” and the “threeness” of the Christian God. Tertullian insists that there is only one divine substance (*substantia*) and that this is why it is true to say that there is only one God. But he equally insists that this one God can have more than one aspect (*forma*), and manifestation (*specie*) without compromising his oneness. Tertullian also later uses the word “person” (*persona*) for the distinction, which later Christians chose as the best word to describe the threeness in God.²⁴

Still, all this does is give a list of words, some of which are one and some of which are three. To help people picture what he means, Tertullian offers some analogies drawn from nature. He says that the Son and the Spirit proceed from the Father the same way a tree proceeds from its root, or a river from its source, or the sun’s rays from the sun.²⁵ But the analogy he develops most is that of a kingdom with a single King.

Recall that Modalism was also called Monarchianism because it used the analogy of a kingdom to point out that the Universe is ruled by one King, God Almighty. By definition, a monarchy can only have one King. Tertullian agrees, but pushes the analogy further. When anyone uses the word “monarchy,” the word “indicates neither more nor less than a single and sole empire.” But does this rule out the possibility that the single monarch can have a son who rules under him in the same empire? Not at all! If “he whose the

²³ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 2. Square brackets removed. Latin: “possidere dum unicum deum non alias putat credendum quam si ipsum eundemque et patrem et filium et spiritum sanctum dicat: quasi non sic quoque unus sit omnia dum ex uno omnia, per substantia silicet unitatem, et nihilo minus custodiatur οἰκονομία sacramentum quae unitatem in trinitatem disponit, tres dirigens patrem et filium et spiritum, tres autem non statu sed gradu, nec substantia sed forma, nec potestate sed specie, unius autem substantiae et unius status et unius potestatis, quia unus deus ex quo et gradus isti et formae et species in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti depuntatur.” Note the use of a Greek word for “economy,” which shows that Tertullian is drawing on existing distinctions and language about the Godhead.

²⁴ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 7.

²⁵ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 8.

monarchy is has a son, it is not ipso facto divided, does not cease to be a monarchy, if the son also is assumed as partner in it.” In this situation there is no *rival* kingdom that could threaten to overthrow the monarchy. There is only a threat to the single rulership of a monarchy “when there is superimposed another kingship of its own character and its own quality, and consequently hostile, when another god is introduced to oppose the Creator.”²⁶ By the force of their own analogy, those who insist on the single monarchy of God should have no problem with the idea of God having a son, since this does not imply a second kingdom that stands in opposition to the first.

SUBORDINATIONISM

Tertullian’s analogy of a monarchy with a King and his Son or sons seems to neatly solve the problem. But how far can we push it? It implies that the Son and the Spirit are not equal with the Father, and rule in submission to him, just as a King’s son can be involved in ruling a kingdom only insofar as he submits to the King’s ultimate rule.

That is why a different kind of Monarchianism arose after Tertullian that was not Modalist. This kind of Monarchianism saw Son and Father as distinct, but believed that the Son was inferior to the Father. This position was called subordinationism, and it was not an organised movement but rather a tendency you can spot in various thinkers. Perhaps the one with the biggest influence on subsequent generations was the great theologian Origen.²⁷

ORIGEN

Born near the end of the second century in Alexandria, Origen was raised by Christian parents who taught him the Bible from an early age. When he was eighteen years old, his father was martyred during an outbreak of imperial persecution. According to Eusebius of Caesarea, Origen wanted to go with his father and turn himself in to the authorities to be martyred. But his mother hid all his clothes and he was too embarrassed to leave the house naked, so he had to stay safely at home.²⁸ In A.D. 231 he was ordained a priest, and in 250 a new wave of persecution led to him being imprisoned and tortured. He died a few years later as a result of his injuries. During his lifetime Origen ceaselessly studied both philosophy and theology, and wrote a vast quantity of books. After his death his writings became so controversial that many of them were destroyed, but his ideas continued to have an influence and many consider him to be the greatest theologian before the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325.

If you want to categorise all your theologians into “good guys” and “bad guys,” then Origen will give you a hard time. Origen was a man of many bold and innovative ideas. Some of these ideas were controversial or even dangerous, but others were groundbreaking and became crucial to the orthodox formulation of the Trinity. For example, Origen was the first person to take the idea that the Son was eternally with the Father, and join it to the idea that the Father begot the Son, to talk about Jesus as “eternally begotten” from the

²⁶ Tertullian, *Against Praxeas* 3. Latin: “monarchium nihil aliud significare scio quam singular et unicum imperium: non tamen praescribere monarchiam ideo quia unius sit eum cuius sit aut filium non habere. ... Si vero et filius fuerit ei cuius monarchia sit, non statim dividi eam et monarchiam esse designer si particeps eius adsumatur et filius. ... Eversio enim monarchiae illa est tibi intellegenda cum alia domination suae condicionis et propria status ac per hoc aemula superducitur, cum alius deus infertur adversus creatorem.”

²⁷ Not every Origen scholar agrees that Origen should be counted as a subordinationist. For example, Pui Him Ip writes that “what has frequently been called Origen’s ‘subordinationism’, namely, his hierarchical understanding of the Father-Son distinction, is better understood as his anti-Monarchianism. Origen’s tendency to stress the transcendence of the Father over the Son is more aptly seen, in his third-century context, as an attempt to counter the Monarchian identification of Father and Son” (Pui Him Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity Before Nicaea* [University of Notre Dame Press, 2022], 122). See also his article, ‘Origen’s Johannine Trinitarian Theology of Love’, *Modern Theology* 38, no. 2 (2022): 260–81.

²⁸ Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, trans. J.E.L. Oulton, Loeb Classical Library 265 (Harvard University Press, 1932), 2:11 (VI, 2).

Father. By this he meant that even though the Father begot the son, there was still never a time when the Son didn't exist.²⁹ This is a hugely important step for reasons that will become clearer later on. Similarly, Origen recognised one of the main difficulties in thinking about the Trinity is the tightrope balance between what you call "one" and what you call "three":

There are, for example, all the heretics who certainly announce the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit; but they do not announce well or faithfully. For either they wrongly separate the Son from the Father, when they say that the Father is of one nature and the Son is of another nature, or they wrongly confuse them, when they imagine either that God is composed of three or that he is merely referred to by three names.³⁰

You can see in this paragraph that Origen believes that Jesus has a divine nature just like the Father, and criticises anyone who suggests otherwise. Origen also believes that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not just three names for the same person, as the Modalists believed. By this point this was the accepted position among early Christians.

But there's a problem that neither Hippolytus nor Tertullian were able to solve. They said that the Son and the Spirit are God, as the Father is God. They also said that the Son and the Spirit are not the same person as the Father. But if both those things are true, what is it that makes the Son and the Spirit different to the Father? If you say "nothing" then you're back to Modalism because you've made them all the same thing. There must be *something* that distinguishes them, but what is it?

Origen's answer was that the Son is different from the Father the way a mirror is different from the object it reflects.³¹ He gets this idea from two Bible verses which call Jesus "the image [*eikon*] of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15) and "the reflection [*ἀπαύγασμα*] of God's glory and the exact imprint [*charakter*] of God's very being" (Hebrews 1:3). Thus these Bible verses convey the important insight that Jesus is like the Father in every way. A reflection is identical to its object in every detail. Nothing about it can possibly be different from the object.

Except one thing: the reflection borrows its reality from the object, and not vice versa. This metaphor is biblical and much about it is therefore good and right. But if you push it too far, it suggests that Jesus is inferior to the Father in the same way that a reflection is inferior to the reflected object. After all, the reflection isn't as *real* as the object: it borrows its reality from the object. Is this what these Bible verses meant to suggest? Origen thought so. He based his argument on John 14:28 where Jesus says "the Father is greater than I" and Mark 10:18 where Jesus asks the rich young ruler, "why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone."³² Origen concluded from this that "The Father exceeds the Savior as much (or even more) as the Savior himself and the Holy Spirit exceed the rest."³³

²⁹ See e.g. Origen, *Homilies on Jeremiah IX.4(4); On First Principles I.2.11*. For further references, see Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition* (Hymns Ancient & Modern Limited, 2009), Part II.B.3fn176; Ip, *Origen and the Emergence of Divine Simplicity Before Nicaea*, 10fn34. See also Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology*, Reprint (Oxford University Press, 2009), 22.

³⁰ Origen, *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans VIII.5.9*. Latin (at VIII.4): "Sunt enim nonnulli qui adnuntiant quidem et praedicant de Patre et Filio et Spiritu Sancto sed non sincere non integre; ut sunt omnes haeretici qui Patrem quidem et Filium et Spiritum Sanctum adnuntiant sed non bene neque fideliter adnuntiant. Aut enim male separant Filium a Patre ut alterius naturae Patrem alterius Filium dicant aut male confundunt ut uel ex tribus | compositum Deum el trinae tantummodo appellationis in eo esse uocabulum putent."

³¹ See, e.g. *Contra Celsum VIII.12; Commentary on the Gospel According to John XIII.153*.

³² Jesus says something similar in Matthew 19:17. In his commentary on that passage, Origen develops the idea of Jesus as an "image" of God. See Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew XV.10*. He also talks about Jesus as God's image in *On First Principles I.2.6* and I.2.12-13.

³³ Origen, *Commentary on the Gospel According to John XIII.151*. Greek: "ὑπερεχόμενον τοσοῦτον ἢ καὶ πλέον ἀπὸ τοῦ πατρὸς, ὅσω ὑπερέχει αὐτὸς καὶ τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα τῶν λοιπῶν."

ARIUS

Nobody coming after Origen was unaffected or uninfluenced by his ideas. But equally it was hard for anyone after Origen to hold on to all of his ideas at once since they led in so many different directions.³⁴ One direction was to say that Jesus was eternally begotten of the Father. But the other direction was to double down on Jesus' inferiority to the Father. This is the direction taken by a priest called Arius.

Around the same year Origen died, Arius was born in modern-day Libya. The bishop of Alexandria (conveniently named St. Alexander of Alexandria), appointed Arius a priest and gave him the job of preaching and expounding the Bible in a large town church. Arius was committed to defending the Christian tradition from all intrusions of false doctrine, especially those which the Church had already identified as dangerous.

Arius' concern to avoid false teaching was aroused when he found that his bishop, Alexander, was teaching Origen's idea that Jesus was "eternally begotten." This meant that even though Jesus came from the Father, he had nonetheless always existed for all eternity and there was never a moment before the Father had begotten him.³⁵ From Arius's perspective, this could mean one of three things all of which are unacceptable. Either (1) it is Modalism because it suggests that Jesus and God are the same person, or (2) it suggests that Jesus is a "part" of God or an "emanation" from God, or (3) it implies that there are two Gods and thus violates the very core of Jewish and Christian belief.³⁶ Therefore Arius concluded that we should abandon this talk of the Son as "eternally begotten."

To counter this, Arius drew on another of Origen's ideas – that the Father is superior to the Son – and pushed it to its logical conclusion. Like all early theologians, he was acutely aware of the huge chasm between created and uncreated. When it comes to the radical difference between creator and creation, you can't have intermediate levels: either something is created or it's uncreated. The Bible is clear that Jesus is begotten of the Father, therefore Jesus has the same origin as the rest of creation: the Father. If there is only one Creator and if everything else is created, and if God the Father is the only being without an origin, then Jesus, the Son, *must* be a created being, though the highest and greatest of all.³⁷

Arius firmly believed that this position was most faithful to the Bible. It is worth explaining why. Jesus is "the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created" (Colossians 1:15-16 ESV). Arius reasoned that if Jesus is the "firstborn of creation" (see also Romans 8:29) then that must mean Jesus was created first and then God created everything *else* through Jesus. Jesus is therefore the ultimate mediator between God and creation (see 1 Timothy 2:5), but he is on *this* side of the radical divide between creator and created.

Furthermore, Arius pointed to Bible verses which say that Jesus was "made" by God. Hebrews 3:2 states that Jesus "was faithful to the one who appointed him" – but the word "appointed" is a translation of the Greek

³⁴ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 83.

³⁵ Holmes, *The Quest for the Trinity*, 86.

³⁶ [For Arius,] it is inadmissible to say that God and his Son 'co-exist': God must pre-exist the Son. If not, we are faced with a whole range of unacceptable ideas – that the Son is part of God, or an emanation of God, or, worst of all, that he is, like God, self-subsistent. The Son exists by God's free will, brought into existence by him before all times and ages and existing stably and 'inalienably'. The logic of this position – which quite eludes Alexander – is simple: God alone is *anarchos*, and the Son has an *archē*. Since the Son is what he is, the firstborn and only-begotten, he cannot be made out of anything else (nothing but God pre-exists him); but he is not a portion of God, who is a simple, spiritual reality; and thus he must be made, like all creation, out of nothing (Williams, Arius, 97).

³⁷ Arius and his colleagues in Alexandria seem to want to insist on several things they consider essential to right faith in the Savior, if it is to represent Scripture and still be philosophically acceptable: he *existed alone with God*, as Son, before the material and temporal realms were created, since in fact he is also presented by Scripture as the agent of *their* creation; he *cannot be a part* of the one transcendent God, who is unique and has no parts; he is *brought forth* from God, not by some kind of material subdivision, or by emanation or "projection" (which was understood to be the model by which the "aeons" came into being in Valentinian and Manichean cosmogonies); but rather "by the *will* of God [the Son was] *created before times and before ages* and received life and being and glories from the Father" (Brian E. Daley, S.J., *God Visible: Patristic Christology Reconsidered* [Oxford University Press, 2018], 98).

poiesanti (ποιήσαντι) which more literally means “made.” The same Greek word appears in Acts 2:36 which says, “God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

You might be asking yourself how Arius can possibly explain all those Bible verses we saw earlier that explicitly call Jesus God. Arius is aware of them. But if you recall, Origen’s favourite way to talk about Jesus was to call him an “image” of God, which the Bible also does. Now an image of something can sometimes be referred to as the thing itself. For example, you might point to a painting of Queen Elizabeth and say “that’s Queen Elizabeth,” or to a photo of your mother and say “that’s my mother.” Obviously the painting and the photo are not the person themselves, but we nevertheless talk as if the photo or the painting is the person themselves simply because they *represent* that person. This is what Jesus means, according to this logic, when he says “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). He doesn’t mean that he *is* the Father, only that he is a perfect photograph of the Father. But a photo must come into existence after the thing it is a photo of.³⁸

Arius’s most famous expression to summarize his position is “there was when he was not” (Greek: *ēn pote hote ouk ēn*) – meaning that there was a time when Jesus did not exist. This deliberately contradicts Origen’s idea that the Son is eternally begotten.³⁹



THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

When bishop Alexander found out about Arius’s views, he was horrified and tried to silence him. When that didn’t work, he deposed Arius from the priesthood. But although Arius was only a lowly priest, he had supporters who were bishops of other regions of the Roman empire. He and his supporters ran to them for help, and so began a feud among Christians that grew and threatened to tear the Church apart.

But by that time the Roman empire had changed. It was led by an emperor who called himself a Christian, Constantine, and who really wanted to keep his empire united. When he found out that the Arian

³⁸ On Arius’ use of the metaphor of Jesus as an ‘image,’ see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 55.

³⁹ For some of Arius’s surviving writings, see Mark DelCogliano, ‘Arius, Letters to Eusebius of Nicomedia and Alexander of Alexandria’, in *The Cambridge Edition of Early Christian Writings: Volume 1: God*, ed. Andrew Radde-Gallwitz (Cambridge University Press, 2017). For the Greek text, see Hans-Georg Opitz, *Athanasius Werke. Dritter Band, Dokumente zur Geschichte des arianischen Streites* (de Gruyter, 1934).

controversy was in danger of dividing Christianity in two, he intervened. He wrote letters to the key protagonists and begged them to set aside their differences for the sake of a united church. Surely these abstract theological disagreements should not undermine the unity of the Church? In other words, can't you all agree to disagree and live in harmony together?

For better or worse, nobody on either side of the debate thought that it was the kind of issue that permitted a diversity of opinions. Constantine's letter was ignored and the tumult continued. So Constantine had another go at restoring unity. In A.D. 325 he summoned all the bishops to the first general council of the Church. Most sources suggest that 318 bishops showed up.

The council debated many things, but at the top of its agenda was to settle the question of how to understand who Jesus is. After a long debate, they voted against Arius's position with a majority of 313 to 5. Together, they wrote a creed that all Christians should commit to if they wanted to remain within the Church. The most important line in the creed stated that Jesus is "one in being" or "consubstantial" with the Father (Greek *homoousios*). This line firmly ruled out all subordinationist theologies by insisting that the Son is completely equal to the Father and not inferior in any way.

What about those Bible verses which suggest that the Son is lesser than the Father, the ones that led to subordinationist ideas? The clearest explanation comes from a letter written by Pope Leo I about a hundred years later. Leo notes that there are two Bible verses which seem to contradict each other. But these are not verses in different books of the Bible or written by different people. They are both verses in the Gospel of John, separated by only a few chapters. How, then, do we reconcile them? Leo suggests that in one case Jesus is speaking about his divine nature, and in the other he is speaking about his human nature:

To say "I and the Father are one" [John 10:30] and to say "The Father is greater than I" [John 14:28] is not by any means of the same nature. For although in the Lord Jesus Christ the Person of God and of man is one, nevertheless, it is due to the one [nature] that injury is common to both, [and] due to the other that glory is common. For from what is ours he has humanity, which is less than the Father; from the Father, his divinity, which is equal to the Father.⁴⁰

In other words, Jesus *as a human being* is inferior to the Father, but Jesus *as God* is equal to the Father.

The Nicene Creed drew a clear line in the sand and Arius and his followers were on the wrong side of it. But this did not put a stop to the conversation. On the contrary, the way the Creed described the Father and the Son as *homoousios* (one in being) sounded to many people to be suspiciously Modalist because it suggested that there is no difference at all between the Father and the Son. Was this a new and insidious form of Modalism that had wormed its way into the Church?

DEFENDERS OF NICAEA

St. Alexander of Alexandria

Arius's bishop, St. Alexander, did not think so. He firmly believed that the Nicene Creed was the best way to preserve and explain what Christians had always believed. Jesus is as much God as the Father is, but this does not make Jesus the same *person* as the Father. When Jesus says "I and the Father are one," Alexander

⁴⁰ Pope St. Leo I, *Letter 28*. Latin: "Non eusdem naturae est dicere: 'Ego et Pater unum sumus' et dicere: 'Pater maior me est'. Quamvis enim in Domino Iesu Christo Dei et hominis una persona sit, aliud tamen est, unde in utroque communis est contumelia, aliud, unde communis est gloria. De nostro enim illi est minor Patre humanitas, de Patre illi aequalis cum Patre divinitas."

writes, he is “not calling himself the Father or explaining that the two natures ... are one, but saying that the Son is of his very nature disposed to accurately preserve his likeness to his Father.”⁴¹

Alexander wanted to draw attention to another verse in the Gospel of John, which says that Jesus is “in the Father’s bosom” (John 1:18, my translation⁴²). According to Alexander, this verse “shows that the two things, the Father and the Son, are inseparable from one another.”⁴³ Notice how he uses this verse to steer a careful path between Modalism and belief in two Gods by emphasising *both* the ways that Father and Son are one *and* the ways that they’re two.

Alexander insists that there’s only *one* thing that the Son doesn’t have that the Father does, and that is the quality of being unbegotten, that is, of having no origin.⁴⁴ But this doesn’t make the Son inferior to the Father because it doesn’t mean that Jesus came into existence at some point in time. Alexander picks up an argument we first saw in Irenaeus to explain why Jesus had always existed. In 1 Corinthians 1:24 the apostle Paul says that Jesus is “the wisdom of God.” Was there a time when God was not wise? Obviously not. But if God was always wise, and if Jesus is God’s wisdom, then Jesus must have existed from all eternity. Alexander adds to this the fact that the Gospel of John calls Jesus the divine Reason (*logos*) and it makes no sense to say that there was a time when God did not have reason. When Arius and his followers say that there was a time when Jesus didn’t exist, it is the same as saying that there was a time when God was neither wise nor reasonable:

And how, if the Son is the Word or Wisdom and Reason of God, was there a time when He was not? It is all one as if they said, that there was a time when God was without reason and wisdom.⁴⁵

In other words, Alexander is keen to defend Origen’s idea that Jesus is “eternally begotten.”⁴⁶ If Jesus was begotten at some point in time, then there would be a time when the Father was not the Father, and that doesn’t make any sense!

On the other hand, you might have some trouble imagining how Jesus could be begotten by the Father and yet have always existed alongside the Father. Surely if God begot Jesus, then that is an action in time and implies that there was a time when God hadn’t begotten Jesus? Not necessarily. This is how C.S. Lewis explained it in the twentieth century:

Imagine two books lying on a table one on top of the other. Obviously the bottom book is keeping the other one up — supporting it. It is because of the underneath book that the top one is resting, say, two inches from the surface of the table instead of touching the table. Let us call the underneath book A and the top one B. The position of A is causing the position of B. That is clear? Now let us imagine — it could not really happen, of course, but it will do for an illustration — let us imagine that both books have been in that position for ever and ever. In that case B’s position would always have been resulting from A’s position. But all the same, A’s position would not have

⁴¹ St. Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Constantinople* 38. Translation modified. Greek: “οὐ πατέρα ἑαυτὸν ἀναγορεύων οὐδὲ τὰς τῇ ὑποστάσει δύο φύσεις μίαν εἶναι σαφηνίζων, ἀλλ’ ὅτι τὴν πατρικὴν ἐμφέρειαν ἀκριβῶς πέφυκε σώζειν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ πατρὸς.”

⁴² Greek: “μονογενὴς θεὸς ὁ ὢν εἰς τὸν κόλπον τοῦ πατρὸς.” The ESV reads “the only God, who is at the Father’s side”; the NRSV reads “God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart”; the NIV reads: “the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in the closest relationship with the Father.”

⁴³ St. Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Constantinople* 15. Greek: “ἀλλήλων ἀχώριστα πράγματα δύο, τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱόν.”

⁴⁴ St. Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Constantinople* 47.

⁴⁵ St. Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to all Bishops* 3. Greek: “πῶς δὲ, εἰ λόγος καὶ σοφία ἐστὶ τοῦ θεοῦ ὁ υἱός, ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν; ἴσον γὰρ ἐστὶ αὐτοὺς λέγειν ἄλογον καὶ ἄσοφον ποτε τὸν θεόν.”

⁴⁶ St. Alexander of Alexandria, *Letter to Alexander of Constantinople* 52.

existed before B's position. In other words the result does not come *after* the cause. Of course, results usually do: you eat the cucumber first and have the indigestion afterwards. But it is not so with all causes, and results.⁴⁷

Although in normal life begetting is the kind of action with a “before” and an “after,” Lewis points out that it doesn't have to be the case necessarily and always. This makes it conceivable what Alexander is arguing for: that God can have begotten Jesus without implying that Jesus started to exist at a point in time.

ST. ATHANASIUS

But Alexander was already old by the time of the Council of Nicaea. Soon after he died and handed the care of the Alexandrian church to one of the greatest Trinitarian theologians in history: St. Athanasius.⁴⁸ At the tender age of thirty, Athanasius had attended the Council of Nicaea as Alexander's secretary. Now, at age thirty-three, he shouldered the great responsibility of bishop in Alexander's place.

Athanasius has done so much for the Christian understanding of the Trinity - more than simply defending the Nicene Creed. He also fought against people who denied that the Holy Spirit was a member of the Trinity, resolved a tough dispute about whether God is one or three substances (*hypostases*), and above all pointed to our own human inability to grasp or comprehend God as the basis for everything, leading the Church in humility as it grappled with the most profound questions anyone can ask.

USE OF NON-SCRIPTURAL LANGUAGE IN THE CREED

When Athanasius became bishop, opponents of the Nicene Creed⁴⁹ were objecting that it contained phrases that did not come from the Bible, which meant foreign philosophical ideas were being injected into the heart of the Christian faith. Nowhere does the New Testament talk about Jesus as “one in being” (*homoousios*) with the Father. What right do we have to go beyond the language that scripture uses, they demanded?

In response, Athanasius first points out that Arius's own favourite phrase, “there was when he was not,” is also not in the Bible.⁵⁰ But he also admits that you cannot completely rule out Arius's position on the basis of scripture alone.⁵¹ Arius knew the Bible extremely well and used biblical text to support all his arguments. Both the Arian and the Nicene theologies are scripturally defensible (which does not mean both are *equally* scripturally defensible).⁵² But both theologies - in fact every possible Christian position - has to be explained using words and concepts that do not come from the Bible itself.⁵³ This is how all interpretation works. Whenever you read or hear anything, you make sense of it using your own concepts and worldview which you got from your own culture and time. Take for example the sentence, “God is our Father.” The only

⁴⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Harper Collins, 2009), 93.

⁴⁸ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (Routledge, 2004), 1.

⁴⁹ Most scholars agree that it's unfair to call all the opponents of the Nicene Creed “Arians” as if they looked to Arius as their inspiration and agreed with him on everything. They did neither. But I will sometimes still use this language because it's simpler than introducing the reader to the distinctive theological positions of Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia, and Asterius, along with the ways they disagreed with Arius. What matters for this narrative is that they all opposed Nicaea.

⁵⁰ St. Athanasius, *De Decretis* 3.12.

⁵¹ ‘When asked why the council had adopted a non-biblical way to respond to Arius, St. Athanasius answered that Arius's position could not be surely excluded by appeal to Scripture, since he could find a way of interpreting the crucial biblical passages in accord with the idea that the Word is created’ (Guy Mansini, *Fundamental Theology* [CUA Press, 2018], 121–22).

⁵² “The heart of Athanasius's response is that recourse to non-scriptural language is sometimes necessary to stabilize and fix the “sense of Scripture” in the face of a conflict of interpretations” (Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* [Baker Academic, 2011], 127).

⁵³ As James Barr says, “The use of concepts and categories taken from ‘without’ the Bible is both natural and necessary” (cited in Anthony C. Thiselton, *Two Horizons: New Testament Hermeneutics and Philosophical Description* [Eerdmans, 1980], 9).

possible way to understand that sentence is if you already have a concept of what the words “God” and “Father” mean. Or take the sentence “Jesus was born of a virgin.” Unless you already know what being born is and what a virgin is, you can’t understand the significance of that claim. The meaning of any sentence is a combined product of the author’s intention and the reader’s time and context.⁵⁴ The Bible is a lot bigger than a single sentence, but the fundamental principle remains the same. You can only help people understand the Bible’s message by using concepts they are already familiar with, which means they come from their own time and context. Otherwise you are not interpreting but simply transliterating the same words and sounds without understanding.⁵⁵

In short, every debate and disagreement between Christians is at bottom about the right way to *interpret* scripture. The debate between supporters of Arius and supporters of the Nicene Creed is no exception.⁵⁶ Athanasius argued that the Nicene Creed is the right interpretation of scripture. What it claims is logically entailed by the whole Bible even if it uses words that cannot be found in any one verse.⁵⁷ What the bishops of the Council did, Athanasius said, was to “collect the sense of the Scriptures, and to re-say and re-write what they had said before, more distinctly still, namely, that the Son is ‘one in essence’ with the Father.”⁵⁸

JESUS AS WISDOM IN PROVERBS 8

So far, so good. But Athanasius has only *claimed* that scripture supports the Nicene position. Now he has to *show* it, and the best way to do that is to look at all the Bible verses that most strongly support Arius’s position and show how they can be interpreted another way. One in particular was most hotly debated not only by Arius and Athanasius but by almost every theologian in the early Church on both sides of the debate.

Recall that the apostle Paul had called Jesus the “Wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:24). The early Christians took that to mean that anything the Old Testament said about wisdom could be applied to Jesus.⁵⁹ Arius and others were quick to point out that in Proverbs 8:22 the character of Wisdom says “The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago.”⁶⁰ They saw this as one of the clearest proofs that Jesus had a beginning and was created.

Athanasius responds to this by saying that *as a man*, Jesus was created, even though *as the Son of God* he was begotten: “it is true to say that the Son was created too, but this took place when He became man; for

⁵⁴ For more on this, see Paul Ricœur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Texas Christian University Press, 1976); *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, ed. and trans. John Thompson (Cambridge University Press, 1981). For an explanation of how these principles apply to doctrinal developments such as the Trinity, see Barnabas Aspray, “Scripture Grows with Its Readers”: Doctrinal Development from a Ricœurian Perspective’, *Modern Theology* 35, no. 4 (2019): 746–59.

⁵⁵ Bernard Lonergan points out that to every text is, at its most basic level, ‘just a series of signs. Anything over and above a re-issue of the same signs in the same order will be mediated by the experience, intelligence, and judgment of the interpreter’ (Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* [Herder and Herder, 1972], 157).

⁵⁶ “Different accounts ... amounted to rival interpretations of the same biblical data” (Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicæa*, 115).

⁵⁷ “The decision had to be made either simply to repeat the old formulas or to go farther linguistically. These three additions introduce a new and unfamiliar note into the Creed, as these are philosophical terms (substance, οὐσία; consubstantial, ὁμοούσιον). This is consciously moving beyond biblical language. With the decision to admit even nonbiblical expressions, a step was taken that went far beyond the situation of the moment. A strict biblicism would have slammed the door on any theological development, and theology would henceforth not only have been declaring the same things, but also declaring them in the same terms. Instead of safeguarding the essential matter, it would have been holding fast to formulae’ (Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, *God Sent His Son: A Contemporary Christology*, trans. Henry Taylor [Ignatius Press, 2010], 83).

⁵⁸ St. Athanasius, *De Decretis* 5.20. Greek: “συναγαγεῖν ἐκ τῶν γραφῶν τὴν διάνοιαν καὶ, ἅπερ πρότερον ἔλεγον, ταῦτα πάλιν λευκότερον εἰπεῖν καὶ γράψαι, ὁμοούσιον εἶναι τῷ πατρὶ τὸν υἱόν.”

⁵⁹ Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicæa*, 122.

⁶⁰ The Hebrew word קָנָה is not the typical verb meaning “to create” and has also been translated “possessed” rather than “created.” But in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament), which the fourth century Christians were using, the Greek word is κτίζω which is the standard word meaning “to create.”

creation belongs to man.”⁶¹ Lying behind this is the idea that when God became human in Jesus he took on characteristics that are not Godlike: being born, suffering, dying, etc. But none of these tell us anything about Jesus in his divine nature: all they do is prove that in Jesus, God really did become fully and completely human. So whenever the Bible says anything about Jesus that is not true of God, it must be talking about his human nature, and this includes any Bible verse that says Jesus was created.

Then, on the offensive, Athanasius shows that to call Jesus “Son” implies that he was not created. Why is this? Recall the distinction Hippolytus made between creating and begetting. Athanasius builds on the same idea and points out that to be a son of anyone implies being begotten by them:

For what man of right understanding does not perceive, that what are created and made are external to the maker; but the Son, as the foregoing argument has shown, exists not externally, but from the Father who begot Him? For man too both builds a house and begets a son, and no one would reverse things, and say that the house or the ship were begotten by the builder, but the son was created and made by him; nor again that the house was an image of the maker, but the son unlike him who begot him; but rather he will confess that the son is an image of the father, but the house a work of art, unless his mind is disordered.⁶²

Athanasius argues that it is self-evident: nobody refers to sons or daughters as “created” or “made” by their parents. Similarly nobody refers to a house as “begotten” by the builder. This means, Athanasius drives home, that every Bible verse which refers to Jesus as the “Son” shows that he is not created but begotten. Moreover, to call God “Creator” does not imply that creation always existed, but by contrast, to call God “Father” *does* imply that the Son always existed. This is because “someone can be and be called a maker even when there is no work made as yet. But one cannot be called and cannot be a father unless a son exists.”⁶³ Thus to call Jesus “Son,” as scripture does, not only implies that Jesus is divine but also that he is eternally begotten, and that there was never a moment when he did not exist. Scripture, then, is more consistently interpreted in a way that supports the Nicene Creed.

THE DIVINITY OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

Yet the Nicene Creed did not settle all disagreements. Even for Christians who accepted it, there were different ways of interpreting what it said. For example, it was very brief about the Holy Spirit. It only said “we believe in the Holy Spirit” and nothing more. This meant that you could confess the Creed and still deny the Trinity, and this is exactly what happened three decades after the Council. A group of Christians in Egypt started denying that the Holy Spirit is God.⁶⁴ This group eventually became called the “Pneumatomachians” which means the “ones who fight against the Spirit.” One of their arguments was that if the Spirit is from the Father, then how is he different from the Son? And if he’s not different to the Son, then are there two Sons who are brothers? But if the Father has two Sons, then Jesus is not the

⁶¹ Athanasius, *De Decretis* 3.14. Greek: “καὶ γὰρ καὶ κτίζεσθαι λέγεται, ἀλλ’ ὅτε γέγονεν ἄνθρωπος· ἀνθρώπου γὰρ ἴδιον τοῦτο.”

⁶² Athanasius, *De Decretis* 3.13. English translation updated to conform to contemporary spelling. Greek: “τίς γὰρ οὐ συνορᾷ διάνοιαν ἔχων ὁρθῆν, ὅτι τὰ μὲν κτιζόμενα καὶ ποιούμενα ἔξωθεν τοῦ ποιούντος, ὁ δὲ υἱός, ὡς ἐν τοῖς ἐμπροσθεν ἔδειξεν ὁ λόγος, οὐκ ἔξωθεν ἀλλ’ ἐκ τοῦ γεννῶντος πατρὸς ὑπάρχει; καὶ γὰρ ἄνθρωπος κτίζει μὲν οἰκίαν, γεννᾷ δὲ υἱόν, καὶ οὐκ ἂν τις ἀναστρέφων εἴποι τὴν μὲν οἰκίαν καὶ τὴν αὐτὴν γεννᾶσθαι παρὰ τοῦ κατασκευάζοντος, τὸν δὲ υἱὸν κτίζεσθαι καὶ ποιεῖσθαι παρὰ τοῦ αὐτοῦ, οὐδὲ πάλιν τὴν μὲν οἰκίαν εἰκόνα τοῦ κτιζόντος, τὸν δὲ υἱὸν ἀνόμοιον τοῦ γεννῶντος. ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον τὸν μὲν υἱὸν εἰκόνα τοῦ πατρὸς ὁμολογήσει, τὴν δὲ οἰκίαν τέχνης εἶναι δημιουργήμα, εἰ μὴ τις ἄρα τὴν διάνοιαν νοσοῖ καὶ τὰς φρένας παρεξέστηκώς τυγχάνοι.”

⁶³ St. Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* 1.29.

⁶⁴ See Amy Brown Hughes and Shawn J. Wilhite, “The Beginnings of a Pro-Nicene Trinitarian Vision”, in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God*, ed. Matthew Barrett (InterVarsity Press, 2024).

“only-begotten” any more.⁶⁵ Hence it makes more sense to say that the Spirit is not divine, but a creature - the greatest of the angels.

In response to this, Athanasius says that the Spirit is not only of the Father but also of the Son. The apostle Paul writes that “God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts” (Galatians 4:6),⁶⁶ and the Spirit is called the “Spirit of Christ” by both the apostles Paul and Peter (Romans 8:9; 1 Peter 1:11). Thus “if the Son is proper to the Father’s substance because he is from the Father, the Spirit who is said to be from God must be proper to the Son in substance.” For example, Jesus is the Truth (John 14:6), and the Spirit is the “Spirit of Truth” (John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13; 1 John 4:6) - logically, then the Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus. This means that the Son and the Spirit do not have the same relationship to the Father, because the Spirit also relates to the Son. The Father sends the Son into the world, but both the Father and the Son send the Spirit (John 14:16 says that the Father sends the Spirit and John 15:26 says that Jesus sends the Spirit).⁶⁷ Jesus breathed on the disciples to give them the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). Consequently, Athanasius says “When the Father sends the Spirit, it is the Son who breathes upon his disciples and gives the Spirit to them.”⁶⁸

But more importantly, Athanasius says, the Spirit is not a Son because nowhere in the Bible is the Spirit ever called a Son,⁶⁹ and the Bible is the only guide we have to understanding the relations of the Trinity.

But this line of thinking led inevitably to another question from the Pneumatomachians: “If the Spirit is of the Son, then is the Father the grandfather of the Spirit?”⁷⁰ This was not a sincere question. They were trying to make the Trinity look silly and convoluted in order to discredit it, and Athanasius knew that. He starts by criticizing the question as trying to penetrate mysteries that created minds cannot grasp. It’s not down to us to name uncreated realities that surpass human understanding. Such a question

is scrutinizing the inscrutable and disregarding the Apostle when he says: “*For who has known the mind of the Lord? Who has been his counselor?*” (Romans 11:34) In addition, who would dare to rename what God has named? Let him name what belongs to the created order! Let our opponents tell us, when the created order came into existence by one and the same command, why one thing is the sun, and another thing the heaven, the earth, the sea, and air?⁷¹

But Athanasius also knew that he needed to explain why we can’t call the Father a grandfather. He does this by pointing to the fundamental difference between human fatherhood and divine Fatherhood. Human relationships are all relative to each other and thus changeable. Every human father also *has* a father and thus *is* also a son: “the same man becomes the father of a son while being the son of another; and a son, while being the son of a father, can himself become the father of another.”⁷²

⁶⁵ Athanasius reproduces this objection in *Letters to Serapion* 1.15.1-2.

⁶⁶ Athanasius makes this point in *Letters to Serapion* 1.25.4.

⁶⁷ This same argument is made in Didymus the Blind, *On the Holy Spirit* 114, 117.

⁶⁸ St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 3.3.5-6. Greek: “ἀμέλει »τοῦ πατρὸς πέμποντος τὸ πνεῦμα«, ὁ υἱὸς »ἐμφυσῶν« διδῶσιν αὐτὸ τοῖς μαθηταῖς.”

⁶⁹ “He is not called a son in the scriptures, but Spirit of God” (St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 1.25.2). Greek: “μὴ υἱὸς ἐλέχθη ἐν ταῖς γραφαῖς, ἀλλὰ πνεῦμα τοῦ Θεοῦ.”

⁷⁰ Quoted in St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 1.15.2. Greek: “εἰ δὲ τοῦ υἱοῦ ἐστὶ τὸ πνεῦμα, οὐκοῦν ἀππὸς ἐστὶν ὁ πατὴρ τοῦ πνεύματος.”

⁷¹ St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 3.4.3. Greek: “μαίνονται ἂν ὁ τοιοῦτος ἐρευνῶν τὰ ἀνερευνήτα, καὶ παρακινῶν τοὺς ἀποστόλους λέγοντος· τίς γὰρ ἔγνω νοῦν κυρίου; ἢ τίς σύμβουλος αὐτοῦ ἐγένετο; ἄλλως τε ἂ ὁ Θεὸς ὠνόμασε, τίς μετονομάσαι τολμήσει; ἐπεὶ εἰς τὰ τῆς κτίσεως ἐπιχορηγέτω. εἰπάτωσαν, ἐπειδὴ ἡ κτίσις τῷ αὐτῷ νεύματι γέγονε, διὰ τί ὁ μὲν ἥλιος, ὁ δὲ οὐρανὸς καὶ ἡ γῆ καὶ ἡ θάλασσα καὶ ἄλλοι;”

⁷² St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 3.6.5. Greek: “οὐκ ἔστιν ὁ πατὴρ ἀεὶ πατὴρ οὐδὲ ὁ υἱὸς ἀεὶ υἱός. ὁ γὰρ αὐτὸς πατὴρ μὲν υἱοῦ γίνεται, αὐτὸς δὲ ἐτέρου γέγονεν υἱὸς καὶ ὁ υἱὸς πατρὸς ὣν υἱὸς ἄλλου γίνεται πατὴρ..”

But this is not at all the way things work in the uncreated realm of eternal realities. God the Father has no father and thus is not the son of anyone. Neither can the Son become the son of anyone. Athanasius puts it this way. In God,

the Father is not from a father; accordingly, he does not beget someone who will become the father of another. Nor is the Son a part of the Father; accordingly, he is not something begotten in order to beget a son. Hence in the case of the divinity alone ... the Father is and is said to be always Father and that the Son is and is said to be always Son. And the Holy Spirit is always Holy Spirit. And we have come to believe that he is of God and that he is given from the Father through the Son.⁷³

Thus he concludes:

Each of the above mentioned names [Father, Son, Holy Spirit] has its own distinct meaning. The Son is the offspring proper to the substance and the nature of the Father: this is what the name signifies. The Spirit, who is said to be of God and is in God, is foreign neither to the nature of the Son nor to the divinity of the Father.⁷⁴

Athanasius also provided many other arguments for the divinity of the Holy Spirit, but these will be covered in a separate video. Here we have focused on the ones that have to do with how the Spirit relates to the Father and the Son.

Athanasius helped to clarify why and how the Holy Spirit belongs to the Trinity. But in order to safeguard Athanasius's patient explanations, they needed to be added to the Creed that all Christians hold to. That is why, at the next Ecumenical Council in A.D. 381, the bishops added a lot more detail about the Holy Spirit. The Creed was updated to say that the Spirit is "the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets."

ONE OR THREE HYPOSTASES?

Athanasius' arguments in favour of the Trinity were extremely influential and successful. But it was not enough to defend the Nicene Creed. The problem remained as to how the three persons of the Trinity could be distinct without undermining the oneness of God. What was needed was to develop the right language to express both the threeness and the oneness, avoiding polytheism on the one side and Modalism on the other.

This language was not easy to find. Some might think that this was simply because the Trinity is an illogical doctrine from the start. But there is another explanation. When Jesus had been born, something completely new had entered history, and the philosophical concepts and terms available beforehand could not do justice to it. The early Church literally had to give new meanings to words to make sense of what God had revealed in Jesus through the Holy Spirit. Three Greek words in particular became crucially important: *ousia*, *hypostasis*, and *prosopon*. These words all had normal everyday meanings before they were given precise theological meanings by the Trinitarian debates. *Prosopon* originally meant "face" or "mask" referring to the

⁷³ St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 3.6.6. Greek: "ὁ γοῦν πατήρ οὐκ ἐκ πατρὸς ἐστὶ· διὸ οὐδὲ γεννᾷ τὸν γενησόμενον ἑτέρου πατέρα· οὐδὲ ὁ υἱὸς μέρος ἐστὶ τοῦ πατρὸς, διὸ οὐδὲ γέννημά ἐστιν εἰς τὸ γεννᾶν υἱόν. ὅθεν ἐπὶ τῆς θεότητος μόνης ... ὁ πατήρ ἀεὶ πατήρ καὶ τὸ υἱὸς ἀεὶ υἱὸς εἶναι· τε καὶ λέγεσθαι· καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα δὲ τὸ ἅγιον ἀεὶ πνεῦμα ἅγιόν ἐστι· καὶ τοῦτο τοῦ θεοῦ εἶναι καὶ παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς δι' υἱοῦ διδοσθαι πεπιστεύκαμεν."

⁷⁴ St. Athanasius, *Letters to Serapion* 3.3-5-6. Greek: "μᾶλλον ἕκαστον τῶν σημαινόμενων ἔχει τὴν ἰδίαν γνώσιν. καὶ γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς ἴδιον τῆς οὐσίας καὶ τῆς φύσεως τοῦ πατρὸς ἐστὶ γέννημα, καὶ τοῦτο ἔχει τὸ σημαινόμενον. καὶ τὸ πνεῦμα δὲ λεγόμενον τοῦ θεοῦ καὶ ἐν αὐτῷ ὄν, οὐ ξένον ἐστὶ τῆς τοῦ υἱοῦ φύσεως οὔτε τῆς τοῦ πατρὸς θεότητος."

masks used in Greek theatre. *Ousia* and *hypostasis* both meant “being” or “substance” and were often used interchangeably.⁷⁵

A few decades after the Council of Nicaea (A.D. 361), Athanasius became embroiled in a controversy in Antioch over whether God is one *hypostasis* or three. The bishop Paulinus claimed that God is only one *hypostasis* because three *hypostases* would mean that there are three Gods. But the bishop Melitius insisted that the Trinity is three *hypostases* because to say there is only one *hypostasis* would entail Modalism.⁷⁶ Both had a point, but they were at an impasse.

Technically Paulinus was more faithful to the Nicene Creed. The version written in A.D. 325 contained a line at the end which condemned all those “who say that the Son of God may be of a different *hypostasis*.”⁷⁷ The Nicene Creed was so concerned to rule out subordinationism that it used both *ousia* and *hypostasis* to refer to the oneness of God. This didn’t leave enough terms available for describing what makes Father, Son, and Holy Spirit distinct.⁷⁸ That is why so many worried that the Nicene Creed did not protect enough against Modalism, as was already discussed. Something more needed to be done.

Athanasius had once referred to the Trinity as three *hypostases* twenty-five years earlier in a sermon.⁷⁹ But normally he talked about God as being one *hypostasis*. This shows that even for him the word could still be used in a way that was not condemned by the Nicene Creed. It was still a word with many meanings. This was partly because there was one place in the New Testament which suggests that Jesus and the Father are different *hypostases*. Hebrews 1:2 calls Jesus the “exact imprint of God’s *hypostasis*” which implies both that Jesus’s *hypostasis* is identical to God’s and that it is not the same *hypostasis*. If that is confusing, it’s because in ordinary language we can mean one of two things when we say that two objects are “the same.” For example, if I tell you “we have the same mother!” it doesn’t mean what it does when I say “we’re wearing the same shirt!” In the first case I mean that there is one woman who is mother to both of us. But in the second case I don’t mean there is one shirt that we’re both wearing at the same time. I mean that my shirt and your shirt are so exactly alike that if you swapped them over nobody would ever be able to tell.⁸⁰ Hebrews 1 states that Jesus is the same as the Father in that second sense, but the verse also logically implies that there are two *hypostases*. There have to be two *hypostases* or else you can’t say that the Son’s *hypostasis* is the same as the Father’s.

To settle the dispute between Paulinus and Melitius, Athanasius called a local council in Alexandria where he was bishop. The results of this council are written in a letter to the church in Antioch.⁸¹ Under Athanasius’s governance, the council had decided to be generous to both sides of the debate. Both could be allowed to use the word *hypostasis* the way they chose, as long as they were clear that what they meant by it was in line with the Nicene Creed and against Arius. The letter puts it this way:

⁷⁵ “Neither the council fathers of Nicaea nor Athanasius himself were working with any determinate technical sense of *ousia* or *homoousios*” (Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 128).

⁷⁶ Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea*, 26.

⁷⁷ Taken from Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, 51. Greek: “Τὸν δὲ λέγοντας, ... Ἐξ ἑτέρως ὑποστάσεως.”

⁷⁸ “What motivated orthodox theologians to advocate formulating trinitarian doctrine in terms of three hypostases, [was] the realization that using all the terms that can convey a sense of objective reality - i.e. hypostasis and ousia - to denote the common being of the Father and the Son amounted to leaving the door open for modalists to claim that they were in full agreement with the dogmatic definitions of the Church” (Juan Argento, *Ousia and Hypostasis from the Philosophers to the Councils*, 31 March 2018).

⁷⁹ “For the fact of those venerable living creatures (cf. Isaiah 6; Revelation 4:8) offering their praises three times, saying ‘Holy, Holy, Holy’, proves that the Three *hypostases* are perfect, just as in saying ‘Lord’, they declare the One *ousia*” (St. Athanasius, *In Illud Omnia* 6). Translation modified. Greek: “Τὸ γὰρ τρίτον τὰ τίμια ζῶα ταῦτα προσφέρειν τὴν δοξολογίαν Ἅγιος, ἅγιος, ἅγιος λέγοντα, τὰς τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις τελείας δεικνύοντα ἐστίν, ὡς καὶ ἐν τῷ λέγειν τὸ, Κύριος, τὴν μίαν οὐσίαν δηλοῦσιν.”

⁸⁰ For more on the difference between the two meanings of “the same,” see Paul Ricœur’s discussion of *idem* identity and *ipse* identity in *Oneself as Another*, trans. Kathleen Blamey (University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁸¹ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 174.

As to those whom some were blaming for speaking of three hypostases, on the ground that the phrase is unscriptural and therefore suspicious, we thought it right indeed to require nothing beyond the confession of Nicaea, but on account of the contention we made enquiry of them, whether they meant, like the Arian madmen, hypostases foreign and strange, and alien in essence from one another, and that each hypostasis was divided apart by itself, as is the case with creatures in general and in particular with those begotten of men, or like different substances, such as gold, silver, or brass; — or whether, like other heretics, they meant three Beginnings and three Gods, by speaking of three hypostases.

They assured us in reply that they neither meant this nor had ever held it. But upon our asking them “what then do you mean by it, or why do you use such expressions?” they replied, Because they believed in a Holy Trinity, not a trinity in name only, but existing and subsisting in truth, “both a Father truly existing and subsisting, and a Son truly substantial and subsisting, and a Holy Spirit subsisting and really existing do we acknowledge,” and that neither had they said there were three Gods or three beginnings, nor would they at all tolerate such as said or held so, but that they acknowledged a Holy Trinity but One Godhead, and one Beginning, and that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, as the fathers said; while the Holy Spirit is not a creature, nor external, but proper to and inseparable from the Father and the Son.

Having accepted then these men's interpretation and defence of their language, we made enquiry of those blamed by them for speaking of one hypostasis, whether they use the expression in the sense of Sabellius, to the negation of the Son and the Holy Spirit.... But they in their turn assured us that they neither meant this nor had ever held it, but “we use the word hypostasis thinking it the same thing to say hypostasis or ousia;” “But we hold that there is One, because the Son is of the ousia of the Father, and because of the identity of nature. For we believe that there is one Godhead, and that it has one nature, and not that there is one nature of the Father, from which that of the Son and of the Holy Spirit are distinct.”⁸²

Athanasius understood that what matters is not the word, but what the person who is talking means by it. He allowed people to use the word *hypostasis* however they chose as long as they were clear that what it meant to them did not contradict the Nicene Creed.

⁸² St. Athanasius, *Tomos Ad Antiochenos* 5-6. Greek: “οὓς γὰρ ἐμέμφοντό τινες ὡς τρεῖς λέγοντας ὑποστάσεις διὰ τὸ ἀγράφους καὶ ὑπόπτους αὐτόθεν εἶναι τὰς λέξεις, ἡξιώσαμεν μὲν μηδὲν πλέον ἐπιζητεῖν πλην τῆς κατὰ Νίκαιαν ὁμολογίας, ἀνεκρίναμεν δὲ ὅμως τούτους διὰ τὴν φιλονεικίαν, μὴ ἄρα, ὡς οἱ Ἀρειομανῖται λέγουσιν, ἀπηλλοτριωμένους καὶ ἀπεξενωμένους, ἀλλοτριουσίους τε ἀλλήλων καὶ ἐκάστην καθ' ἑαυτὴν ὑπόστασιν διηρημένην, ὡς ἔστι τὰ τε ἄλλα κτίσματα καὶ οἱ ἐξ ἀνθρώπων γεννώμενοι, ἢ ὥσπερ διαφόρους οὐσίας, ὥσπερ ἐστὶ χρυσὸς καὶ ἄργυρος καὶ χαλκός, οὕτω καὶ αὐτοὶ λέγουσιν, ἢ ὡς ἄλλοι αἰρετικοὶ τρεῖς ἀρχὰς καὶ τρεῖς θεοὺς λέγουσιν, οὕτω φρονούντες τρεῖς ὑποστάσεις λέγουσι καὶ διεβεβαίωσαντο μὴτε λέγειν μὴτε πεφρονηκεῖν ποτὲ οὕτως. ἐρωτώντων δὲ ἡμῶν αὐτοὺς »πῶς οὖν ταῦτα λέγετε ἢ διὰ τί δὲ ὅλως τοιαύταις χρῆσθε λέξεσιν« ἀπεκρίναντο »διὰ τὸ εἰς ἁγίαν τριάδα πιστεῦειν οὐκ ὀνόματι τριάδα μόνον, ἀλλ' ἀληθῶς οὐσαν καὶ ὑφ' ἑστέῳσαν πατέρα τε ἀληθῶς ὄντα καὶ ὑφ' ἑστέῳτα καὶ υἱὸν ἀληθῶς ἐνοῦσιον ὄντα καὶ ὑφ' ἑστέῳτα καὶ πνεῦμα ἅγιον ἀληθῶς ὑφ' ἑστέῳδος καὶ ὑπάρχον, οἶδαμεν μὴτε δὲ εἰρηκεῖν τρεῖς θεοὺς ἢ τρεῖς ἀρχὰς μὴτε ὅλως ἀνέχεσθαι τῶν τοῦτο λεγόντων ἢ φρονούντων, ἀλλ' εἰδέναι ἁγίαν μὲν τριάδα μίαν καὶ θεότητα καὶ μίαν ἀρχὴν καὶ υἱὸν μὲν ὁμοούσιον τῷ πατρί, ὡς εἶπον οἱ πατέρες, τὸ δὲ ἅγιον πνεῦμα οὐ κτίσμα οὐδὲ ξένον, ἀλλ' ἴδιον καὶ ἀδιαίρετον τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ πατρὸς.«

Ἀποδεξάμενοι δὲ τούτων τὴν ἐρμηνείαν τῶν λέξεων καὶ τὴν ἀπολογία ἀνεκρίναμεν καὶ τοὺς αἰτιαθέντας παρὰ τούτων ὡς λέγοντας μίαν ὑπόστασιν, μὴ ἄρα, ὡς Σαβέλλιος φρονεῖ, οὕτω καὶ οὗτοι λέγουσιν ἐπὶ ἀναίρεσει τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος ... οἱ δὲ καὶ αὐτοὶ διεβεβαίωσαντο μὴτε τοῦτο λέγειν μὴτε οὕτω πεφρονηκεῖν ποτὲ, ἀλλ' »ὑπόστασιν μὲν λέγομεν ἡγοῦμενοι ταυτὸν εἶναι εἰπεῖν ὑπόστασιν καὶ οὐσίαν, μίαν δὲ φρονούμεν διὰ τὸ ἐκ τῆς οὐσίας τοῦ πατρὸς εἶναι τὸν υἱὸν καὶ διὰ τὴν ταυτότητα τῆς φύσεως· μίαν γὰρ θεότητα καὶ μίαν εἶναι τὴν ταύτης φύσιν πιστεύομεν καὶ οὐκ ἄλλην μὲν τὴν τοῦ πατρὸς, ξένην δὲ τούτου τὴν τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τὴν τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος.«.

This was a wonderful way of sustaining unity in the Church without compromising its core beliefs. But it was only a temporary solution. In the long term the Church would need to choose one particular meaning of *hypostasis* to avoid confusion. In the end, it settled on a formula which remains to this day, in which we believe God is three *hypostases*. Consequently, when the Nicene Creed was updated at the First Council of Constantinople in A.D. 381, the line condemning people who talk of Jesus as a different *hypostasis* to the Father was quietly dropped.

INCOMPREHENSIBILITY OF GOD

The same problem arose with the other Greek word *ousia*. Opponents of the Nicene Creed complained that the word “consubstantial” (*homoousios*) implies that God is a “substance” which makes him sound like a part of the created world. This dishonours God the Creator by diminishing his radical transcendence over all of creation. Just like the word *hypostasis*, there was no clear dictionary definition of *ousia*. Some people thought it meant physical substance, which for Christians is a big mistake to apply to God.

But the deeper problem, which Athanasius points out, is that the opponents of the Nicene Creed were assuming that to call God a substance means we can understand God in the same way we can understand physical substances. On the contrary, Athanasius argues, to call God a substance does not imply that you know anything about that substance.

This was nothing new. Christians and Jews had always shared the conviction that God is incomprehensible, an unutterable mystery, by his very nature. It is not that we’re not smart enough to understand him. The most and the least intelligent people in the world are in the same boat when trying to understand God. Both are created beings, and created beings cannot understand the uncreated.

To understand why this might be (because however much God cannot be understood, we *can* understand the fact that God can’t be understood, and this is a worthwhile thing to understand), let’s think about the way our minds are limited. I don’t mean limited because we don’t know everything or understand everything. I mean limited by their very nature because they are constituted by the created order. We live within three dimensions which we call space, and within time. All our concepts presuppose space and time as realities. God is the creator of space and time and therefore is outside them.⁸³ But doesn’t the word “outside” already imply space, making us imagine an area and putting God physically beyond it? Similarly we say that God is outside time, but we can’t conceive what that might be like. We imagine it as if God could “know” the future, but the idea of the future implies time. Even when we say God “created” time, we have smuggled in an idea of time by using the past tense. Our imaginations are stuck: they can’t escape and give us a conception of a being not limited by space and time. Christians have typically used the word “transcendent” to describe this aspect of God. God’s transcendence means that he is utterly beyond all our conceptions of him. He eludes our grasp. This might give us an idea why in the Old Testament, God was so insistent that his people should never make images of him (see Exodus 20:4). To depict God in any way would violate his transcendence, his inability to be depicted or conceived by any created thing.

That is what Jews and Christians meant by saying that the created cannot understand the Creator. Athanasius did not invent this idea – it was a core principle of all early Christian teaching about God. For example, Irenaeus had already written: “It is not possible to know God, for it is impossible that the Father can be measured.”⁸⁴ What Athanasius did was to use this idea to defend the Nicene Creed. Its opponents were objecting that it makes God too understandable by conceiving him as a created substance. Athanasius

⁸³ Not every Christian today agrees that God is outside time. See e.g. R. T. Mullins, *The End of the Timeless God* (Oxford University Press, 2016). But in the early Church everyone agreed on this.

⁸⁴ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* IV.20.1. Latin: “Non est cognoscere Deum: impossibile est enim mensurari Patrem.” The original Greek has been lost.

turns the tables on them, and shows that it is *they* who are imagining God more like a human being.⁸⁵ For example, when they argue that to call Jesus “begotten” implies that he must have a beginning in time, they forget that God’s begetting is not like human begetting.

If they are discussing a man, then they may argue about his word and his son on the human level. But if they are talking of God, man’s creator, they must not think of him on the human level but on a level above human nature. The character of the parent determines the character of the offspring. Man is begotten in time and begets in time; he comes into being from non-existence, and therefore his word ceases and does not remain. But “God is not like man” as the Scripture has said (Judith 8:16); but he is “he who exists” (Exodus 3:14) and exists for ever; therefore his Word is “that which exists” and exists eternally with the Father.⁸⁶

Not only is God’s fatherhood unlike any human fatherhood: God’s is the original and human fatherhood is only its shadow or copy. He points to a Bible verse in Ephesians which says “I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every fatherhood [=family; Greek *patria*] in heaven and on earth takes its name” (Ephesians 3:14-15; translation adapted). This verse tells us that human fatherhood “takes its name” from divine fatherhood. Calling God “Father” is not an analogy drawn from biology, as if biological fatherhood was the real thing and God’s fatherhood was the metaphor. It’s the other way around. God’s fatherhood of Jesus is the eternal Fact, the ultimate real principle, and biological fatherhood is a shadowy image of that eternal Father-Son relationship. This idea has been called the doctrine of “pre-eminence” in the Christian tradition and is an important foundation stone in the Christian understanding of God. Athanasius puts it this way: “For God does not imitate men; but rather men, because God is properly, and alone truly, Father of His Son, are also called fathers of their own children.”⁸⁷

We must always remember that we are using words one way when talking about God and another way when talking about creation. It’s not that there’s *no* resemblance between the words. But words like “father” are only analogies, not meant in exactly the same way. In short, Athanasius ultimately directs all Christians to an appropriate humility when considering our Creator.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ “On using such language about God, they conceive of Him almost as a man” (Athanasius, *De Decretis* 4.16). Greek: “τοιαῦτα λαλοῦντες περὶ θεοῦ μικροῦ δεῖν ἄνθρωπον τὸν θεὸν ὑπολαμβάνουσιν.”

⁸⁶ St. Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* II.35. Greek: “εἰ μὲν περὶ ἀνθρώπου τινὸς διαλογίζονται, ἀνθρωπίνως καὶ περὶ τοῦ λόγου αὐτοῦ καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ λογιζέσθωσαν· εἰ δὲ περὶ θεοῦ τοῦ κτίσαντος τοὺς ἀνθρώπους, μηκέτι ἀνθρωπίνως, ἀλλὰ ἄλλως ὑπὲρ τὴν τῶν ἀνθρώπων φύσιν διανοείσθωσαν. ὁποῖος γὰρ ἂν εἴη ὁ γεννῶν, τοιοῦτον ἀνάγκη καὶ τὸ γέννημα εἶναι, καὶ ὁποῖος ἂν ἦ ὁ τοῦ λόγου πατήρ, τοιοῦτος ἂν εἴη καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ. ὁ μὲν οὖν ἄνθρωπος ἐν χρόνῳ καὶ αὐτὸς γεννᾷ τὸ τέκνον· καὶ ἐπειδὴ ἐκ τοῦ μὴ ὄντος γέγονε, διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ παύεται καὶ οὐ μένει· »ὁ δὲ θεὸς οὐχ ὡς ἄνθρωπος ἐστὶ τοῦτο γὰρ εἶπεν ἡ γραφή· ἀλλ’ »ὢν ἐστι« καὶ αἰεὶ ἐστὶ· διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ὁ λόγος αὐτοῦ ὢν ἐστὶ καὶ αἰδίως ἐστὶ μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς.”

⁸⁷ St. Athanasius, *Orations Against the Arians* I.7.23. Translation by Michael Marlowe. Greek: “οὐ γὰρ ὁ θεὸς ἄνθρωπον μιμεῖται, ἀλλὰ μᾶλλον οἱ ἄνθρωποι διὰ τὸν θεὸν τὸν κυρίως καὶ μόνον ἀληθῶς ὄντα πατέρα τοῦ ἑαυτοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ αὐτοὶ πατέρες ὀνομάσθησαν τῶν ἰδίων τέκνων.”

⁸⁸ “Athanasius ... is clear that, beyond stating the logical distinction of Father from Son, charges of modalism and materialism are most appropriately resisted by focusing attention on the character of the divine existence as unique and beyond comprehension” (Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 117).



CONCLUSION

The story of Trinitarian theology begins with a unique event crashing into the world like a meteor from outer space. When something as radically new as the Incarnation happens, there are no concepts available to explain it. New concepts have to be created through a long and involved process. Many explanations were tried and then abandoned. You can imagine the competing doctrines like trees racing towards an empty space in a forest canopy. Eventually one of them emerged at the top, and became the core confession of the Church. The doctrine of the Trinity is like the Church's DNA. It has become so central to everything Christians believe that rejecting it would mean that it was no longer the Church. That doesn't mean it's certainly correct. Like any doctrine, the Trinity could be wrong. It means that it is now so much a part of Christian identity that if it is wrong, Christianity is wrong.

The Trinity is an "explanation" of the God proclaimed in the gospel, but that does not mean it is a complete explanation that removes all mystery. On the contrary, mystery is precisely what it is meant to preserve. The heresies that were rejected all had one thing in common: they had a high level of confidence in our ability to understand God. The position that won its way to orthodoxy did not lack confidence that it was correct, but it did lack confidence that it was comprehensive. In the fourth century, St. Augustine preached a sermon in which he said this:

What then shall we say, brothers, of God? Whatever you say, if you have grasped it, that is not God. For if you have been able to grasp it, what you have grasped is something other than God. If you have been capable in any way of grasping him in your thought, then by your thought you have deceived yourself. So if you have grasped him, it is not God, and if it is God, you have not grasped him.⁸⁹

How great is your God? If you can imagine or conceive him, then he's not as great as the God the early Church worshipped as Trinity.

Now you might be thinking, "surely all this talk of God's incomprehensibility is a dodge to avoid admitting that the Trinity simply doesn't make logical sense, that Christianity is incoherent at its core." That's absolutely possible and nothing said so far rules it out. In the same way, nothing in modern physics rules out

⁸⁹ St. Augustine, *Sermons* 52. Latin: "Quid ergo dicamus, fratres, de deo? si enim quod vis dicere, si cepisti, non est deus: si comprehendere potuisti, aliud pro deo comprehendisti. si quasi comprehendere potuisti, cogitatione tua te decepisti. hoc ergo non est, si comprehendisti: si autem hoc est, non comprehendisti." Latin and English translation from John Cottingham, 'Skeptical Detachment or Loving Submission to the Good? Reason, Faith, and the Passions in Descartes', in *Faith, Rationality and the Passions*, ed. Sarah Coakley (John Wiley & Sons, 2012).

the possibility that physics is incoherent and a failed attempt to describe the physical world. In both cases one cannot do without faith. Faith is the springboard to understanding.

But there is another way to look at the challenging nature of the Trinity. It may be so complicated for the same reason physics is complicated: because reality is complicated. It may be incomprehensible because God is incomprehensible. A simpler description of God could have been more easily made up by someone. But the flavour of the real hangs around things that are hard to explain or describe. They resist being oversimplified.

Imagine a square talking to a cube, and the cube says “I’m a shape with six sides.” The square replies, “how can any shape have more than one side? My side is the whole of me, identical with who I am.” The square can only conceive of a side being the whole of an object because it only exists in two dimensions. It can’t imagine – even contemplate the idea of, say, an object that has more than one side, because his imagination can’t enter three dimensions. In the same way, for us who live in three dimensions, a person is the whole of their being and identical with it. We can’t really conceive the idea of a being existing in three persons. But what we can do is understand that there might be something beyond understanding, something greater and more wonderful and glorious than any human mind could ever conceive.

But now you may be thinking: “you’ve spent a very long time defining the Trinity only to say that it can’t really be defined or understood. Couldn’t we have skipped all these complicated distinctions and fights and simply admitted from the start that we can’t understand it so we shouldn’t bother trying?”

It may feel like a waste of time to think hard about something that can never be understood. But there is a big difference between abandoning a marathon run at the start and collapsing exhausted at the end. Something has happened to the marathon runner in the meantime. They have pushed themselves to the limits of their ability and that has changed them. In the same way, when we don’t even try to understand the Trinity, what really happens is that we are secretly *misunderstanding* it. We are Modalists or Tritheists or Subordinationists without realising. The work of thinking about the Trinity is the hard labour of rejecting false conceptions of God, and replacing them with an incomprehensible mystery. It is hard because our minds want to fill that mystery with some graspable concept, and the effort of keeping the mystery is like the effort of running a marathon. In truth, all Christian language to describe the Trinity is not meant to explain it rationally, but to protect it as a mystery – to protect it from any over-rationalisations that are too simple and thus falsify the mystery of the transcendent God.⁹⁰

The 12th Century “Shield of the Trinity” is a good example of something that is designed to protect the mystery rather than explain it. It protects against all the false ways of talking about God, and makes it clear what you can and can’t truly say as a Christian.

But even this doesn’t grasp the most fundamental point of the Trinity. The most fundamental point of the Trinity is not to explain, or to understand, or to understand that we don’t understand, or anything at all to do with our understanding. The most fundamental point of the Trinity is to guide us into a relationship with our Creator, our Lord, our Saviour, and our Redeemer. As C.S. Lewis puts it:

You may ask, “If we cannot imagine a three-personal Being, what is the good of talking about Him?” Well, there isn’t any good talking about Him. The thing that matters is being actually drawn into that three-personal life, and that may begin any time — tonight, if you like.⁹¹

⁹⁰ In his lectures on Christology, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, notes that the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils (like Nicaea) don’t actually give us positive definitions, but rather guard a mystery. They mark off a space for the incomprehensibility of God, a space in which “getting it” is precisely expressed in the fact that one leaves that standing which is incomprehensible. See Bonhoeffer, *Christology*, 205.

⁹¹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 89.

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