

**RETHINKING THE TRINITY:
Pastoral Implications of the Current Discussion**
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Introduction

Do we who claim to be trinitarian in doctrine actually demonstrate a conscious belief in that truth? What difference does trinitarian theology make in our churches and in our personal lives? Are we satisfied with a doctrinally accurate formulation in our statements of faith, while living out a Christianity that is more in conformity with modalism or tritheism or even practical Unitarianism? These and other questions are being asked in a flood of new books and articles. At present, the doctrine of the Trinity probably is the most discussed aspect of theology. Although other issues, such as Openness Theism, are more in the news, the real focus in western Christianity is on working out the practical implications of trinitarian belief.

The Christian formulation of the doctrine of the Trinity began as a Christological project. The Apostolic Fathers were faced with the daunting task of harmonizing the scriptural data concerning Jesus Christ with biblical monotheism. Since the majority of the ancient theologians recognized the true deity of Christ, while at the same time holding to belief in God as one personal divine spirit, they recognized that some reasonable explanation had to be reached. As a part of the same theological process, they also took steps to account for the deity of the Holy Spirit. It was the question of the Son of God, however, that defined the task which resulted in the Nicene Creed (325 A.D.) and its Chalcedonian explication (451 A.D.).

The Doctrine in the Patristic Era

The Doctrine of God

The cultures in which the Church Fathers lived and the philosophies with which they were familiar tended to understand ultimate realities as static, in an unchangeable state. Thus, formulations of the doctrine of God came to emphasize divine immutability. This concept included God's nature, personality, and actions. Not only was God viewed as unchanging in essence, but also in personal expression and in function. That is, God could not begin or end any activity or state. The common view, which is still the position of classically inclined theologians today, was that everything about God is *eternal*.

Understood in this way, eternity is not merely unlimited time without beginning or ending—temporal eternity, but a state of existence completely apart from time—atemporal eternity. In this view, God exists always in one, timeless instant. God's plan (or decree), then, is eternal in the sense that there is no "time" in which God chose one plan out of many possible plans. In other words, the plan of God is not something God chose, but is necessary, having been the divine will eternally. God exists eternally as the planner of the now revealed plan. He is simply that kind of being: One who always plans this plan.

Likewise, the divine personality was considered to be impassible—without emotion.¹ First of all, static immutability required that the divine disposition could not change from one state to another, i.e., from anger or wrath to love. Further, any change of emotion would be in response to another being, hence (in this view) caused from outside the divine consciousness. In such a condition, God would be mutable—changeable and subject to the whims of his creatures. It is partly from this concept that the idea of divine love (especially as expressed by the Greek word ἀγάπη) often has popularly been considered not a real emotion but an intellectual state or choice.

In the same way, no act of God could be construed as beginning or ending within the divine initiative. Time began with creation and all created existence experiences time and the sequence of events which either define or characterize time, but God exists outside of that condition. One of the interesting tasks for classical theologians has been to explain two especially difficult matters: (1) How can God know what point of time it is within the (plan for) creation, since he “sees” the whole of time at once? (2) How could the atemporal divine nature be joined to the temporal human nature in the one person of Jesus Christ, God incarnate?

The Doctrine of the Trinity

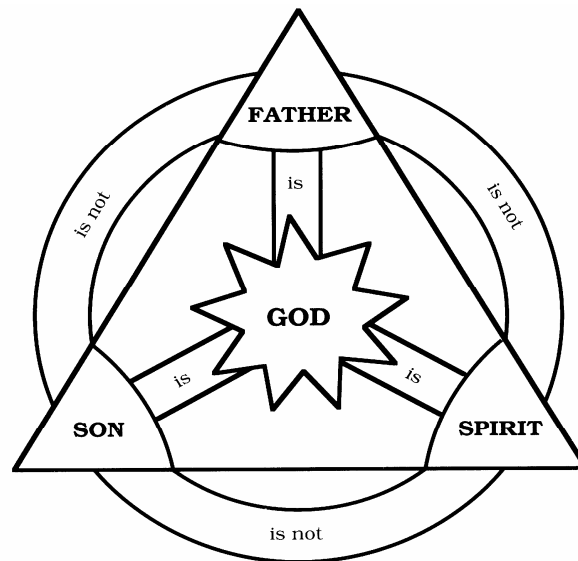
The classical doctrine of the Trinity was developed with this understanding of the Godhead as its foundation. The natural conclusion one has to draw is that the relationships between the persons of the Trinity are also static. All orthodox views of God take many statements about him in Scripture as metaphorical, but this view requires that the vast majority are figures of speech. Not only does God not literally have hands, feet, or eyes, nor repent, discover, ponder, etc., but he also doesn’t get angry, respond directly to the actions of his creatures, begin and end conversations, or the like. Although not clearly stated in most cases, this view leads to the conclusion that the persons of the Trinity do not interact in the kinds of ways that created persons do. There is no mutuality, only unity. The concept of *person* thus becomes a complex metaphor which is not intended to imply actual personal distinctions or individuality. Each person is identical to the other, not merely in the one shared nature, but also in every personal characteristic.

This static condition is further expressed in the doctrines of eternal generation of the Son and eternal procession of the Holy Spirit. The Godhead necessarily exists eternally with the Father as generative source of the person² of the Son and as the source from whom the Spirit proceeds. In other words, the relative roles of the persons as revealed in the New Testament, are not merely economic functions, but are necessary expressions of their essential state. The Ontological Trinity is identical to the Economic Trinity and revealed as such. Interestingly, this classical understanding is partly based upon the assumption that the terms *Father* and *Son* are not metaphors, but expressions of essential reality. This contrasts sharply with the inclination to view other descriptive terms used of divine characteristics largely as metaphorical.

¹John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him: The Doctrine of God*. Foundations of Evangelical Theology, ed. John S. Feinberg (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001), 264.

²The Father is never thought of as generating the *nature* or *substance* of the Son, since the Son eternally shares the one divine essence (spirit) with the Father. Likewise, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father as a person, but not essentially.

Yet another aspect of trinitarian doctrine which developed very early involves the concepts of transcendence and immanence. Each person of the Trinity is transcendent to each of the others; that is, each person *is not* one or both of the others. At the same time, in immanently sharing the same essence co-equally and co-extensively, each person *is God*. To describe this relationship, theologians use the term *perichoresis* (pericwvrhsiö).³ Also known as *emperichoresis* (ejmpericwvrhsiö) coinherence and circumincession (Latin: *circumcessio*, *circuminsessio*), this Greek term was developed by John of Damascus (c. 675-c.749) to describe the interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity, who share the divine essence. The personal distinctions are not diminished, but the substance of the godhead is also not divided. Thus, each person is fully involved in the existence and actions of each of the others, but remains a distinct individualization of the essence. The following diagram, which properly pictures the two aspects, dates from ancient times.⁴



Summary of the Doctrine

The classical doctrine, then, deals primarily with two models of contrasting elements. The Ontological (aspect of the) Trinity and the Economic (aspect of the) Trinity were seen by the majority of theologians as being identical. The economic roles of the persons are not volitional, chosen for the purpose of fulfilling the divine plan, but essential, expressing the very nature of the Godhead. The Transcendent (aspect of the) Trinity and the Immanent (aspect of the) Trinity are seen as definitive of the way in which God is three and one: Three distinct persons subsist within the one, undivided spirit essence. The Godhead exists as atemporally eternal, immutable in all respects. God is apart from (transcendent to) his creation and is unmoved by it.

³The word is derived from the classical Greek verb, pericwrevw. In the New Testament, only the noun, pericwroö occurs.

⁴Copied from: H. Wayne House, *Charts of Christian Theology and Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 45.

The Doctrine in the Reformation Era

Theology Proper in general, and the doctrine of the Trinity in particular, came into the era of the Protestant Reformation essentially the same as formulated by the Church Fathers and as expressed in the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds. Both within the Catholic Church and within the emerging Protestant groups, the doctrines were accepted as expressed and communicated by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas. Variations of detail could be found, but the basic doctrines were largely unchanged.

One significant distinction in methodology did exist between the eastern and western churches, a distinction that continues today. The Orthodox and Roman Catholic churches had split around the year 1054 over differences culminating in the *filioque* controversy. The expanded form of the Nicene Creed contained the words: “And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and the Life-giver, that proceedeth from the Father,…”⁵ This wording remained settled in the eastern churches, but following Augustine’s writings on the Trinity, the Latin (western) church began routinely extending the expression to include procession of the Spirit from the Son (*filioque* = “and from the Son”). To the eastern churches, this denied the classical doctrine that all divinity derived from the Father.⁶ This controversy helps to highlight the methodological difference. The western churches, including those of the Reformation, tend to discuss the doctrine of the Trinity beginning with the oneness of God and going on to explain the threeness. In the Orthodox Church, the opposite is the case. Beginning with the three distinct persons, they then go on to deal with their shared essence.

The difference in emphasis has practical results, both positive and negative. The Orthodox liturgy is emphatically trinitarian in a way that is not always true of western churches.⁷ Certainly, all theologically orthodox Christian churches include the trinitarian distinctions in their worship, but in western practices, the distinctions may not be emphasized. In fact, in the prayers of many evangelical Christians, carelessness in this area may even lead to a verbal denial of the Trinity. Such would be unthinkable in an Orthodox service. On the other hand, the individuality of the three persons may be emphasized so much that the oneness of God becomes underemphasized in Orthodox practice, whereas it will be the point of emphasis in the West.

The Doctrine Today

The Modern Era

Between the Reformation and today in western cultures, the modern era saw continued discussion of the doctrine of God, with increasing tendencies to depart from some of the classical formulations. These departures developed partly for exegetical reasons and partly as theological rethinking. From the exegetical perspective, some have come to reject the doctrines of eternal generation and procession. The opinion of these theologians is that the biblical statements

⁵Henry Bettenson, ed. and comp., *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2d ed. (London/Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1963), 26.

⁶Alister E. McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), 70.

⁷Kallistos Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, rev. ed. (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1998), 37-41.

simply do not support such a doctrine, hence it has no basis. Though there are many aspects to the argument, primary place is given to reconsideration of the word traditionally translated “only begotten”.⁸ Many now consider this word to mean, not “only begotten”, but “one of a kind” or “unique”. A number of modern English translations of the Bible have adopted the latter understanding, including the NIV, ESV, and HCSB. Without the doctrine of eternal generation, there is no real basis to support the doctrine of the procession of the Spirit. As a result, many systematic theologies are abandoning the doctrines.⁹

As an extension of rejecting eternal generation, another issue arises: Are the personal designations *Father* and *Son* ontological representations of how God necessarily exists or are they metaphors based upon analogy with human familial relationships? In other words, are the terms defined on the human plane or on the divine? Acceptance of eternal generation virtually requires the ontological understanding; rejection of the doctrine prejudices the case for the analogical view, but doesn't demand it.

The doctrine of impassibility also came to be reconsidered. Careful reading of the biblical texts convinced many theologians that God does indeed experience emotional states in a way analogous to humans. The major exception is that God is not coerced in his emotional states, but is completely free to choose how he will respond to any emotional stimulus. Further, the idea of divine love as a real (uncoerced) emotion entered the discussion.

If God's emotions do change with time and circumstance, however, this means that the classical concept of immutability cannot stand. In fact, it may be observed that the classical doctrine not only makes God immutable, but also makes him immobile. A natural reading of Scripture suggests that God is anything but immobile. He relates to his creation in a dynamic, active way. Thus, gradually the concept of immutability has come to be considered by many as an attribute of God's essential nature, but not of his actions, including his personal emotional states. He is eternally unchanging in his essence, character, and attributes. As a result, his ethical norms, promises, and decrees (or plan) cannot change.¹⁰ As personal being, however, he is mobile and responsive to other persons, including within the Trinity. The persons of the Trinity, rather than being in a static relationship, are viewed as in an interactive, dynamic relationship analogous to the sort that other persons experience.

The Postmodern Era

The Cultural Climate. In recent decades, all of created existence has come to be understood in a much more dynamic way than ever before. In the physical world, the theories of relativity and the developing field of quantum physics have shown that all of the universe is in a perpetual state of change. At the subatomic level, matter and energy are in constant interchange, so much so that some physicists believe that reality should be defined in terms of formulas

⁸μονογενῆς: Used of the Son of God in John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; I John 4:9; used of other sons in Luke 7:12, 8:42; 9:38; Hebrews 11:17.

⁹For example see: Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 488-92; Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1998), 324-30; James Oliver Buswell, Jr., *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962), I:110-12. See also: Gerard Pendrick, “MONOGENHS,” *New Testament Studies* 41 (October 1995): 587-600.

¹⁰Feinberg, *No One Like Him*, 264-76.

describing their interchange, not in terms of their temporary states. On the macro level, the billions of galaxies of the universe are seen to be in dynamic relationship, producing effects that span incomprehensible distances. The earth itself, until recently thought to be a static object, is now recognized to be in a continual state of change, with convection currents constantly altering the shape and composition of ever-moving tectonic plates.

At the same time, the modernist ideal of impassive objectivity on the part of solitary observers has been abandoned. Pure objectivity is no longer considered possible, let alone desirable. Personal engagement with life's tasks and relationship within community are rapidly becoming the new ideals. The contemporary goal is no longer the isolated individual in complete control of all circumstances, but rather the passionate participant, personally engaged with others in mutual pursuits.

The Theological Climate. This changing social and cultural environment has created an opportunity for theologians to reexamine ancient ideas about God as personal and as triune. Just as the ancient fathers of the church imagined God in terms suggested by their social and philosophical environments, so today's thinkers are reimagining God in quite different terms. The advantage today, however, is that all of the thinking of the past, as well as centuries of exegetical study, are at our disposal. Thus the modern critique of the classical concept of divine immutability, now provides a starting point for asking new questions of both the biblical texts and theological formulations. The result may be seen in recent articles and books which either describe a cautious new understanding of God or earnestly defend the language of the classical creeds. In either case, the theological conversation has taken an interesting new turn. The possible benefits and dangers to the churches must not be ignored.

These changes in thinking by western theologians actually approximate, in some limited senses, the tradition of the Orthodox Church:

Personhood and love signify life, movement, discovery. So the doctrine of the Trinity means that we should think of God in terms that are dynamic rather than static. God is not just stillness, repose, unchanging perfection. For our images of the Trinitarian God we should look rather to the wind, to the running water, to the unresting flames of fire. A favorite analogy for the Trinity has always been that of three torches burning with a single flame....

But in the end the least misleading ikon is to be found, not in the physical world outside us, but in the human heart. The best analogy is that with which we began: our experience of caring intensely for another person, and of knowing that our love is returned.¹¹

Indeed, there undoubtedly has been some eastern church influence upon current western theology in rethinking the implications of the doctrine of the Trinity. However, that is a study in itself and beyond the purposes of this paper.

The growing trend in current thinking about the Trinity is to view God as a divine community of three diverse persons, dynamically immanent by virtue of sharing the same spirit essence co-equally and co-extensively, but radically transcendent by virtue of being true persons—unique, unrepeatable individualizations subsisting within the essence. In this understanding, the word *person* becomes definitive by taking on its normal sense in language,

¹¹Ware, *The Orthodox Way*, 29. This way of viewing God probably accounts for some of the recent appeal of Orthodox churches to evangelicals.

instead of being a metaphorical approximation attributed to the mysteriously distant “other”. Divine persons are viewed, not as having some similarities to human personalities, but as defining the concept of person, of which humans are lesser examples.

The next step is to assume that the relationship between the divine persons also defines what personal relationship is. Thus, all human relationships are to be measured against the perfect fellowship of the Trinity. Whether marriage, or friendship, or church relationships, all are to be modeled on the Trinity. Obviously, there are a number of underlying presuppositions that have to be accepted, but the approach has great appeal, particularly in company with the trend toward thinking of God as active and passionate within the same chronological framework as his creation. Nancy Pearcey represents this understanding from an evangelical perspective:

The balance of unity and diversity in the Trinity gives a model for human social life, because it implies that both individuality and relationship exist within the Godhead itself. God is being-in-communion. Humans are made in the image of a God who is a tri-unity—whose very nature consists in reciprocal love and communication among the Persons of the Trinity. ...We are not atomistic individuals but are created for relationships.¹²

This way of thinking about God seems to fit well with the incredible diversity evidenced within his creation, as well as with the diversity of gifts which the Spirit distributes within the unity of the local church. As another writer describes the Trinity, there is: “Unity without monotony, variety without chaos.”¹³ In other words, within the essential unity (one essence, *perichoresis*) of the Godhead, there is true diversity of persons.

The benefits of this view include a more natural reading of Scripture and less emphasis on God’s transcendence over his immanence. Also, humans as images of God are seen as more truly representative of God. The doctrine of the Trinity becomes more than words in a creed or doctrinal statement and a basis for personal worship of three real persons, not three names for identical entities. Every part of life may be seen as reflecting aspects of the divine community.

There are two major dangers to the trend that come immediately to mind. One is the concern that believers may begin to think of the divine persons virtually as separate deities, thus becoming tritheists. The second is that imagination may exceed biblical data with contrived constructions of what theologians think God should be like. The basic doctrine of the Trinity is a second-level theological construction with limited (though sufficient) biblical content. To extrapolate even further increases the danger of unfounded formulations. Thus considerable care should be taken in working out the implications of this theological project.

The Practical Applications

While exercising caution to avoid the dangers, the thoughtful Christian leader may find fruitful applications for the revised view of the Trinity. Some of the possibilities are:

¹²Nancy R. Pearcey, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2004), 132.

¹³F. Duane Lindsey, “Essays Toward a Theology of Beauty, Part I: God Is Beautiful,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 131 (April-June, 1974): 121.

- Corporate worship may be purposefully reshaped to emphasize the actuality of the one true God who exists as three true persons. Prayer, music selections, Scripture readings, and sermons may all be designed to reflect the whole of the divine self-revelation.
- Greater appreciation may be fostered for diverse personalities, talents, and spiritual gifts within the community of faith which is the local church. The fellowship of believers may develop the goal of imitating God in seeking unity without uniformity and diversity without division. Nurturing each member's unique potential may take on higher priority than simply finding people willing to do tasks.
- Worshipers of the triune God may learn to think of each other with a higher degree of mutuality, seeking the benefit of others over self and celebrating differences rather than fearing them or competing with them. Even racial and ethnic differences may be viewed as opportunities, rather than problems or sources of misunderstanding. Certainly, the intimate immanency of the divine persons should be allowed to critique western hyperindividualism.
- Families may be encouraged to imitate the love of (the persons of the) God(head) in their relationships, each person humbly submitting to the needs and potentials of other family members. Especially in the intimacy of the marriage relationship, believers should be able to envision themselves as nurturing diversity without chaos, while enjoying union without monotony in holy response to the divine standard.

Conclusion

The wisdom of the ancients, embedded in the great creeds, should not be forsaken lightly. Yet, they are not inspired Scripture, but theological extrapolations drawn from exegetical conclusions as fallible humans have studied the diverse biblical texts. Culture should never be allowed to dictate doctrinal change, but it should be permitted to ask hard questions which drive God's people back to his Word in search of better understanding and theological refinement. We find ourselves at an advanced point in a long trajectory of thought concerning the doctrine of the Trinity. We must avoid ignoring the lessons of the past and rushing eagerly into reckless speculation. At the same time, we must never stop critiquing and evaluating our doctrinal formulations, lest we settle for the cultural opinions of an earlier era. No doctrine is more foundational to our faith than that of the Trinity, so it behooves us to think long and well about it.

May we experience together the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit as we seek to honor God in living out a rigorous and vital trinitarian theology!

Select Bibliography

New articles and books on the Trinity and on applications of trinitarian truth to other areas of doctrine and polity are appearing in such volume that it is impossible to keep up with all of them. In addition to standard systematic theologies, the following list is offered to suggest some sources which may help the interested reader pursue some of the topics discussed above. They represent a variety of theological orientations and a range of theological and philosophical sophistication. Some will defend the classical formulations, others will argue for reformulation.

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