

Fools for Christ, Week 4:

What's the Deal with the Trinity? Pt. 1



Most beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

Grace and peace to you all in the Name of our hallowed Father, Who predestined from before the ages began that His Son would die as the Christ to reconcile all peoples back to Himself, empowered and made effectual by the might of His Holy Spirit. In the distinct processions of each Person of the Trinity, all of Whom work uniformly so that we may abide in Yahweh, we find our eternal life, hope, and salvation. May we forever have the heart of Polycarp of Smyrna, who prayed this last prayer before his gruesome martyrdom by the Romans ca. 155: "For this cause, yeah and for all things, I praise Thee, I bless Thee, I glorify Thee, through the eternal and heavenly High-Priest, Jesus Christ, Thy beloved Son, through Whom with Him and the Holy Spirit be glory both now [and ever] and for the ages to come. Amen" (*Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14:3).



In the last three lessons, I dealt exclusively with Biblical theology. This field of theology primarily dealt with issues relating to exegesis (interpretation), hermeneutics, lexical analysis, typology, motifs, and thematics. While Biblical theology will forever be my greatest love (inasmuch as it relates to my love of Christ, of Whom the Scriptures cohesively speak), today we will step out into another branch of theological studies--systematic theology! Systematic theology, as described in the last few emails, goes one step beyond interpretation. It is the categorizing (systematizing) of what the Bible as a whole teaches about certain doctrines on the basis of proper exegesis. A helpful template to think about the goal of systematic theology is the following: "*what does the Bible say about [fill in the blank]?*" Biblical theology is subordinate to systematic theology, for through the rightful interpretation of the text are we able to extract, articulate, and apply Scripture in a thoughtful and precise manner. Systematic theology, for those of you who are more well-read out there, has been made especially popular nowadays by theologians like Wayne Grudem, whose textbook of the same name has become a staple seminary tool. Although historians and theologians alike tend to agree that systematic texts in theology (as we recognize them today) were not really compiled until the 12th Century (when medieval theologian Peter Lombard wrote *Libri Quattuor Sententiarum*, or *The Four Books of Sentences*, though this can be and has been debated), the Church had been practicing systematic theology since its conception. Sometimes these doctrines could be known and articulated clearly and with minimal debate (on topics such as strict Judeo-Christian monotheism, charity/piety, and the existence of a post-mortem or eschatological 'heaven' of some kind), but some of the more important doctrines of the Faith took centuries of careful debates, intense persecution, scrupulous

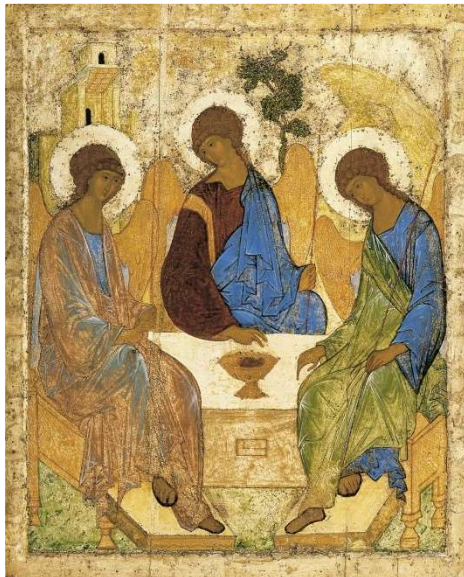
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writings, and godly proponents in order to become ubiquitous teaching. The most quintessential example of such a developing doctrine? The doctrine of the Holy Trinity.

The Trinity is by and large the most confusing (and dangerous) theological topic known to mankind. I'll be the first to admit it. The Scriptures explicitly teach that there is one single, true, real, and living God; at the same time, the authors of the Scriptures have no problems calling the Father God, the Son God, and the Holy Spirit God. While the Early Church did near-universally recognize this, it took about 200-400 years before the Church would be able to articulate the doctrine of the Trinity with precision and correctness. This does not imply that the Trinity was a post-Biblical doctrine, but that the process of gazing into "the secret things [that] belong to Yahweh our God" (Deut. 29:29) was fueled by a long perseverance, sustained by God's grace and providence, of orthodox teaching. Although I don't have time to elaborate much on the



historic development of the doctrine of the Trinity (specifically over how it was progressively taught by the Early Church Fathers following the death of the Apostle John) and why it is impossible that it was an unbiblical idea invented at the Council of Nicaea (you hear this argument *a lot* from pop-atheists and opponents of Christianity), we will cover a lot of rationale for the Trinity here. If you are wanting to address what I just said above in greater detail, always feel free to come and talk to me about it... I'd be more than happy to talk about Early Church history and apologetics with you! However, if you want some encouragement that you are aligned with the beliefs of the earliest Christians, rest easily in the prayer of Polycarp that I included... Polycarp was one of the close disciples of the Apostle John, who was martyred a little over a half a century after John died (John is the only Apostle traditionally believed

to have died a peaceful death, not by a martyrdom... fun Church trivia, am I right?). As early as 155 AD, even the simplest, least eloquent early Christians were proclaiming a nascent Trinitarian theology!

Nonetheless, I think that we can all agree that, even 2,000 years after Jesus' earthly ministry, the Trinity is impossible to grasp. Job lived in an age before Yahweh had even inspired the holy Scriptures (which means that he had extremely little revelation regarding the intricacies and complexities of the Godhead's nature), yet he even lamented that "Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty" (Job 11:7). Job had zero knowledge

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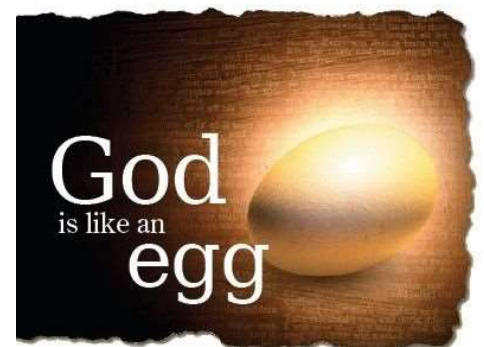
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of the Trinitarian monotheism of Yahweh, but he couldn't even fathom how to know the secrets of his Lord from this antiquated knowledge. We all know *astoundingly* more about God and the world than Job did, yet we run into the exact same problem as he. I guarantee we have all sympathized with Job's remarks when thinking about the Holy Trinity. In an attempt to avoid a deep and confusing dive into the Trinity, theologians, pastors, and laypeople alike simply regurgitate very poor analogies to explain the three-in-one Lord away.

Here are a few common (and mind you, *really bad*) examples, many of which people rehearse without genuinely knowing any better:

- ***The Holy Trinity is like water!*** Water can exist as a solid (ice), a liquid (water), and a gas (steam). Just like each of these three forms (ice, water, steam) come from H₂O, the three Persons of the Trinity can all be the same one God.
- ***The Holy Trinity is like a piece of candy corn!*** There are three distinct colors on a piece of candy corn (orange, yellow, and white), yet it is still one piece of candy. Therefore, the three Persons of the Trinity can similarly be distinct but part of the same God.
- ***The Holy Trinity is like a clover (or a triangle)!*** The clover itself is one object, but it also has three identifiable leaves that are distinct from another. In a similar way, God is one substance but with three distinctly identifiable Persons (sorry St. Patrick... as cool as you are to get your own holiday, your analogy is terrible. This, of course, does not diminish the miraculous work that God achieved through St. Patrick's astoundingly courageous obedience).
- ***The Holy Trinity is like an egg!*** In one singular egg, there are three distinguishable parts: the shell, the yolk, and the white. Just as these three essential parts compose a single egg, so too can the three Persons of the Trinity be one God.
- ***The Holy Trinity is like a man who is a father, a spouse, and a son!*** Although he is indeed one, he has three distinct relations/roles that he is to different people all at the same time. In this way, the three Persons of the Trinity have different roles, but together are one God.
- ***The Holy Trinity is like a man!*** Every singular man has three essential parts: a body, a spirit, and a soul. Just as these three parts are needed to make one man, so too is the singular God made up of three distinct Persons. This is what it means to be made in the image of God!



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Okay, okay, you get the point. I did not include *all* analogies made (Church history has some particularly bad analogies over its 2,000 years... even the intellectual powerhouses like Augustine of Hippo included), but these are the ones that are most often told from pulpits, from lecterns, and from dining room tables. Maybe you've heard many of these, or maybe you've even taught some of these to others. We've all been there, and I don't dare blame you for that! Poor Trinitarian theology is a hallmark of our contemporary age; in a cultural environment that wants quick, quippy, and strictly empirical answers to all of its quandaries, nobody has patience to understand the Trinity! Our androgynous and hyper-relativistic zeitgeist does not compel us to draw clear, distinct, objective, and immutable boundaries within the doctrine of God. Yes, Jesus is God, but is the Father 'better than' or 'over' Jesus? Surely the Son isn't 'lesser' than the Father, but why then does it seem like the Father is higher up in the hierarchy of Divine authority? Does Jesus have to listen unflinchingly to everything the Father tells Him? And what's the deal with the Holy Spirit? Is He just Jesus' sidekick or something? Or maybe the Father's sidekick? Is He literally just an inanimate spirit or a Divine force of power? But then again, He (it?) is also called God, but only kind of... what gives?!? My head hurts...

Because of the insurmountable confusion that rests in the doctrine of the Trinity (both today and in eras past), I want to dedicate these next couple of emails addressing just that in simpler terms: *what's the deal with the Trinity?* While I'm jumping into a practically impossible feat, it is my goal to provide a proper and orthodox understanding of Who the Trinity is, informed by the saints of old and by Scripture. In this first e-lesson, I will cover the basics of the doctrine of the Trinity: how should I think about the Trinity? How did the Early Church understand the Trinity? How do the distinct Persons (the Father, the Son, and the Spirit) relate to one another? Is the Trinity taught in the Bible? How are we to understand the Trinity in our salvation? Why are those analogies that I listed above so bad, and what are some of the heresies surrounding the doctrine of the Trinity? This is all that I'll cover today and more. In the next email or two, I will delve more specifically on the topic of Christology (the study of Christ), which is a necessary offshoot of Trinitarian dogmatics: how can Christ be both Man and God? How many natures does Christ have, and how many wills does He have? What does it mean that Christ 'emptied Himself' in His Incarnation? On that note, how the heck does the Incarnation even work? What does the Incarnation mean for Christ's eternal generation in the Trinity? What does it mean that Christ was forsaken by the Father on the Cross, especially if the Trinity cannot be



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broken apart? If Christ suffered, does that mean God can suffer? How in the world am I to understand the Lord's Supper (also known as the Eucharist/Communion)? How can this be the body and blood of Christ if He is at the right hand of the Father? All of these burning questions (and more!) I will attempt to answer and explain.

Who am I that I should attempt to dive into the secret things of God? Every single one of you should be asking me this question and for good reason. In fact, *I am nobody* that I should attempt to answer this. I would go so far as to say that I am the most unworthy to examine the unsearchable riches of our utterly transcendent Creator, harmonizing with Paul that "I was the worst sinner of all" (1 Tim. 1:15). If Yahweh truly "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16), wholly set-apart from all else, a mere sinner, let alone mortal, shall not gain access into the knowledge of His being. However, it is not me, myself, and I that have decided to explain these things to you. We are assured in Amos that "surely the Lord Yahweh does nothing unless He reveals His secret counsel to His servants the prophets" (Amos 3:7). We are to know the character of God not by our own wisdom, but through the words of the prophets as recorded in the Scriptures. Yet, it gets even better than this. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son, Whom He appointed the Heir of all things, through Whom also He created the world" (Heb. 1:1-2). As the ultimate, perfect, and eschatological Prophet of God, Jesus Himself reveals to us the secret things of Yahweh! Indeed, we are called "to reach all the riches of full assurance of understanding and the knowledge of God's mystery, which is Christ, in Whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2-3). We are further told that Christ told His disciples the mysteries of His Kingdom through parables (Matt. 13:11-13). Paul, through the writings of the NT Scriptures, was commissioned to reveal the mysteries of Christ, which is the Gospel message to be proclaimed and understood by the Gentiles (Eph. 3:2-6; Col. 1:26-27). Now the Father "[makes] known to us the mystery of His will, according to His purpose, which He set forth in Christ" (Eph. 1:9). The zinger? After admonishing His disciples in the nature of true love, which was to be accomplished on the Cross, He makes the startling comment: "You are My friends if you do what I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you" (John 17:14-15).

Verily, verily, I am the most unworthy and incapable among my brothers to teach of such an ineffable Majesty. But I am not the one who has to. Christ, as the Prophet of God Who is the exact imprint of His Divine Father's nature, assures us that all who are in Him are told the mysterious counsel of the Lord. Christ reveals to us, through His inspired Word, the true

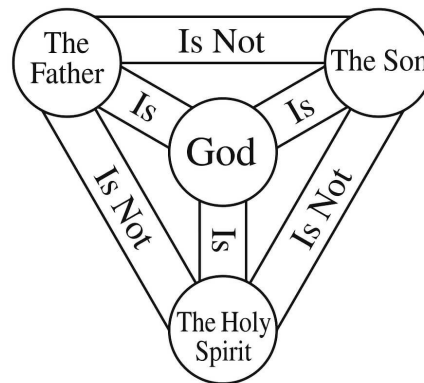
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interpretation of all God's works, of which reciprocate to reveal His secret character. In our election by the Father, sonship in Christ, and assurance in the Spirit, we may rightly speak of the true nature of the Trinitarian Yahweh, just as the fallible Job did in his lament (Job 42:7). We may not explain away the Trinity exhaustively, but we can do so sufficiently for the knowledge of our salvation, joy, and lifelong obedience. I am not alone in this endeavor, as always, but I have the chorus of the redeemed to help assist my teaching of this to you. The doctrine developed by the Church in its long history is instrumental to speaking of the Godhead in an orthodox and correct manner. Once more, I will not dare to come up with anything new; I will exclusively teach things that have remained steadfast in the orthodox teachings of the Church from the Scriptures onwards. I am forever indebted to the God-enabled blessing of the Early Church Fathers.

All of that being said, let's delve into the Impossible... let's talk about the Trinity!



Theological Glossary for Week Four:

- **Theology Proper** – refers to a subclass of systematic theology that specifically concerns the doctrine of the being, attributes, and works of God. Essentially, theology proper is the study of the Godhead.
- **Divine Person** - most precisely, a unique subsistence of the singular and rational Divine nature that is distinguished from, yet inseparably united with, the other Divine Persons by Divine relations. I know, I know, these definitions are brutal to read and to wrap your head around; however, it is absolutely necessary that I remain as accurate and careful

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with my language as possible to communicate orthodoxy. You'll see why this is vital as I continue on. In the meantime, bear with me.

- **Procession** - refers to the origination (or 'coming forth') of a Divine Person from another through communication of the one Divine essence; more particularly, Protestants and Roman Catholics use this term to refer to the eternal generation of the Son from the Father (filiation) and to the spiration of the Holy Spirit from the Father and from the Son.
- **Perichoresis** *ADVANCED* - refers to the mutual interpenetration and coinherence of the Divine Persons (also of the two natures of Christ). In 'simpler' words, it describes the mutually indwelling relationships of the three Divine Persons to One Another.
- **Koinonia (or Communion)** - fellowship or mutual receiving and giving. This term can apply both to the relationship between Christians (see Acts 2:42, where Luke uses the Greek word κοινωνία, *koinonia*, for 'fellowship') or to the relationship between Christians and the Divine Persons of the Trinity.
- **ὁμοούσιος (homoousios)** - a Greek term meaning 'of the same substance or being'. This term was used at the Council of Nicaea to refer to what was common between the Father and the Son, and it was later extended to the Holy Spirit. While its first use was initially very ambiguous (and a breaking point of no compromise for many of the Nicene Fathers), it was adapted to mean 'consubstantiality'. Consubstantiality refers to sharing substance, which entails sharing all attributes that are essential to a particular type of thing. In the case of the Trinity, it refers to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit sharing the same single primary substance without division.
- **ὁμοιούσιος (homoiousios)** – a Greek term meaning 'of similar substance or being'. By adding a single *iota* to *homoousios*, this term now described the teachings of Arius, who said that the Son is lesser than and subordinate to the Father and that the Father created the Son. This heretical term was condemned at the Council of Nicaea.
- **Council of Nicaea** - the first ecumenical (that is, relating to and representing the unity of all different Christian churches) council held in 325 AD. This council established the original Nicene Creed, which was later modified at the First Council of Constantinople (381 AD) to produce the now-used Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, which is referenced as a standard of orthodoxy by confessional Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant Christians. This council condemned Arius and his teachings, affirmed the eternal generation of the Son, used the word *homoousios* to speak of the Father and the Son, and left the Spirit's status and nature undefined. The conclusions of the council prompted

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decades of subsequent Trinitarian debate that would be resolved in later ecumenical councils.

- **Classical Theism** **ADVANCED** - a form of theism in which God is characterized as the absolutely metaphysically ultimate Being. Strict classical theists affirm, in their strongest forms, God's aseity, immutability, impassability, and simplicity. This philosophical-theistic approach was taught implicitly by the Early Church and explicitly from the Middle Ages and beyond. This is the traditional, historic view of God.
- **Social Trinitarianism** **ADVANCED** - a form of Trinitarianism that, in contrast to Latin Trinitarianism, emphasizes the relationship of the three Persons as the basis for God's unity. The social model articulates that God consists of three distinct consciousnesses (each with Their own mind, will, and prerogative) which agree in perfect harmony. This harmony is what makes God 'one' instead of 'three'. While not heretical, this form of Trinitarianism is certainly heterodox and naturally leads to concerning conclusions.
- **The Omnis** - refers to the triad of God's attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence (omni-benevolence is occasionally included). The omnis are the quintessential examples of God's incommunicable attributes, or attributes that He does not share with His Creation (love, mercy, goodness, and righteousness are examples of God's communicable attributes, which He, to some degree, shares with us). All of the omnis are affirmed by historic and orthodox Judeo-Christian theology.
- **Aseity** - literally God's 'of-Himself-ness' or self-existence. Deriving from the Latin *a se*, meaning 'from or by oneself', it refers to God's attribute of needing and receiving nothing from Creation, having His existence entirely determined by Himself.
- **Immutability** - a doctrine which clarifies God's necessary attribute that He does not and cannot change.
- **Divine Simplicity** - the doctrine that God is not composed of parts. In its strongest form, simplicity denies material parts, a real distinction between Divine attributes, and a distinction between God's essence and God's existence. In other words, God's *being is to be*, and any distinction between His attributes (like His wrath and His mercy) are only made for our sake (they are all one in reality).
- **Impassibility** – the doctrine which states that God does not experience emotional changes either from within or effected by His relationships to Creation. In other words, God cannot have any kind of emotional change within His being or character (a corollary of immutability). Softer forms of impassibility say that God does experience emotions, but

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that they are caused only in accordance with Himself (not effected by His Creation) and that He is utterly and completely in control of them.

- **Arianism** – an ancient heresy (taught by Arius) that maintains that the Son was created by the Father. This necessarily obligates that the Son is neither coeternal nor consubstantial with the Father, but some sort of lesser being. This teaching was condemned as heresy by the Council of Nicaea
 - **Sabellianism (or Modalism or Modalistic Monarchianism)** - an ancient heresy (taught by Sabellius) that treats the three Divine Persons as temporary, economic modes of the one single God. For example, God manifested Himself as the Father in the Old Testament, became the Son in Jesus' earthly ministry, and is now known as the Holy Spirit, hence the different 'modes' or 'manifestations' of a monotheistic God.
 - **Adoptionism (or Dynamic Monarchianism)** - an ancient heresy (taught by people like Theodotus of Byzantium) that teaches that Jesus was a human person adopted by God to become His Son at some point in history after that person's birth. Typical proponents of adoptionism say that God chose the person of *Yeshua* of Nazareth at his baptism to become His Son, whereby Jesus' obedience unto death allowed God to resurrect Him and 'adopt' him as His Divine Son. Jesus' sonship was not eternal, but temporal and conditional.
 - **Partialism** – an ancient heresy that says that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are altogether components of God. While the Godhead is 100% Divine, each Person makes up a percentage of that Divinity (the Father is one-third of God, the Son is one-third of God, and the Spirit is one-third of God). This teaches that God is only the summation of all three Persons, where each Person is not fully and 100% God.
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Here is the usual roadmap of what we will cover today. I like to think this is how y'all would (should?) be asking these questions (honestly, I'm still asking them like this too):

1. **How in the World Can We Understand the Trinity?**
2. **How the Heck Can We Comprehend How the Three Persons Relate to (Proceed from) One Another? If They Are All One God, How Can They All Be Distinct?**
3. **Why Does My Brain Hurt, and What Kinds of Crazy People Even Came Up With This Stuff?**

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4. **Why isn't God like Candy Corn? Where Have Bright Minds Screwed Up in the Past?**
5. **Okay, Okay, I'm Kinda Sorta Understanding This (Maybe)... Sure, God is a Trinity, But What Else Can We Know About Him? What Are Other Attributes of God?**

Before we begin, let us look at the teaching of Tertullian of Carthage, the prolific Early Church Father who came up with the term 'Trinity' to refer to the Godhead: "Keep always in mind the rule of faith which I profess and by which I bear witness that the Father and the Son and the Spirit are inseparable from each other, and then you will understand what is meant by it. Observe now that I say the Father is other, the Son is other, and the Spirit is other. This statement is wrongly understood by every uneducated or perversely disposed individual, as if it meant diversity and implied by that diversity a separation of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit [...] Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete [the Holy Spirit], produces three coherent Persons, as it is said, 'I and My Father are one', in respect of unity of being not singularity of number" (*Against Praxeas*).

1. How in the World Can We Understand the Trinity?

Maybe Tertullian's quote made perfect sense to you, and maybe it didn't. Maybe you have always relied on analogies like the ones above in order to understand the Trinity, and now you're panicking that you've been misguided. Fret not, for no man has a proper comprehension of the mystery of the Trinity. Yet, the entire Christian Church has put forth an orthodox, linguistically precise way in such a manner that we can speak of God rightly. On the basis of the Scriptures, the brightest philosopher-theologians of the Church have rattled their minds so that they may present to us more amiable explanations. There are easier ways to start to get a hold on the Trinity than what you've likely been taught. Before we get into the technical definitions in Trinitarian dogmatics, let us present the Trinity in a way that is Biblical and *much* easier to understand.

The Scriptures clearly and ubiquitously teach that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Spirit is God. How did the earliest Christians understand this? The greatest minds of Church history (starting generally at Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo, and developing further into the medieval writings of Bonaventure, John Duns Scotus, Thomas Aquinas, etc.) looked to one verse in particular to solve their dilemma: "God is love" (1 John 4:16). Consider how the saints of old regarded this observation as a critical verse to understanding the Trinity.

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I spoke before that even Augustine himself fell victim to poor analogies to describe the Trinity, even though he wrote one of the most important works on the Trinity in all of Church history (*De Trinitate*). I am going to use one of his bad analogies here--while it may not be a very great one, it is helpful to consider in order to understand how the relationships work between three Persons in one Godhead. This analogy will lay a foundation needed to move on to better explanations. Let us now examine what Augustine described. Augustine said that there are three things necessary to establish a true, loving relationship: someone who is loving, someone who is being loved, and the love that is shared between them. Nothing more nor anything else is required. Because God is love, Augustine tells us, God Himself must have all of these parts within Himself! The Father is the One Who is loving, the Son is the One Who is being loved, and the Holy Spirit is the bond of love between them. The trinitarian nature of love, according to Augustine, naturally tells us the Trinitarian nature of God! Like I said, I'm a little hesitant about seeing triads in human nature/relationships and prescribing those same attributes to God, hence why I consider this to be a poor explanation. The image of God *cannot* simply be a set of faculties that we possess, and we should be cautious to describe our own world in a trinitarian manner. Even still, Augustine's observations here provide a necessary foundation to understanding why God *must* be Triune if He is to *be* love. Having all of this in mind, let's take the next step up in complexity. Here is a better argument that the Church has used throughout history that proves that, if God is love, then God is a Trinity.

God, by definition, is a maximally great Being. This essentially means that God possesses all properties and attributes that are inherently the greatest of all positivities and perfections (omniscience is better than limited knowledge, omnipotence is better than limited power, omnipresence is better than finitude, omnibenevolence is better than malevolence, moral perfection is better than moral corruption, necessary existence is better than non-existence or contingent existence, etc.. just think of a thing that's more perfect than everything else by every measure). One of these maximally great properties is love, as I am sure you would agree that a loving being is better than a non-loving being. For God to be maximally loving (out of necessity of His own perfection), He cannot simply love His singular Self—love, by definition, is a mutual and reciprocal relationship. For God to be love, He must be maximally loving. Because God's love is infinite, the object of His love must also be infinite, or it would not be able to perfectly contain the fullness of His infinite love. This is precisely why the Father, Who is God, has eternally begotten the Son, Who is equally God... in order to *be* love, He must have Someone to love and to have Someone love Him back! This shows how the Father and the Son, while both God, are distinct Persons from One Another. Although, because the Father has begotten the Son, they share the same Divine essence, they are distinct Persons in order that the Father may shower

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His infinite love upon the Son, to which the Son receives and reciprocates this love back to the Father. This establishes the first procession of the Father. Yet, theologians have also noted that a love shared between two people is not the maximal expression of love. In order for there to be maximal and perfect love, there must also be a person whom the first pair both equally love and delight in. Love (koinonia) is better when a third person co-equally participates. This is where the Holy Spirit comes into play. ***The Father outpours His infinite love to His Son, and the Son receives and reciprocates that love to the Father. However, both equally love the Holy Spirit, where both the Father and the Son express their infinite love upon Him, to which He receives and reciprocates it back to both the Father and Son. The Holy Spirit acts as the eternal Bond of love between the Father and the Son, Who both mutually communicate their love through the Spirit to One Another in all eternity!***



Two quick notes. Firstly, yes, the Father begets the Son and proceeds forth the Spirit. However, we are not to think that the Father does this within the confines of time. He didn't, at one moment, go from not begetting the Son to begetting Him, nor did He proceed forth the Spirit one moment and not the other. Although we cannot understand it, these processions occurred beyond time. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are equally essential to the Godhead... without any One, there would be no God. Thus, all this occurs not by a matter of a momentary decision by the Father, but necessarily co-eternally. We have nothing like it to compare to in this Creation, and it impossible for our puny brains to even grasp. Secondly, when I say that a third person is better/necessary for maximal love, human polygamy does not follow. I know at least one of you will think that this argument implies such a morality, but Trinitarian philosophy and anthropological morality have no direct parallels to draw from one to another. This is not the same romantic love, but a love expressed through koinonia (mutual indwelling, coinheritance, and interpenetration by loving fellowship). I had to clarify both before we continue.

That might have been a lot to think about, but here it is repeated in fewer words. In order to express a maximally loving relationship, there must be two necessary characteristics. Firstly, there must be a pair of persons that mutually, equally, reciprocatively, infinitely, and willingly love each other to their fullest capacity. Secondly, there must be another person that these two persons mutually love with the same love they have for another, for what could possibly be better than loving the one whom your object of love loves? Adding any more mutually loved persons is arbitrary, and would not enhance the union experienced by all persons involved. This

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is why theologians say that if God is love, He must necessarily be Trinitarian. The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father. They share and reciprocate this love through the Holy Spirit, Who is the bond of their love for One Another. The Father loves the Son *through* the Spirit, and the Son receives and reciprocates this love back to the Father *through* the Spirit. This is the most basic idea behind the logistics of the Trinity—one essence, one love, yet necessarily three distinct Persons! Any less than three means that God cannot be love, while any more Persons is far too many and entirely implausible for a perfect love (the love between two Persons and the Bond of love between Them; no other Person is needed). God cannot be love if He isn't relational in His essence, and this relationship is expressed through the three Divine Persons!

Confused yet? I certainly am... but, hopefully that provides some vague foundation upon which you can begin to understand this intellectual headache. If nothing else, I hope that this axiom of 'God is love' helps you to understand that God *must* be a Trinity. He was not a single, monotheistic God Who was one Person, then begat the Son and spirated the Spirit at His own will at a later date. An all-loving God, *by the very definition of what it means to be God*, must be a Trinity and no other. God always was and always has been a Trinity. This is yet another reason Christianity has such a powerful position over other monotheistic traditions (like Islam, Jews, contemporary Judaism, etc). While the only logical explanation of the world around us comes from a monotheistic God (feel free to ask me more about how I can confidently say this), a Triune God is the only way to explain His perfect character. For Him to be God, He *has* to be Three-in-One. Our God is a God of dynamic activity, characterized by His constant outpouring of harmonious love amongst His three Persons; He is a relational Life!

2. How the Heck Can We Comprehend How the Three Persons Relate to (Proceed from) One Another? If They Are All One God, How Can They All Be Distinct?

If you aren't already scratching your head and wondering why you even subscribed to get these emails, this section may get you there a lot quicker. I've tried digging into the depths of this for as long as I have been introduced to theology, and I still struggle to understand any of it (let alone articulate it). But, by the Lord's grace and the Spirit's power, I pray that greater exposure and exploration of this will be beneficial to all of us. We have established that God must necessarily be Triune if He is all-loving; each Person fully gives and receives the love of the other two Persons. Yet, there are genuine distinctions to be made. The Father is indeed the origin of this love and of the other two Divine Persons. The Father is not begotten of the Son, but the Son is begotten of the Father. Furthermore, the Spirit proceeds both from the Father and from the Son, and no other way. What are we to make of this order within the Trinitarian Godhead? If the

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Father is the origin, how can He be equal with the Son and the Spirit? How can They all be distinct if They share the same Divine essence, which contains the fullness of all Deity? What makes the Father the Father, and not the Son or the Spirit? Likewise, what makes the Son the Son, or the Spirit the Spirit? All of these questions can be answered through a proper understanding of processions. **I have also attached to this email an image of the Trinity, labelled with these processions. If you are a visual learner (or new to Trinitarian philosophy, at that), this may be incredibly helpful to look at as you read.** Ready? Let's do this.

The question of procession (which is the origination of a Divine Person through the communication of the Divine essence) boils down to one critical distinction: is the Father the Father because He begets, or does the Father beget because He is the Father? Believe it or not, this has been a vehement and rowdy source of controversy across Church history, especially in the later medieval era. However, historic Christianity (that is, the generally held opinion in the medieval Latin Church, the Roman Catholic Church, and orthodox Protestantism) has usually granted (with many, many exceptions) that the Father is the Father because He begets. What follows from this tradition is that the Persons of the Trinity are distinct from each other only in the way that They relate to (or proceed) one another. In its most concise definition, this is how we can define the distinct Persons of the Trinity: ***The Father is the Father because He is the origin, the Son is the Son because of His filiation from the Father, and the Spirit is the Spirit because of His double-procession (spiration) from the Father and the Son.*** Let us examine what the heck that all means.

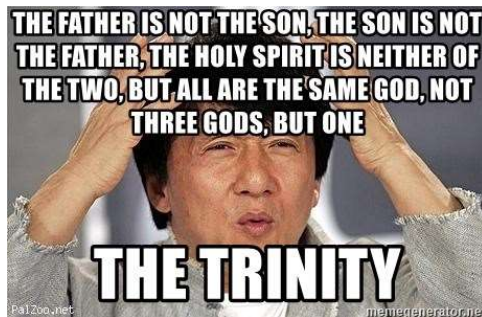
First, *the Father is the Father because He is the origin.* As Tertullian cautions, this verbiage has been seriously tampered with and misinterpreted over many millennia. Please listen carefully to my explanation so that you may not fall into grievous error and heresy. **The Father is not the origin of Divinity.** He is not the sole and exclusive source of the Divine essence, which He shares to the Son and to the Spirit. No, the Son and the Spirit have been, are, and always will be fully Divine in their own Persons. If the Father was the source of Divinity, then there must necessarily be a scenario where only the Father was/is Divine, where the Son and the Spirit might have not participated in this Divinity. Unchangeable and sound Christian doctrine teaches that if the Trinity can be broken, God cannot exist. The Trinity is not an accidental characteristic of the Divine Being (where God could essentially not be three Persons), but it is an essential characteristic of the Divine Being. It belongs to God's very essence to be Triune. All the Persons have the fullness of Deity, so the Father cannot be the origin of that Deity. Someone, even God, cannot 'make' God. So, the Father could not have 'made' the Son or the Spirit at some

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time in eternity's past, but the Son and the Spirit were always there and always God. If the Father isn't the source of Divinity, then what is He the origin of? In technical terms, **the Father is the origin of the Trinity in terms of the working order of operating.** That's a lot to unpack, so let's get gritty. 'Order of operating' simply refers to the manner by which He is ordered relationally in the Trinity: the Father operates from Himself, but the Son operates from the Father. Likewise, the Father does not operate from the Son, and the Son does not operate from Himself. *Only the Father operates from Himself, hence He is the 'origin'.* This Self-subsisting operation is what defines the Father's origin of order. The word 'working' is added to 'order of



operating' to make it clear that this order is only present in how the Father operates, not in the ontological (relating to the study of existence) rank or hierarchy of the Father over the others. The Father shares the highest equality with the Son and the Spirit consubstantially, so the Father cannot be ordered above the Son or the Spirit in preeminence. *The Father is not better than the Son or the Spirit in any way. Instead, this order simply refers to the mode by which the Father operates.* Are you following? Me

neither. This *will not* make sense the first time you read it, unless you are some kind of prodigious genius, I'm sure. Read through this paragraph a few times, let it marinate in your mind. Saturate yourself with these arguments, meditate on it, pray about it, and spend time with the Lord. Over time, you will begin to follow. But the best way to learn this all is to be exposed to it frequently. Let us wean you off the milk of Americanized Christianity and into the meat of orthodoxy!

Okay, so the Father is the Father because He is the origin, specifically the origin of the working order of operating in the Trinity. In less technical terms, He is the Father because He begets and operates in Himself! Second, *the Son is the Son because of His filiation from the Father.* The Son in the Trinity, due to the raw exposure of this language in the Bible, tends to be the easiest for us to understand more quickly. I think that C.S. Lewis gives us the perfect language to understand this in his infamous work *Mere Christianity*: "We say the First [the Father] begets or produces the Second [the Son]; we call it begetting, not making, because what He produces is of the same kind as Himself." He later goes on to elaborate that there can only be one Person that the Father begets, for even if He begat an infinite number of Sons, they would all be of the same kind as Himself, which means that they would 'collapse' into a singular and distinct Son. This is how Christ can be the Father's 'Only-Begotten Son'. As we discussed

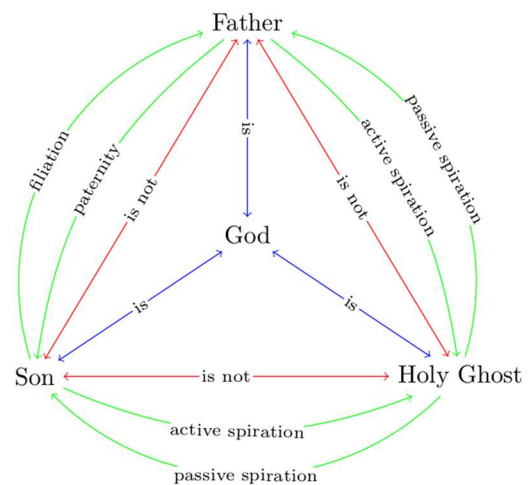
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earlier, this begetting is done by procession, where the Father communicates the Divine essence to the Son through the Son's (modal/working) origination in the Father. This communication of the essence mysteriously happens from all eternity and has no point of beginning, meaning that the Son always has been God in and of Himself from all eternity. This unique procession, that is the Father's begetting of the Son, is called filiation (coming from the Latin *filius*, meaning 'son'). **Only the Son and the Son alone is filiated from the Father; this is what makes Him the Son.**

Maybe that one was a little better than the first? I certainly hope so. You have a tough and stubborn mind if you've made it this far; I like that about you! Let's finally move on to the Spirit. Third, *the Spirit is the Spirit because of His double-procession (spiration) from the Father and from the Son*. Recall that the best way to understand the Holy Spirit is the Bond of love between the Father and the Son. Let's steal from C.S. Lewis again to prepare our minds for the heavier jargon: "The union between the Father and the Son is such a live concrete thing that this union itself is also a Person. I know this is almost inconceivable, but look at this. You know



that among human beings, when they get together in a family, or a club, or a trade union, people talk about the 'spirit' of that family, or club, or trade union. They talk about it's 'spirit' because the individual members, when they are together, do really develop particular ways of talking and behaving which they would not have if they were apart. It is as if a sort of communal personality came into existence. Of course, it is not a real person: it is only rather like a person. But that is just one of the differences between God and us. What grows out of the joint life of the Father and the Son is a real Person, is in fact the Third of the three Persons who are God." Through the Holy Spirit, the Father and the Son communicate and reciprocate their love to One Another, in which They equally communicate and reciprocate this love to the Spirit. Because He is the Person that precedes both from the Father and from the Son, Western/Latin Christians have said that the Holy Spirit is defined by a double-procession. This double-procession has a technical term: spiration. **This double-procession is what makes the Holy Spirit distinct from the other Divine Persons.**

I know that this stuff is tough. I assure you, what I just explained to you above will be the hardest thing that I cover both in the rest of this lesson and, if I'm completely honest, one of the

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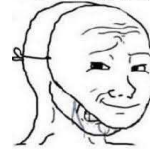
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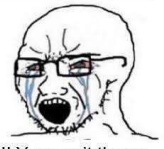
hardest things to possibly understand in any study. If physics and mathematics can confuse the greatest minds to have graced the earth, how much more would the comprehensive knowledge of our unfathomable Lord? That being said, if you could glean nothing else that I wrote above, just understand that the Persons of the Trinity (the Father, the Son, and the Spirit) are distinguished from one another by their *processions*. How they relate to the other two Persons defines their Personhood (any of you Hegelians out there are happy).

Of course, we can identify Who the Father is, Who the Son is, and Who the Spirit is through their unique operations (actions) towards mankind, and we will get to those very briefly. However, this is simply articulating how God is a Trinity within Himself without *any* relation to His Creation (the fancy phrase that theologians use for this is the 'ontological Trinity'... there is no need to concern yourself with this if you have no desire). He is not dependent upon His Creation for anything, so He must still be a Trinity without it! This is how theologians have resolved this issue over the last 2,000 years. Honestly, I can't help but steal from the words of Descartes: "Nor do I now have enough free time to waste it on subtleties of this sort" (*Meditation II*). You tell 'em, Descartes! Although, being able to articulate this kind of thing is something that needs to be restored back into Christendom. I'll explain why at the end of the email.

Atheism:



The theory of evolution still can't explain how life began.



Nooooo!!!! You can't throw away generations of ground-breaking science! We just don't have all the answers yet!

Christianity:



The Doctrine of the Trinity is a logical paradox.



We Know.

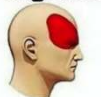
3. Why Does My Brain Hurt, and What Kinds of Crazy People Even Came Up With This Stuff?

Your brain hurts because God is *huge*. Literally. Zophar, in the book of Job, muses "Can you find out the **deep** things of God? Can you find out the **limit** of the Almighty? It is **higher**

than heaven--what can you do? **Deeper** than Sheol—what can you know? Its **measure** is longer than the earth and **broad**er than the sea" (Job 11:7-9). Job and his friends lament that God is too broad, too long, too high, and too deep to fathom. You probably can relate right now, maybe when you read an explanation of the Trinity or when you don't understand why suffering continues. No matter the cause, God is tough to know—how could the dust ever understand the Almighty? But look at what Paul tells us who have been justified. When bowing before the Father, "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith—that you, being

Types of Headaches

Migraine



Hypertension



Stress



The Doctrine of the Holy Trinity



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rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the **breadth** and **length** and **height** and **depth**, and to now the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God" (Eph. 3:17-19). Did you notice that? Paul uses all the same words that Zophar uses to show that, in the power and love of Christ, we may begin to know the true nature of God! While Job is comforted by the fact that God knows more about wind than him (just kidding, but it is kind of funny to consider), we can now be comforted in understanding the true knowledge of God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Your head hurts because of the incomprehensible immensity of Yahweh, but it is in Christ that we may be transformed by this knowledge into worship with and love of Him!

Okay, but who even came up with all of this? I know that the Bible teaches the God-ness of the Father, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit, but how did we get from there to what I just explained? What kinds of old, dead, white guys decided that we should explain it in such complicated terms? Well, funny enough, they weren't old, dead, white guys like most of our history--they are for the large part old, dead, non-white guys! The Lord blessed the early Church with powerful thinkers to steward the truth of His Word, to speak of Him rightly, and to codify the Trinity into the creeds and councils of the universal Christian Church. Let's look at this development that was fleshed out more fully in the ecumenical councils.

Leading up to the Council of Nicaea, many theologians were expressing early Trinitarian doctrine. Polycarp, Ignatius, and Justin Martyr in the second century expressed a general notion of a 'Divine Three'. They all acknowledged the Deity of the three distinct Persons articulated in the Bible, although they did not have the language to describe it well. It wasn't until Origen and Tertullian in the third century that the term 'Trinity' was used in theological writings referring to the God of Israel. It must be admitted that every single one of these theologians held some form of heresy regarding the Trinity, for there was no universal doctrine/language/authority developed yet to describe the Triune Godhead beyond the Holy Scriptures. The earliest Church Fathers, especially those immediately succeeding the Apostles (called the Apostolic Fathers, these men were directly disciples by the Apostles), were notably witnesses of Christ and His Word, not interpreters. They taught exactly what they were instructed, rarely interpreting these truths and determining their nuanced, intricate explanation; they simply held to the plain view of the Scriptures and the Apostolic tradition in faith that they were true, even if they didn't understand it. They spoke of the things they held witness to, not of the things they attempted to understand. This is why Trinitarianism, even as a clear Biblical teaching, needed time to progress. Even if they were concerningly incorrect at many points, these great minds were critical in the progressive deepening of the doctrine of the Trinity (I hope to teach y'all about some of these

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great saints of God in a much later email; these guys are valiant, admirable, and so fascinating). By the second, third, fourth century, God began to raise up teachers who were both witnesses *and* interpreters, who sought to explain the doctrines that they found so evidently in the



Scriptures. As more grave heresies began to arise, these Church Fathers were forced to develop more precise language to hold steadfast and true to the Word of God. The pillar of orthodoxy was purified by the crucible of heresy, through which Christ would deliver His bride (just as He did with Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego). The doctrine of the Trinity was never 'made up'; instead, it existed from the earliest disciples of the Apostles and became more refined, precise, and true as people desired to explain it, especially in the midst of heresies and blasphemy. The battlefield where the orthodox Christians would combat these dangerous heresies would be at the ecumenical councils.

The ecumenical councils refer specifically to the conferences/gatherings of bishops representing the whole apostolic and catholic Church who convened to discuss pressing matters in Christian doctrine and practice.

Ecumenical comes from the Greek οικουμένη (*oiousmene*), literally meaning "the inhabited" but more accurately referring to "worldwide", "general", or "universal". There is a significant debate between different sects of the Church concerning how many ecumenical councils 'counted', although most orthodox and creedal Christians hold to the first seven ecumenical councils. The first of these is uncontested orthodoxy: the First Council of Nicaea. The Council of Nicaea was held in 325 AD in none other than Nicaea (an ancient city which was located in modern-day Turkey) and was the first effort to articulate an orthodox consensus that represented true Christendom. The council, which was convened by Emperor Constantine and likely presided over by Hosius of Corduba, most importantly gathered in order to settle the issue of the Son's relation to the Father, namely, is the Son God, and if so, how do we reconcile that with the Father's Deity?

What was the cultural context for this council? By the third and fourth century, an ancient heresy named Arianism was rampant among Christian communities. Arius was an Alexandrian priest who taught that the Son was not eternally and necessarily generated by the Father (in other words, he essentially taught that the Father 'created' the Son at some point in time). Arius quipped to the laypeople in Alexandria: 'if the Son was truly equal with the Father, then He

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would be called His Brother. Therefore, the Son has to be lesser than the Father in substance'. All in all, Arius' teaching is summed up well by his infamous phrase: "there was a time when He [the Son] was not." This held grave complications towards Christology. The consequences of Arianism were that the Son was not equal with the Father in substance nor was He co-eternal with the Father, which implies that Jesus was a 'lesser being' than God the Father with respect to His essence. Quite literally, Arianism took Christianity by storm. A few bulwarks of the Faith stood firm to true Trinitarian teaching, though these men were persecuted heavily by their brothers in Christ. One such saint was Athanasius of Alexandria, who was such a fierce opponent against Arianism that the phrase '*Athanasius contra mundum*' (Athanasius against the world) became a popular saying to refer to a persecuted dissident. The warriors against Arianism were few. As time went on, and as men like Athanasius began to reign victorious in their interactions with Arians, Christians around the world felt a fervor around the debate of the Son's generation from the Father. Early Church Father Gregory of Nyssa described how everyone got into theological discussion surrounding the Sonship of Christ in the Eastern Roman Empire (a passage which I find to be very humorous):

"The whole city is full of it, the squares, the marketplaces, the cross-roads, the alleyways; old-clothes men, money changers, food sellers: they are all busy arguing. If you ask someone to give you change, he philosophizes about the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire about the price of a loaf, you are told by way of reply that the Father is greater and the Son inferior; if you ask "Is my bath ready?" the attendant answers that the Son was made out of nothing" (*On the Deity of the Son*, P.G. xlvii, 557b).

Imagine going to the grocery store today for a pint of ice cream (sometimes it's nice to indulge in that comfort food). As you check out, you ask the clerk at the register, "how are you today?"

They respond, "although the Son is consubstantial with the Father, the Father is the origin according to the working order of operating within God's ontology!" That's essentially what Gregory explained was happening in the East around the time of Nicaea. Clearly, Christians around the globe (though especially in the East) were enraptured by this debate. Even the laypeople were discussing the begottenness of the Son! The First Council of Nicaea sought to resolve just that.



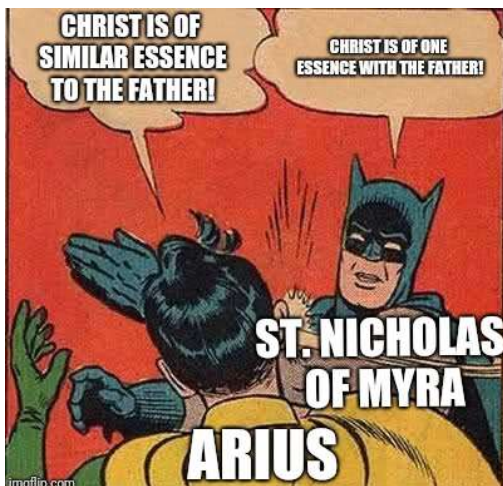
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The council was convened primarily to discuss the theology of Arianism, chiefly concerning the ‘status’ of Christ. Needless to say, the council itself became very heated. The orthodox saints argued uncompromisingly that the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, a Greek term literally meaning ‘of one substance’. These men took carefully into account Christ’s declaration that “[He] and the Father are one” (John 10:30). We are able to call both the Father God and Christ God because they share the exact same substance of Deity, or essence. Because they share in this Divine essence equally, they both have been, are, and will be God-of-Himself (*autotheos*) for all eternity. There was no point at which the Father existed but the Son did not. Many of the Early Church Fathers, especially Arius, were enraged by the ambiguity of this word. Admittedly, it wasn’t until later development that *homoousios* became known as teaching ‘consubstantiality’, as we hear it referred to as today. This drove the Arian proponents to create their own word for the relation between the Father and the Son: *homoiousios*. By adding one single letter into the middle of this word (the Greek letter *iota*), this changed the meaning from ‘of the same substance’ to ‘of similar substance’. They advocated from Jesus’ words that “the Father is greater than [Him]” (John 14:28), teaching that the Son was begotten from the Father as a created being. While the Son would share in the powers, honors, and prerogative of Divinity above all other creatures, He still was not equal with the Father. This was the crux of the Arian controversy—a single Greek letter that forged the boundary between orthodox Christianity and absolute blasphemy. The lesser used phrase “one iota of difference” actually comes from this very debate. It was a battle between the orthodox *homoousios* and the heretical *homoiousios*.

Let’s just say that this debate got *heated* quickly. Legends (recorded significantly after the council actually convened) tell of a time where Arius was vigorously defending his position to the 300+ bishops, most of whom listened respectfully. However, one bishop in particular could not stand Arius’ blasphemy any longer. That bishop was none other than Saint Nicholas of



Myra—yes, you are right, the very Saint Nick that we recognize today as the origin of Santa Claus. While Saint Nick may have been known for his exceeding generosity to the poor and miraculous feats, he had a difficult time keeping his composure listening to Arius’ attacks against the essential Godhead. So what did jolly ol’ St. Nick do? The story goes that he rose to his feet, angrily stormed across the room, and *slapped* Arius across the face! While it is hotly debated whether this story is true or not, it continues by explaining how Nicholas was thrown into prison, where Jesus and Mary appeared to give him a Book of the Gospels and his vestments. The next morning, the jailers

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found Nicholas dressed as a bishop, completely unshackled from his chains, and quietly reading the Scriptures. He was then brought back to the council by Constantine and reinstated as the Bishop of Myra. This legend is more than a fun tale that I like to share with people every Christmas (who knew that Santa himself had such a temper with heretics?!), but it also displays how high the stakes were in the Early Church to get this correct.

Eventually, the 300+ members of the council voted (by a landslide) in favor of St. Nick's position, the orthodox view which is clearly affirmed in the Scriptures. Out of these hundreds of bishops, 17 originally opposed the confession. That is until Constantine threatened exile to any dissidents, from which that number was reduced to only two. The official 314-2 vote constituted a 99.36% majority in favor of orthodoxy. Even if the original 17 were held in consideration, this would still be an overwhelming victory for the Nicene confession. The Son's Divinity was rightly defended: both God the Father and God the Son share the same Divine substance co-eternally! As a result of the consensus reached at Nicaea, the council produced a defining statement of belief which we now call the Nicene Creed. This creed is considered necessary to the profession of the Christian Faith in all orthodox, confessional, and historical churches (Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and Protestantism). This creed would notably be amended by later ecumenical councils, most significantly the First Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, to create more precise language and to articulate the status of the Holy Spirit, which was not covered in the first council. This has produced the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, a creed which all Christians confess to this day. Jesus' promises about the Holy Spirit had been fulfilled: "I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all the truth, for He will not speak on His own authority, but whatever He hears He will speak, and He will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify Me, for He will take what is Mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; therefore I said that He will take what is mine and declare it to you." (John 16:12-15). The Holy Spirit had guided the Church in the truths of Christ, in the matters which the Disciples could not yet comprehend. In Nicaea and the ecumenical councils, the Spirit did indeed conserve the Church as the "pillar and buttress of truth" (1 Tim. 3:15), guiding the saints to speak of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit rightly as one Lord, one God, and *homoousios*. Today, all orthodox Christians hold steadfast to this same profession as the essence of the Faith. Here is the full creed for you to read, to adhere to, and to confess as the one Body, Bride, and Church of our Lord:



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*"We believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
Maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.*

*And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the only Son of God,
begotten from the Father before all ages,
God from God,
Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made;
of the same essence as the Father.
Through Him all things were made.
For us and for our salvation
He came down from heaven;
He became incarnate by the Holy Spirit and the virgin Mary,
and was made human.
He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered and was buried.
The third day He rose again, according to the Scriptures.
He ascended to heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the Father.
He will come again with glory
to judge the living and the dead.
His kingdom will never end.*

*And we believe in the Holy Spirit,
the Lord, the Giver of life.
He proceeds from the Father and the Son,
and with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified.
He spoke through the prophets.
We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church.
We affirm one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.
We look forward to the resurrection of the dead,
and to life in the world to come. Amen."*

Hallelujah and amen! Although the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed established the boundaries of orthodox Trinitarianism, as according to the Scriptures, later confessions and creeds have since gone into far more detail. The Latin Church (that is the Western Church, encompassing all Roman Catholics and Protestants) adheres to the Athanasian Creed as a valid expression of

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orthodox doctrine on the Trinity. Although it almost certainly was not written by Athanasius, who the medieval Church credited this creed to, its profession of the Faith has historically been considered as orthodox teaching. The Athanasian Creed is as follows:

“Whoever desires to be saved should above all hold to the catholic faith.

Anyone who does not keep it whole and unbroken will doubtless perish eternally.

Now this is the catholic faith:

*That we worship one God in Trinity and the Trinity in unity,
neither blending Their Persons
nor dividing Their essence.*

*For the Person of the Father is a distinct Person,
the Person of the Son is another,
and that of the Holy Spirit still another.
But the Divinity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is one,
Their glory equal, Their majesty coeternal.*

*What quality the Father has, the Son has, and the Holy Spirit has.
The Father is uncreated,
the Son is uncreated,
the Holy Spirit is uncreated.*

*The Father is immeasurable,
the Son is immeasurable,
the Holy Spirit is immeasurable.*

*The Father is eternal,
the Son is eternal,
the Holy Spirit is eternal.*

*And yet there are not three eternal beings;
there is but one eternal Being.
So too there are not three uncreated or immeasurable beings;
there is but one uncreated and immeasurable Being.*

*Similarly, the Father is almighty,
the Son is almighty,
the Holy Spirit is almighty.*

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*Yet there are not three almighty beings;
there is but one almighty Being.*

*Thus the Father is God,
the Son is God,
the Holy Spirit is God.
Yet there are not three gods;
there is but one God.*

*Thus the Father is Lord,
the Son is Lord,
the Holy Spirit is Lord.
Yet there are not three lords;
there is but one Lord.*

*Just as Christian truth compels us
to confess each Person individually
as both God and Lord,
so catholic religion forbids us
to say that there are three gods or lords.*

*The Father was neither made nor created nor begotten from anyone.
The Son was neither made nor created;
He was begotten from the Father alone.
The Holy Spirit was neither made nor created nor begotten;
He proceeds from the Father and the Son.*

*Accordingly there is one Father, not three fathers;
there is one Son, not three sons;
there is one Holy Spirit, not three holy spirits.*

*Nothing in this Trinity is before or after,
nothing is greater or smaller;
in their entirety the three Persons
are coeternal and coequal with each other.*

*So in everything, as was said earlier,
we must worship their Trinity in their unity
and their unity in their Trinity.*

*Anyone then who desires to be saved
should think thus about the Trinity.*

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*But it is necessary for eternal salvation
that one also believe in the incarnation
of our Lord Jesus Christ faithfully.*

Now this is the true faith:

*That we believe and confess
that our Lord Jesus Christ, God's Son,
is both God and human, equally.*

*He is God from the essence of the Father,
begotten before time;
and He is human from the essence of His mother,
born in time;
completely God, completely human,
with a rational soul and human flesh;
equal to the Father as regards Divinity,
less than the Father as regards humanity.*

*Although he is God and human,
yet Christ is not two, but one.
He is one, however,
not by His divinity being turned into flesh,
but by God's taking humanity to Himself.
He is one,
certainly not by the blending of His essence,
but by the unity of His person.
For just as one human is both rational soul and flesh,
so too the one Christ is both God and human.*

*He suffered for our salvation;
He descended to hell;
He arose from the dead;
He ascended to heaven;
He is seated at the Father's right hand;
from there He will come to judge the living and the dead.
At His coming all people will arise bodily
and give an accounting of their own deeds.
Those who have done good will enter eternal life,
and those who have done evil will enter eternal fire.*

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*This is the catholic faith:
one cannot be saved without believing it firmly and faithfully."*

I hope that these creeds make clearer the foundations of the Faith, that there are ways to properly talk about God as a Trinity. Even if everything prior to this has been incomprehensible and confusing, you can hold steadfast to the teachings of these creeds. For 1,700 years, this has been ubiquitously understood as the historic, orthodox, and Biblical articulation of the Trinity. Believing in these, as the creeds state, is a matter of mere and real Christianity. We will get into the Christological dogmas (that is the teachings relating to the Person and works of Christ) in the next few emails; for now, internalize the wisdom of the Fathers, enabled by the Spirit, as they began to interpret the God that had revealed Himself through the Scriptures in Christ!

4. Why isn't God like Candy Corn? Where Have Bright Minds Screwed Up in the Past?

Now that you are all experts on Trinitarian dogmatics, you are now much better equipped to address those bad analogies I gave earlier. From the glossary, brush up on those last few entries that define common Trinitarian heresies. Then, I want you to watch this very quick video made by LutheranSatire on YouTube. Not only will it quickly teach you the flaws in using analogies to describe the Trinity, but it is one of the funniest videos that I have seen in a while; I promise you that you'll remember the content well after watching this. Here's the obligatory link: <https://youtu.be/KQLfgaUoQCw>.

Now that you have caught up on your Heresy 101 with Donnal and Connal, let's play a fun segment that I like to call **NAME THAT HERESY!** We will go through many of the analogies that I listed at the beginning of this email, and we will separate them by how they misinform us about the Trinity.

NAME THAT HERESY!

The Holy Trinity is like water! Water can exist as a solid (ice), a liquid (water), and a gas (steam). Just like each of these three forms (ice, water, steam) come from H₂O, the three Persons of the Trinity can all be the same one God.

If you were to say, "what is modalism, Alex", then you would be correct! Modalism teaches that God does not essentially *exist* as three distinct Persons, but that God *reveals* Himself to us in three different modes, forms, or persons. The Father becomes the Son, who becomes the Spirit. He is one God, modalists says, but He simply manifests Himself to us as a different Person depending on the



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occasion. The water analogy fits this bill. Water does not simultaneously exist as three distinct Persons in Triunity, but water may only be in one state at one time. Water is ice, which melts into water, which then evaporates into steam. The states of matter do not co-exist in any way in all three states at the same time as a plurality, but changed 'modes' based upon the conditions that they are in. Sorry all you science brains out there... this one is no good! Be sure to

pass this lesson along to Sabellius, who was one of the key proponents of modalism back in the Early Church!

NAME THAT HERESY!

The Holy Trinity is like the Sun! The sun is comprised of the star itself, the rays which proceed from it, and the heat that is produced by it. The Father is like the star, Who emanates/begets the Son, through which there is the Spirit, which is the heat!

Ding ding ding! If you said Arianism, you are correct! Arianism, as explained at length prior, is the belief that the Father created the Son (sometimes extended to the Spirit, if they acknowledge His distinct Personhood) out of a similar substance as Himself. Likewise, the analogy above necessitates that the star *creates* both the rays of light and the heat from its body. If the Father were the star, He would be *creating* the Son (the rays) and the Spirit (the heat). Don't ask Santa what he thinks about that nonsense!



NAME THAT HERESY!

The Holy Trinity is like a piece of candy corn! There are three distinct colors on a piece of candy corn (orange, yellow, and white), yet it is still one piece of candy. Therefore, the three Persons of the Trinity can similarly be distinct but part of the same God.

Oh goodness, where do I begin? My 10-year-old self would be *devastated* to learn that his favorite analogy was heretical. If you identified this statement as Partialism, you've earned the jackpot! Partialism teaches that each Person of the Trinity is a component of God. For all intents

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and purposes, it leads people to assume that the Father is one-third God, the Son is one-third God, and the Spirit is one-third God, and all together they make one God! This denies the full Deity of each Person of the Trinity (Col. 2:9 clearly refutes this). Yes, it is true that God would not be God if any of the Persons could leave the Trinity, but each Person does not constitute a particular part, composite, or percentage of the Godhead. Each Person is fully and 100% God-in-Himself (*autotheos*). The exact same heresy is propagated by the clover analogy, the egg analogy, the triangle analogy, and both of the man analogies.

Hooray! You have now successfully thrown every one of these illustrations to the dust, destroying all your confidence in the knowledge of God's ontological Being with it. In all seriousness, analogies are helpful in grasping concepts which we cannot otherwise imagine or explain. The most intelligent people craft analogies to allow even more people to participate in seriously tough decisions. After all, using the clover analogy, St. Patrick converted the hostile pagans of Ireland into faithful Christians (mind you, these were the same people that enslaved and held him captive for six years after he was kidnapped by Irish pirates). Analogies do wondrous things for the mission of God; there's a reason that Jesus spoke in parables! However, we simultaneously need to understand that analogies, by their nature, will always fall short of the thing that they are trying to explain. This is problematic for all arguments, but especially for the Trinity. What a person believes about the Trinity, theologians advocate from the Early Church to today, is a

matter of salvation... it isn't that you *must* have a perfect understanding of the Trinity to be saved. ***Far from it!*** Instead, we are to affirm with the Scriptures that the Father is fully God, the



Son is fully God, and the Spirit is fully God at the same time from all eternity. Creeds, confessions, and historical theology provide the necessary guardrails to keep us from professing anything different. You don't need to understand the Trinity to be saved (or else nobody would be saved), and you can certainly accept something that is actually heretical and be saved (like the Early Church Fathers). Salvation is by grace through faith alone. However, it does necessarily follow that you have to believe in the *correct* and *true* God, Who does exist as a Trinity. Analogies, while they can be helpful, often pass over the guardrails which the Lord has equipped us with by the creeds

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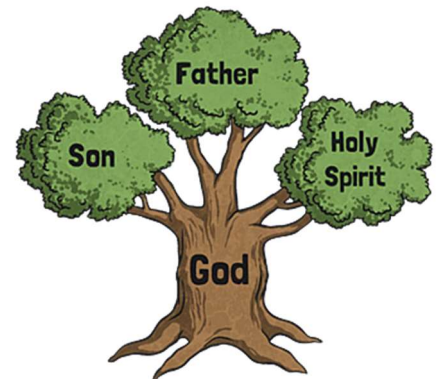
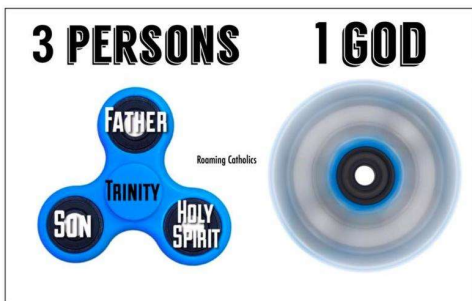


and councils of the ecumenical Church. No, there is no sensical way to explain the Trinity—it defies all human reason! Yet, we may hold steadfast to the wisdom of the Spirit given by the Scriptures and by Apostolic tradition to the Nicene Fathers, who held true to the truths of God. If you ever need to explain the Trinity, do not do so with analogies, unless you can properly explain why they fail. Instead, rely upon the creeds and councils of the Church—Church history is more important than many realize!

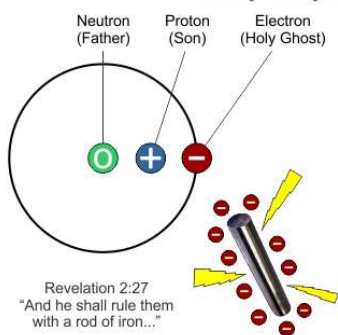
Because you did so well with **NAME THAT HERESY!** (it must be because you are very smart 😊), I thought that I would give you a bonus round! Here are some other analogies I've seen pop up around the Internet (obviously as memes, the superior form of intellectual content); see if you are able to identify which heresy that they fall victim to! Be like Santa, and use those sharp Trinitarian skills of yours to take down those heretics (let's maybe use the gracious and truthful Sword of the Spirit as a weapon, not our fists). If any of y'all go out of the way and actual tell me, maybe I could justify giving out a little something as a prize:

Me *explaining the trinity*

My Friend - So there are 3 gods?



Holy Trinity as an Atom

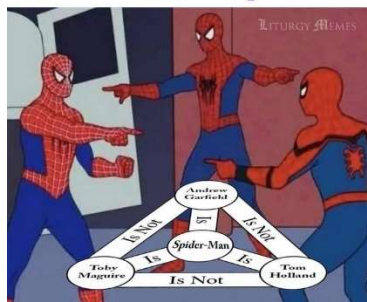


Neutrons in All
Ephesians 4
"One God and Father of all,
who is above all, and
through all, and in you all"

Proton Standing Next to Neutron
Acts 7:56
"And said, Behold, I see the heavens
opened, and the Son of man
standing on the right hand of God"

Electron = Electricity/Power
Acts 1:8
"But ye shall receive power, after that
the Holy Ghost is come upon you..."

And I thought the Holy Trinity
was difficult to explain!



God, before He created the universe



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5. Okay, Okay, I'm Kinda Sorta Understanding This (Maybe)... Sure, God is a Trinity, But What Else Can We Know About Him? What Are Other Attributes of God?

Once establishing that God is necessarily a Trinity (as well as painstakingly trying to determine how that even works), it is reasonable to then examine what else we know about God and His Being. Fortunately, everything that follows is much more logical and coherent to understand than what we have covered so far. We typically speak of God of possessing attributes, or things that belong to the essence of God. There are two categories of attributes that God has: communicable and incommunicable. Communicable attributes are attributes that God shares with His Creation to some extent (all of God's qualities/attributes are infinitely transcendent above ours, but they are not entirely dissimilar)—they are necessarily relational: love, mercy, justness, righteousness, goodness, holiness, faithfulness, trustfulness, wisdom, etc. This is not what we will be talking about today (as I said before, God is a maximally great Being, meaning that He possesses these attributes to their greatest possible ends). The other category is referred to as incommunicable attributes, which we will be covering a small selection here. Incommunicable attributes refer to God's characteristics that belong to Him alone and cannot be transferred. The most circulated examples of these would be the omnis—God is omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent, and omnibenevolent unlike any other creature. However, there are plenty more incommunicable attributes of God that have lost their value in contemporary Christian discourse. People nowadays have a very, very low view of God. Theologians have parsed through the Bible to understand characteristics that make God God, in a sense. The classical (or traditional) theistic position has been mainstream over the course of most of Church history, and I hope to bring y'all into the conversation. Most people have never even heard of these attributes that the Church has identified in God from the beginning; so, after learning the complexities of the Trinity, let's delve even further into theology proper!

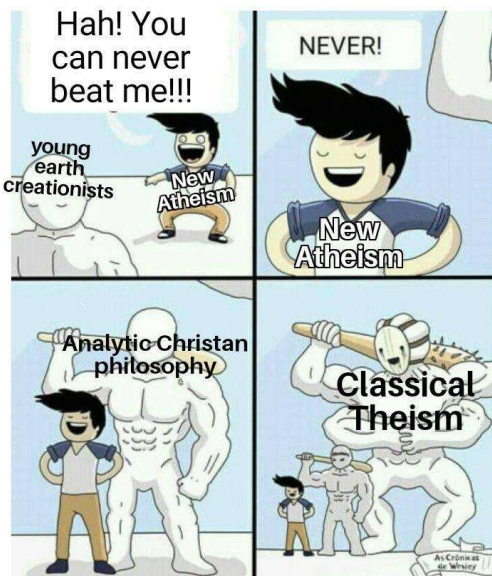
The classical theistic model (that is the model that the Latin/Western Church has used to describe God for most of traditional Church history) articulates four necessary attributes about God: His aseity, His immutability, His simplicity, and His impassibility. These are very bizarre words; I know all too well. But let's take an examined look at what each of these mean, and especially how they tie into the doctrine of God. The easiest of these to grasp is God's aseity. Literally, this can be taken to mean God's 'of-Himself-ness'. God's aseity means that He is dependent upon nothing outside Himself; not only is He perfectly self-sufficient and completely 'other' than all else, but He is also self-derived and self-originate (nothing created God, nor did God 'become' to be... this is a logical contradiction by the very definition of God. Nothing caused God because He is the efficient Cause). The doctrine of aseity protects God's transcendence and His necessity. Because God is of Himself (and nothing more), then He does

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not depend on anything outside of Himself. He cannot be changed or influenced in any way outside of Himself, not by anything in His Creation (all that is not God is necessarily His Creation). It also shows that God exists not by accident, but as the only absolutely essential Being... God, by definition of what it means to be God, has to exist (for those of you curious folk, this logic derives a lot from Aristotle's philosophy, to which the argument was more perfected in the various forms of the ontological argument for the existence of God). This is precisely what God's aseity brings to the table.



Okay, we learned that God cannot be influenced in any way outside of Himself. The next attribute dictates a similar line of argumentation, but in the other direction. God's immutability is the attribute that describes how He is unchanging in Himself (that is in His will, essence, nature, character, perfections, and covenant promises). The Lord Himself declares that "I Yahweh do not change" (Mal. 3:6), while the author of Hebrews adds that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). God cannot enact any change within Himself that alters His Being—Who God was is forever Who God will be. He cannot lie, He cannot change His mind or will, and He cannot betray anything of His own character. He is immutable—completely unchanging within Himself. It is absolutely

essential to the Christian faith that God is immutable. It ensures that every work that God has done, every promise He has ever given to us, will never fail. It is within His essential character that He cannot alter from these promises. We can have hope in our Lord precisely because He does not and cannot change! Imagine the utter disaster it would be for us if God could decide to turn from His promises... praise to God that He is immutable!

Aseity and immutability, while most Christians do not know those terms, are typically affirmed by anyone with a decent grasp on the Faith. Both are clearly taught in the Scriptures, and both are traditionally expounded upon when dealing with God's relationship to man. However, I would bet that most of you are not aware of the next two attributes that we cover, even though they are both necessary corollaries of the first two. The doctrines of simplicity and impassibility have been identified by millennia of Christian thinkers in order to resolve many of the great paradoxes of the Godhead... as always, these are not just manmade articulations, but rooted in the Scriptures and developed in holy tradition.

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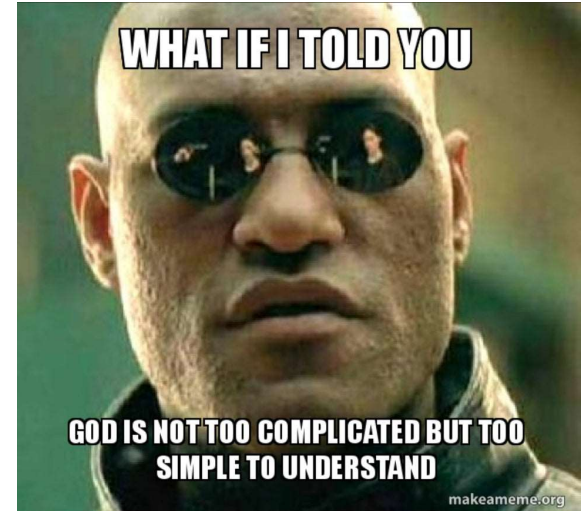
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Divine simplicity, even though it is a complicated doctrine, solves an almost insurmountable number of problems. I guarantee that many of you have confronted these already in your own thoughts: if there are three distinct Persons, how can God truly be one Being? If God is immutable and completely unchangeable by anything in or outside of Himself, how are we to explain the different communicable attributes (how can He be both merciful and wrathful at the same time if He can't change)? These are genuine problems with really tough answers. Luckily, we don't have to come up with these answers ourselves—God has blessed us with the works of His greatest servants across history to answer it for us! The view that the Church has traditionally adhered to is the doctrine of Divine simplicity. God's simplicity teaches, literally speaking, that God is simple. God is not and cannot be made up of any composite parts; the attributes of God are identical to the Being of God.

If this is confusing (which it is), please consider this thought experiment. Humans are composites. We are creatures that are made up of parts—the human body contains an average of 6.5 octillion atoms at its most fundamental level, while we are also a combination of a specific order of organs, bones, sinews, and body parts. Not only this, but humans are both body and soul united into one being. We, by clear observation, are made up of innumerable parts. The same goes for anything in Creation that you could possibly fathom—the spiritual and material cosmos are constructed using simpler parts to make something more complex. Are you following? Good; let's take it up a notch. God, on the other hand, is nothing like His Creation—He does not share in being a composite Being. Why does this follow? Imagine God for a moment, particularly that His goodness and His justness are two genuinely different attributes that He possesses (they are not simple, but that He has these two qualities independently). If these two attributes are truly separate from one another, you should be able to take, say, His goodness away from Him.

What you have left is two pieces—God's goodness in one hand, and everything else in the other hand. Yet, if you take God's goodness away, then He necessarily is not God anymore... God is maximally great, so the absence of one of His attributes means that He ceases to be God entirely. Then what is in your other hand? It cannot be God, for he no longer possesses a necessary attribute of Him being God... but it once was God? What then does it mean to be God? Moreover, if God is a composite which is made from the combination of individual parts, at what point can He go from not God to God? How much do you need to add to this being before it



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possesses Divinity? If certain pieces are needed to ‘build’ God, then why aren’t those pieces God in and of themselves? What percent God is each piece? Isn’t that just Partialism all over again?

As you can see, describing God as having ‘parts’ creates a whole mess of problems. This is exactly why theologians began to articulate the doctrine of simplicity, to say that God is necessarily simple. In other words, a common explanation is this: ***all that is in God is God.***



While it is helpful for us to say that God has this attribute and that attribute, that is simply a way for us finite creatures to understand and talk about God. In reality, all of God’s attributes are one, and all of them are indistinguishable with His Being. God has no parts and no pieces, nor is He a composite of anything—He is strictly and purely simple. This is how we can identify unity within the Trinity. Even with three distinct Persons, the Trinity is one God because God is simple—the Persons of the Trinity are not three different parts to one whole God, but each Person that ***is in God is God.*** They are identical to God’s existence, which is to be. I told you that this would be a complicated doctrine! For now, unless you are super curious about simplicity (which I can point you to many resources where it is explained and defended much better than I ever could), just think of simplicity as the doctrine that states that God cannot be made of parts.

Finally, we reach the doctrine that is under fierce opposition by theologians today—Divine impassibility. Impassibility is a product of the doctrines of aseity and immutability; it states that God cannot experience passions (emotions and suffering) either from within Himself nor effected by His Creation. If God cannot change in or outside of Himself, and emotions are definitionally a change of disposition brought on by a certain cause, then it follows that God cannot experience emotions. The earliest historical articulations of this argument define emotions more as ‘ill passions’, where God unintentionally experiences an emotional change that negatively affects His perfections. This means that God can have emotions to some degree (He can rejoice with gladness, He can be angry, He can be jealous, He can be sorrowful, etc.), but that none of these can be done outside of what He wills. These emotions are not caused by His Creation (God’s emotions do not respond to His Creation unless He effects the emotion within Himself)—this is in accordance with His aseity. On the other hand, God can not actualize an emotion in Himself that contradicts any of His other perfections (for example, He cannot actualize His happiness if it contradicts His holiness and righteousness), nor do these emotional shifts occur outside of His control (unlike humans, who have minimal control over emotions)—this is in accordance with His immutability. This does not mean that God has no real relationship

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with His Creation—quite the contrary. It simply demands that Creation may not influence God in any way that He does not expect or will. Stricter proponents of impassibility, on the other hand, say point-blank that it is impossible for God to experience any emotion whatsoever, not even willed by Himself of Himself; this position I find nearly impossible to uphold Biblically.

I know, all of these are very difficult doctrines to grasp. I tell them to you now not that you become an immediate expert on them (there is a *lot* of philosophical and Biblical nuance behind each and every one of these doctrines and coinciding positions), but to unveil how the Church has historically viewed God. These doctrines were, like the doctrine of the Trinity, developed more acutely as people began to face increasing heresy. Not only this, but difficult doctrines like the Trinity produced a host of further questions that had to be reconciled (most of them still need to be reconciled, and it has been 2,000 years). Aseity, immutability, simplicity, and impassibility affirm the strong Trinitarianism of the Scriptures and defend it well—like any good systematic theological practice, theologians have taken what they've seen taught in the Scriptures and articulated doctrines like this to protect it. These attributes of God are beautiful things, worthy of all praise and honor by our learning of them. Introducing them to you helps to unearth the richness of God, one that has been buried by our culture's vehement secularism! In conjunction with the Trinity, these doctrines flesh out a God Whose majesty is too immense to fathom, too profound to comprehend, too beautiful to lay our eyes upon. This is the powerful and almighty God of the Scriptures, a God to be feared and a God to be praised!

That takes us to the end of the lesson for today! Now that was a doozy. I know how complicated this stuff is; I've spent innumerable hours and many sleepless nights trying to come close to deciphering the paradox of the Godhead, yet have come none the closer to figuring these things out. If nothing else, I pray that you come out the other end with two things: 1.) a deeper appreciation for Church history (which we will never be able to separate ourselves and our faith from) and, more importantly, 2.) a greater sense of awe over Who our Lord truly is. The Trinity is something to bask in, to force us to bow to our knees at the glory that is contained within Him. It is something to delight in—by our union with Christ, we therefore become a part of the *koinonia*-love and fellowship that the three Persons of the Trinity share with one another. Our God is, in and of Himself, a relational God, and we are called to participate in that through Christ's death and resurrection!

Understanding the Trinity gives you a greater appreciation for the God Who has been revealed to us in the Scriptures. It gives the basis for understanding all of Creation and all of

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redemption. It allows us to interpret the works and actions of God, and it gives us a proper baseline to understand what exactly happens in the life, death, and resurrection of Christ. That is precisely where we are heading next—what's the role of the Trinity in the Bible (we will actually exegete the text, Old Testament and New, to see how the Trinity is both taught and how each Person interacts with one Another within the Godhead), and how will all this come together in the Person and work of Christ? I cannot wait to get there with y'all. But for now, that is all I have left. If this has piqued your interest, please don't hesitate to talk with me. I'd love to explain, to clarify, to answer questions, or to dig deeper into anything that I brought up today. Until next time, *tolle lege!*

From Him, through Him, and in Him

Bohdi Hollman

Soli Deo gloria

Analogies for the Trinity

