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DOGMATIC ESSAY:
DE TRINITATE

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INTRODUCTION: THE NATURE OF THE TRINITY

One God. Three persons. The orthodox paradox of this Christian confession confounds many, due to its apparent contradictions, abstractions, and absence from Scripture. From Arius to Augustine and beyond, trinitarian debates have raged even among those who agree that God exists, that the Bible is true, and that it is therefore worthwhile to consider what the Bible says because it reveals the existent God. Although the best discussions of the Trinity begin with an acknowledgment of its inscrutable mystery which eludes the grasp of human reason's highest reach, a sober analysis of the doctrine's canonical presence and historical outworking may help to answer the charges that the Trinity is a nonsensical, unbiblical abstraction worthy of abandonment.

Although it is precisely the Trinity's classical formulation that receives the criticisms just noted, it is important to begin at the end, so to speak, by introducing the operative terms before analyzing the scriptural context *out of which* and the historical context *in which* these trinitarian terms grew. The definitive statement of trinitarian belief is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381 CE, discussed below.[1] In brief, however, Christians confess belief in one God who eternally and only exists in one divine substance, essence, or *ousia*, and in three divine subsistences, Persons, or *hypostases*.[2] One in three, three in one: Father, Son, and Spirit – each Person equally and essentially God, and yet each distinct from the other two.

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[1] All dates CE, unless otherwise noted. Wainwright notes that the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed "has remained the most widely affirmed statement of trinitarian faith in both East and West." Geoffrey Wainwright, "Trinity" in *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer et al.; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 815.

[2] The three terms in each of these two sets will be used synonymously throughout, unless otherwise noted. Substance = essence = *ousia*. Subsistence = person = *hypostasis*. Capitalized "Person" will refer to divine, and not human, personality.

CANONICAL PRESENCE

A common objection to the doctrine of the Trinity as just stated is that it nowhere appears within

the pages of Scripture. And indeed, despite the favorite trinitarian proof-texts in which Father,

Son, and Spirit appear together, "no doctrine of the Trinity in the Nicene sense is present in

[even] the New Testament."[3] However, as Jenson persuasively argues, "the doctrine of the

Trinity is indeed in Scripture, *if* one abandons modernity's notion that statement in so many

words as formulated is the only way that a doctrine can appear there."[4] Instead, the *narrative* of

Scripture portrays the Trinity "by telling a history of God with us that displays three enactors of

that history, each of which is indeed other than the other two and yet is at the same time the same

God as the other two."[5]

These three *dramatis personae Dei*, or "persons of the divine drama," appear throughout

Scripture as God – "as a *persona* in Israel's story – of which he is simultaneously the author."[6]

YHWH – the God of Israel who created the world and delivered through the Exodus – is the

Father by virtue of Jesus' address of him as such.[7] The Son is Jesus of Nazareth by virtue of this

same address, but also in light of passages such as Psalm 2, appropriated in Hebrews 1 to

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[3]   Rusch notes that the binitarian NT formulas are: Rom. 8:11; 2 Cor. 4:1; Gal. 1:1; Eph. 1:20; 1 Tim. 1:2; 1 Pet. 1:21; and 2 John 1:13. The trinitarian NT formulas are: Matt 28:19; 1 Cor. 6:11; 12:4ff.; Gal. 3:11-14; Heb. 10:29; 1 Pet. 1:2. William G. Rusch, trans./ed., *The Trinitarian Controversy* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 2. Without denying the importance of such passages, Jenson rightly laments those who "scrabble around in the Bible for bits and pieces of language to cobble together into a sort of Trinity-doctrine – usually with intellectually lamentable and indeed sometimes heretical results." Robert W. Jenson, "The Trinity in the Bible," *CTQ* 68 (2004): 196.

[4]   Jenson, 197. Emphasis original.

[5]   Jenson, 199. The divinity of the Father is perhaps the easiest to note throughout the Bible. On the divinity of the Son, see John 1, 10; Col. 2; Phil. 2; and Heb. 1. On the divinity of the Spirit, see 1 Cor. 2:11; Heb. 3:7-10; and 10:15-17. I have here stuck to the contours of Jenson's argument in lieu of the common arguments for the divinity of Son and Spirit, e.g.

[6]   Jenson, 198-202. The phrase "*dramatis personae Dei*" is Jenson's adaptation of Tertullian's verbiage.

[7]   Cf. John 5:16-23; Jenson, 199. Although this is almost assuredly an oversimplification, cf. Marshall's claim that "the Father is the God of Israel, the Son is the God of Israel, and the Holy Spirit is the God of Israel, yet they are not three Gods of Israel, but one God of Israel." B. Marshall, "Do Christians Worship the God of Israel" in *Knowing the Triune God* (ed. J. Buckley and D. Yeago; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 258; quoted by Wainwright, 817. However, Jenson's main point still stands, by virtue of Jesus' address to the Father establishing both Fatherhood and Sonship within the Trinity.

identify Jesus as the divine Son.[8] Finally, the Spirit appears as a *persona* of the story, first in the

OT as the Spirit of YHWH which gives life and "keeps the creation moving toward its

fulfillment," and then in the NT as the one in relationship between the Father and the Son, who is

poured out upon the Church.[9]

The significance of trinitarian "proof-texts" mentioned above is that they portray the

three persons of the divine drama in close proximity. Most significant of these is the baptismal

formula of Matthew 28:19, spoken by the Son himself: "...baptizing them in the name of the

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Although the earliest Christians used poignant

trinitarian phrases before the full implications of such had been thoroughly considered, these

biblical patterns provided "the raw data from which the more developed descriptions of the

Christian doctrine of God [would] come."[10] The classical formulation of the Trinity did not arise

from a scriptural vacuum.

HISTORICAL OUTWORKING

Neither was the doctrine formed in a historical vacuum. Instead, as Wainwright notes: "the

classic creeds were being formulated at the same time as the canon of the Scriptures was being

recognized and determined; there was interaction between the two processes, and the Scriptures

and the creeds continue to function reciprocally."[11] The ecumenical creeds – such as the

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[8]   Cf. Ps. 2:7; Heb. 1:1-14. In addition, Jenson (200-3) focuses on showing the presence of the Trinity in the OT, where it is so often neglected, by positing that the Son shows up via the themes of the angel of the Lord, the name of the Lord, and the glory of the Lord..

[9]   Jenson, 199, 204; cf. Gen. 1:2; Ps. 51:11; Isa. 11:2; Ezek. 37:1-14; John 14:15-31; Acts 1:7-8; 2:1-41; Rom. 1:4; 8:11.

[10]   Rusch, 2. Gregory of Nazianzus captures the progressive nature of this scriptural trinitarian revelation well: "the old covenant made clear proclamation of the Father, a less definite one of the Son. The new covenant made the Son manifest, and gave us a glimpse of the Spirit's Godhead. At the present time, the Spirit resides amongst us, giving us a clearer manifestation of himself than before." See Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fifth Theological Oration (Oration 31): On the Holy Spirit*, 14, in *On God and Christ: The Five Theological Orations and Two Letters to Cledonius* (Popular Patristics Series 23; trans. Frederick Williams and Lionel Wickham; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 26.

[11]   Wainwright, 815.

Apostles', Niceno-Constantinopolitan (381), and the Chalcedonian *Definitio Fidei* (451) – serve as an interpretive key to the complex Scriptures, and yet also distill the divine drama of the Bible into a concise summary.[12]

A crucial facet of trinitarian doctrine in which this dialectic took place was the distinction between the *immanent* and the *economic* Trinity – the former referring to the Trinity within itself, and the latter referring to the Trinity's external relationship to the universe. While the majority of Scripture provides portrayals of the economic Trinity interacting with creation, it also offers enticing glimpses into the immanent relationships between the persons of the divine drama.[13] The doctrine that developed from such glimpses offered a way of distinguishing between how God relates to himself and to everything else, but also concluded that "the immanent Trinity lives no other plot than that displayed in the economic Trinity, that when you are taken into the story told in Scripture, you are taken into God himself."[14] In other words, "there is no deeper reality of God lurking in the background" behind the three Persons of the Godhead.[15] Although many of the disagreements took place before the distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity was formalized, the contours of the historical trinitarian debates revolve around where the conceptual boundary lies between the two.[16]

A concern for the preservation of God's *unity* motivated many of the early controversies. For example, Paul of Samosata collapsed the immanent Trinity to the Father alone, pushing the Son and Spirit into the economy, in their respective relations to the human being Jesus and the

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[12]   Jenson, 205; Wainwright, 815.

[13]   Cf. Jesus' "high priestly prayer" of John 17 and the glimpse of the relationship between Father and Son.

[14]   Jenson, 206.

[15]   Jenson, 205.

[16]   That is, while the debates did not originally or chronologically take place in terms of "immanent/economic Trinity," the concept provides a helpful analytical framework when considering the trinitarian controversies. .

apostles – the view known as adoptionism.[17] Similarly, Sabellius pushed all three divine Persons into the economy, positing that the immanent Godhead was one God who exists in three modes or roles of being to the external creation – the view known as modalism.[18] Finally, it was Arius's commitment to monotheism that led him to shrink the immanent Trinity down to the Father alone – concluding that, because God is the indivisible cause of all that exists, he must have existed prior to the Son, who is "not everlasting or co-everlasting or unbegotten with the Father."[19]

Although each of these views would ultimately find condemnation in the creeds of the Church, it was Arius's conception of a created Son that ignited the controversy that led to the Council of Nicaea (325), which refuted Arianism by declaring that the Son is "begotten, not made, being of one substance [*homoousios*] with the Father."[20] However, the trinitarian debates continued, in part because of the relative ambiguity of the term homoousios and the ability of different factions to interpret it as they wished.[21] The years between the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Constantinople (381) were theologically chaotic as Athanasius of Alexandria and the Cappadocian fathers (Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nazianzus, and Gregory of Nyssa) fought for the Nicene view of the Trinity against its detractors, Arian and otherwise.[22]

However, along the lines of Arius's original concerns, if the Son and the Spirit are granted full divinity along with the Father (as they are in the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed), why do Christians confess one God and not three? Gregory of Nyssa addressed these concerns first by appealing to the differences between the trinitarian terms *ousia* (common essence) and

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17   Adoptionism is also known as "dynamic monarchianism." Rusch, 8.
18   Modalism is also known as "modalist monarchianism." Rusch, 9.
19   Arius's "Letter to Alexander of Alexandria," §4, in Rusch, 32.
20   "The Creed of the Synod of Nicaea (June 19, 325)" in Rusch, 49.
21   Rusch, 20.
22   Rusch, 22.

hypostasis (distinct personal subsistence). Belonging to the category of collective or common nouns – which unite by referring to the common nature shared by diverse members of the same category – *ousia* refers to the divine essence or substance, shared equally by the three *hypostases* of the Godhead so that they are properly *homoousioi*, or of the same substance, with one another.[23] However, belonging to the category of individual or proper nouns – which distinguish by referring to only one member of a particular category – *hypostasis* refers to the individual identity or subsistence of each divine Person which demarcates it from the other two.[24] The divine *hypostases* are distinguishable in that "the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost are one in all things save in the being unbegotten [Father], the being begotten [Son], and the procession [Spirit]."[25]

The distinction between a common *ousia* and distinct *hypostases* therefore prevents the collapse of the Trinity, yet through a crucial difference between the distinction-in-unity with regard to humanity and with regard to the divine. After all, it is difficult to ascertain the unifying *ousia* of humanity because the distinct *hypostases* both appear and behave in such discordant ways. Due to their myriad differences and a merely conceptual unity, humans are not properly referred to as one human but many. In contrast, the unity of the three divine *hypostases* is actual, by virtue of the trinitarian rule *opera trinitatis ad extra indivisa sunt*.[26] As Gregory of Nyssa notes, "every activity which pervades from God to creation and is named according to our manifold design starts off from the Father, proceeds through the Son, and is completed by the

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[23]   Gregory of Nyssa, "To Peter his own brother on the divine ousia and hypostasis," 2a-c. in Anna M. Silvas, *Gregory of Nyssa: The Letters* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 250-1; "Concerning that We Should Think of Saying That There Are Not Three Gods to *Ablabius*" in *The Trinitarian Controversy* (trans./ed. William G. Rusch; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 149-51.

[24]   Gregory of Nyssa, "To Peter," 3a, 4d-f in Silvas, 251,3.

[25]   John of Damascus, "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith," I.2, in *Saint John of Damascus: Writings* (trans. Frederic H. Chase, Jr.; Washington D.C.: The Catholic University Press of America, 1958), 167.

[26]   "The external operations of the Trinity are indivisible."

Holy Spirit."[27] Christians worship one God, because although each divine Person is God, "by the same proclamation God is one, because neither in regard to nature [or ousia] nor activity is any difference viewed."[28] Unlike the diverse and discordant human *hypostases*, the divine persons are completely unified in their will and operations. Therefore, in the words of Gregory of Nazianzus: "the Godhead exists undivided in beings divided."[29]

CONCLUSION

To return to what was mentioned at the outset, the best discussions of the Trinity also *end* with an acknowledgment of its inherent mystery which eludes the grasp of human reason's highest reach. Theological modesty is always in order, in part because of the unavoidable limitations of finite human speech about *anything*, much less about the infinite God. Granted, certain ways of framing how God can be one and yet three are better than others, not only based upon their coherence with the traditions of orthodoxy, but also with regard to their impact on other areas of theological concern – such as the atonement and interpersonal relationships.[30] And yet, because true theology is not learning how to speak about God in order to master him intellectually, but in order to worship him faithfully, a persistent lacuna in trinitarian understanding is surely acceptable. For, although the gracious condescension of the triune God enables our faith to seek understanding successfully, the inscrutable mysteries of the same triune God ensure that some understandings will ever transcend our faith's reach.

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27   Gregory of Nyssa, "To Ablabius," in Rusch, 155.
28   Gregory of Nyssa, "To Ablabius," in Rusch, 159
29   Gregory of Nazianzus, *Fifth Theological Oration*, 127.
30   In fact, feminist critiques have helped to address trinitarian sloppiness in theological explorations of the atonement and interpersonal relationships. See Scot McKnight, *A Community Called Atonement* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007), 40-3 and Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1996), 27, 167-190.