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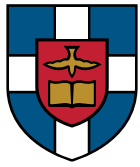

REMEMBERING NICAEA

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Remembering Nicaea

Editorial: Remembering the 1700th Anniversary of the Nicene Creed

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This year is the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. At Nicaea, the church stood for the truth of who God is, along with the glory of our Redeemer, against the heresy of Arianism. Arianism is the view taught by Arius that argued that our Lord Jesus Christ is merely a creature, albeit the first and greatest creature. In denying the deity of the eternal Son of God, Arius failed to understand who our Creator and Lord is as the triune God. In the place of the truth of the God of the Bible, he affirmed an idol—an idol who ultimately is a blank impersonal unity, who is not fully complete in himself, and one who cannot redeem us from the plight of our sin. In fact, if Arianism had won the day, Christianity would have reverted to merely another pagan religion, and the truth of Scripture and the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ would have been lost.

But thankfully, the church stood firm and upheld the truth of Scripture. In contrast to Arianism, the church believed God's own revelation of himself,

revealed over time, and ultimately fully disclosed in the Father's sending of his Son and Spirit. The Son who assumed our human nature in order to dwell among us to accomplish our redemption — a redemption planned between the persons of the Godhead from eternity — and to win for us a new creation by his obedience in life and death as our new covenant head. And the Spirit who was sent by the Father and the Son to bring to completion God's plan so that in the end, we, as God's people, are redeemed, and the triune God is forever praised as our glorious Creator, Lord, and Redeemer. At Nicaea, the church faithfully upheld biblical teaching by rejecting the Arians denial of the deity of the Son and the Spirit and articulated the biblical and dogmatic truth of the Trinity.

In terms of monumental events, Nicaea is one of the most significant events, not only in church history, but also in human history. There is nothing more foundational than to confess correctly who God is. The God of the Bible is the foundation of everything, and the one who deserves all of our worship, love, trust, obedience, and service. And the doctrine of the Trinity is not some strange doctrinal formulation that Christians must believe, but in the end, it carries no significance. Instead, the Trinity is of absolute significance for at least three reasons.

First, the Trinity is the foundation for all theology. Herman Bavinck states it this way: "The entire Christian belief system, all of special revelation, stands or falls with the confession of God's Trinity."[1] By God's self-revelation we discover that the Trinity is God's name (Matt 28:18-20) and that from eternity, the Father, Son, and Spirit have existed as the only true God in the blessed perfection of a fully shared life of love, joy, and communion. We get a sense of this when Jesus, the divine Son, prays to his Father and speaks of the glory and love he has shared with the Father (and Spirit) from eternity (John 17:5, 24; cf. 1:1-2, 18). Since God is complete within himself and in need of nothing (Acts 17:24-25), his choice to share himself with his creation, especially his people, is a free, sovereign, and gracious choice. In fact, the *summum bonum* God has willed for his church is to know *him* as Father, Son, and Spirit, and without the Trinity we do not know who God truly is (John 5:22-23; 17:3). Herman Bavinck is correct again when he argues that what was at stake in "the development of the church's doctrine of the Trinity … was not a metaphysical theory or a philosophical speculation but the essence of the Christian religion itself."[2]

Second, the Trinity is what distinguishes the God of the Bible from all other ideas of "god." In some monotheistic views, especially those who borrow from Scripture such as Islam and various Unitarian conceptions (Socinianism, Jehovah's Witnesses, and now Judaism), there is a "formal" similarity in describing God's attributes, although without the Trinity, this description is "materially" different. But in all non-Christian thought, whether religious or philosophical, there is a uniform rejection of the Trinity. On this point, Christian theology is in total antithesis to *all* non-Christian thought — a significant point to remember in our secular, postmodern, and pluralistic age. Also, given the centrality of the Trinity, it is not surprising that every heresy is an attack on the Trinity, which reminds us that the Trinity is not an insignificant point of doctrine.

Third, without the Trinity, we cannot make sense of God's self-description in Scripture and the Bible's gospel message as revealed through the biblical covenants centered in Christ. As Scripture begins, we are confronted by the eternal, independent, and self-sufficient God. As sin enters the world by human choice and rebellion, given who God is, we realize that sin is a major problem *before* him. Given God's gracious choice to redeem us, the question is how can he do so? Ultimately, we discover that we cannot solve the problem of sin; only *God* can do so. But in God's promise and provision of a Redeemer, we need more than a human deliverer (although we need an obedient, human covenant-keeper to obey for us); we need a divine Son to bear our sin and to satisfy *his* own righteous demand against our sin, along with a divine Spirit to raise us from spiritual death and apply the Son's work to us. In other words, the Bible's story of God, humans, sin, and salvation makes no sense apart from the Father, Son, and Spirit who choose to redeem us by grace, and from beginning to end, accomplish what we need: a *divine* and *triune* work of redemption. Without the Trinity, it is impossible to make sense of how the Bible describes who God is, the incarnation of the divine Son, the substitutionary nature of the atonement, and the work of the divine Spirit.

For these reasons (and many more), the Trinity is not some esoteric point of doctrine. In fact, when the Trinity is rejected, some pagan notion of "god" and some humanistic utopian vision of salvation inevitably attempts to replace it, which in the end, is simply the foolish and rebellious idol-making "constructions" of fallen humanity. This is why Nicaea is one of the most

significant events in all of human history. To formulate correctly who God is, is life, and the only hope for us, but to live in error is death and destruction.

This is also why we are devoting an entire issue of *SBJT* to remember and to celebrate the monumental significance of the Council of Nicaea that occurred 1700 years ago for Christian theology and a proper understanding of the gospel itself. Our articles will not only give some of the crucial history leading up to Nicaea (325) and then to the full-blown formulation of the Nicene Creed at the Council of Constantinople (381), but they will also discuss the biblical warrant for the Nicene Creed itself. In addition, we will offer reflections on key theologians in church history and their contribution and understanding of the significance of the Nicene Creed for the life and health of the church. My prayer is that our focus on the 1700th anniversary of Nicaea will not only remind us of the importance of this event in human history, along with the crucial importance of the doctrine of the Trinity, but even more significantly, that this issue will lead God's people to a greater love, adoration, and trust of our triune God who is worthy of all of our thinking, love, and service. And even more: we, as the church, will be led to proclaim to this poor, lost world the glory of our triune God in the face of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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1 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 2, *God and Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 333.

2 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 2:333.

Creeds and the Gospel: From the Beginnings to the Council of Nicaea (325)[1]

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Perhaps the most central of all Protestant convictions is the affirmation that the Bible stands alone as the authoritative source of truth. From the Reformation slogan *sola scriptura* ("Scripture alone") to John Wesley's famous description of himself as *homo unius libri* ("a man of one book") to the contemporary explanations of what is meant by biblical inerrancy, evangelical Protestants have trumpeted the truthfulness, uniqueness, authority, and sufficiency of Scripture for understanding saving history and for guiding all aspects of Christian life. Some evangelical Protestants have gone as far as claiming that there is no need for any human authorities at all, and within our evangelical movement there is suspicion about any doctrinal statements that might detract from the uniqueness of the Bible. Sometimes this suspicion is directed at "creeds," statements from the early centuries of Christian history such as the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed, statements that the church as a whole has long regarded as normative, even

authoritative. Some evangelicals insist that we need "no creed but the Bible" or "no creed but Jesus."

This anti-creedal tendency in some branches of our evangelical tree is especially poignant now, because this year marks the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea,[2] at which the first version of what we today call the Nicene Creed was published. The creed from the year 325 is technically called the "Creed of Nicaea," and it was later revised and expanded at the Council of Constantinople in 381 into the "Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed." That slightly revised form is what we ordinarily call the "Nicene Creed" today. Most of the Christian world in 2025 is holding major celebrations of the council and creed from 325, which leaves those evangelicals who are suspicious of or opposed to creeds in a rather awkward position. I suggest that while our insistence on the uniqueness of Scripture is absolutely correct, our corresponding suspicion of creeds is based on three misconceptions of what they are and what their purpose is. If we can clear up these misconceptions, we will be in a good position to appreciate the significance of what Christian leaders were doing in the summer of 325, as they published the Creed of Nicaea. In this essay, I hope to address these misconceptions and to explain the events surrounding this historic Council.

Clearing up Three Misconceptions

Creeds are not a Replacement for Scripture

Some Protestants are concerned that the affirmation of creedal authority undermines the unique place of Scripture. This concern is understandable, and the impulse behind it is important and commendable. But we need to recognize that authority is not a zero-sum game. Declaring another document authoritative is not necessarily a threat to Scripture's authority. On the contrary, it is possible that some other document might be considered authoritative precisely because it follows the teaching of the ultimate authority, the Bible. There is no question about the commitment of the early Christian leaders — the people we call the "church fathers" — to the Bible. Some of them had the entire text of Scripture memorized. All of them quoted it extensively in their writings (probably from memory). Many of them spent their whole lives writing biblical commentaries and

patiently reflecting on the meaning of key biblical texts when that meaning was in dispute. And a few of them actually stated what was implicit in the writing of all of them — that no other writing had authority equal to or in place of the Bible. Any other writing that was regarded as normative was so regarded because it followed the Bible, and its authority was understood to be derivative from the Bible. In the same way that a modern statement (for example, the Southern Baptist Convention's "Baptist Faith and Message") is not meant to replace the Bible but to summarize its teaching, the creeds were not at all meant to replace or denigrate the Scriptures.

Creeds are not merely about What *We Believe, but* in Whom *We Believe*

We as Protestants are accustomed to long statements that describe the beliefs that distinguish one group of Christians from another, and we usually call these "confessions of faith." There are Lutheran confessions, Anglican confessions, Reformed confessions, Anabaptist confessions, etc., all dating from the time of the Reformation. There are also more recent confessional statements like the London Baptist Confession (1689), the New Hampshire Confession (1853), and of course, the "Baptist Faith and Message" (2000). These recent documents describe what particular groups of Christians believe, and with these statements in our minds, we tend to think of the ancient creeds as short, old confessions. That is, we tend to assume the creeds are simply about *what* we believe. This assumption shows up in the fact that when Protestant churches do use creeds in public worship, the pastor or other worship leader often introduces the recitation of the creed by asking, "Christians, what do you believe?" But the creeds are not merely about *what* Christians believe. They do not begin, "We believe *that there is* one God ..." as Protestant confessions of faith typically do. Instead, they begin with, "We believe *in* one God ..." or "I believe *in* God ..." They are not primarily "belief *that*" statements but "belief *in*" statements. They are not merely about what we consider to be true; they are also about the one in whom we place our trust, the one to whom we pledge our allegiance.

Creeds did not Originate *in the Midst of Doctrinal Controversy*

Many Protestants have heard of the "Arian Controversy" in the early fourth century and have been told that the Nicene Creed was a response to Arius's

heretical view of the Son of God. This is true, and I'll return to Arius and the Arian Controversy momentarily, but theological controversy was not the source of the Nicene Creed or any other creed. If there had been no Arius, there still would have been a creed very much like the Nicene Creed. How do I know? Because there already were numerous creed-like statements that had been used in worship in the second and third centuries.[3] The Arian Controversy provided the occasion for coalescing various Greek creedal statements into one united creed, not the occasion for concocting a completely new document out of thin air.

Long before Arius (c. 256 to 336 AD) came on the scene, Christian creeds originated in public worship in direct imitation of creed-like statements in the Bible. Early Christians paid close attention to the scriptural affirmation of one God, most notably in Deuteronomy 6:4, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one." They noticed the New Testament's depiction of the Son and the Spirit in relation to the one God, as for example in 1 Corinthians 8:5-6, "There is one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist." They saw the pattern of describing the saving events of Christ's life in creed-like statements, as in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures." And the church fathers began to put these scriptural affirmations together into creeds, short doctrinal statements that Christians could recite.

These early creeds were initially connected to baptism, and so they were called "baptismal symbols" ("symbol" is one of the Greek words for "creed"). The baptismal symbols followed two forms, interrogatory and declarative. In the first, the person about to be baptized was asked "Do you believe in God the Father?" then "Do you believe in the Son of God?" and then "Do you believe in the Holy Spirit?" After each question, the person being baptized would respond with a short statement naming and describing the trinitarian person in whom he or she believed. For example, something like "I believe in Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, suffered and died and rose again." Answering these questions was a public way for a new Christian to pledge his or her allegiance to God, his Son, and his Spirit. By the third century, these interrogatory symbols were turned

into declarative statements: "We believe in one God, the Father ... and in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who was conceived … And in the Holy Spirit." These declarative statements were used in all public worship, not just in baptism. So a new believer being baptized would individually confess faith in Father, Son, and Spirit by answering questions with set statements, and all believers together would corporately confess faith in Father, Son, and Spirit by corporately reciting very similar statements.

There were various versions of these creeds in different languages, used in different places within the Christian world. They differed slightly in wording but not in substance. The most common western one, called the "Old Roman Creed," eventually became the Apostles' Creed, which reached its final form about 700. The various eastern creeds became the exemplars that were combined into the Creed of Nicaea in 325. The differences between the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed are that the former evolved gradually and was never officially approved by the church, whereas the latter was standardized deliberately and rather quickly as a result of the Arian Controversy in the fourth century, and it *was* officially approved by the church at two great councils in 325 and 381.

Thus we can see that creeds do not denigrate the Bible but grow directly out of it. They do not merely describe what we believe but also profess the one in whom we believe. They are not merely the result of doctrinal controversy but grow out of the need for Christians to pledge their allegiance to Father, Son, and Spirit. As a result, Protestants need not be suspicious of them; instead, they can be an important part of our worship. But with all of this background in mind, we still recognize that the Arian Controversy of the fourth century *was* a major crisis in the Christian church, and that this crisis *did* lead to the specific wording of first the Creed of Nicaea in 325 and then the final version of the Nicene Creed in 381. How then did Nicaea — both the Creed and the Council — come about?

The Road to Nicaea

What led to the Council of Nicaea?

In the year 318 or 319, a man named Arius wrote a letter to Alexander, the bishop of Alexandria in Egypt. Arius was probably from Libya and seems to have studied in Syrian Antioch before he settled in Alexandria, where he

became an elder in the church. In his letter, Arius famously called the Son a "creature" and claimed that "before he was begotten, he did not exist" and therefore that "he is not co-everlasting with the Father."[4] These startling claims immediately created an uproar in the Alexandrian church and beyond. Bishop Alexander wrote to refute Arius's letter, others quickly chimed in as well, and Emperor Constantine sent his most trusted theological advisor, Hosius of Cordoba (Spain), to investigate the matter.

Arius's claims arose as a result of logical and spiritual concerns. Logically, Arius reasoned from human beings to God. Humans beget sons and daughters in time, through a physical process, and so of course the sons and daughters must be younger than their parents. If the Son of God is *begotten*, as the Bible obviously says he is, then to Arius that must mean that the Son came into existence and is "younger" than the Father.[5] Thus, he was created and therefore not eternal or equal to the Father. More important than Arius's logical reasoning, though, was his spiritual understanding of salvation. To Arius, the point of existence was to advance toward God. The Son was created (and therefore lower than God) and called to advance toward God, to become God by his own self-improvement. According to Arius, we too were and are created lower than God and called to advance to him, following the pattern and example given to us by the Son.

As is often the case, the theological history of Nicaea is inseparably tied to the political history of the era. After a major persecution of Christians under the Roman Emperor Diocletian, Constantine had begun taking control of the Roman Empire. As is now famous, in October 312, when he was about to fight the decisive battle that conquered Rome itself, Constantine saw a vision, declared himself a Christian, and won the battle. At that point, the persecution of Christians in the western part of the Roman Empire was effectively ended. However, even though he had taken Rome, it would take Constantine another twelve years to solidify his control over the rest of the empire — during which time, Arius was actively promoting his views. Finally, in September 324, Constantine defeated his final foe, Licinius, and Christians throughout the Roman world suddenly found themselves supported by a Christian emperor and by imperial power. But as soon as Constantine had finished putting down his political rivals, a theological controversy was threatening to tear his newly-united Christian empire apart.

While Constantine was busy uniting the Roman empire, bishops and church leaders across the nation were producing a flurry of writings to address the Arian question. Early in 325, just a few months after the empire was united, Hosius of Cordoba chaired a small council in Antioch that condemned Arius's teaching, and he advised Constantine to call a larger council to provide widespread confirmation of the condemnation. Constantine complied by calling a council, which was initially slated for Ancyra (modern day Ankara, in north central Turkey) but then moved to Nicaea to be closer to the imperial residence. Constantine invited all 1,800 bishops in the Roman Empire, and about 300 came. While Constantine surely had little understanding of the theological issues involved — and contrary to some opinions, he probably had no substantive influence on the proceedings — he did have a vested interest in the production of a united statement, and he attended and directed the proceedings accordingly. The council met from May through July 325.

The opposition to Arius at the council included Hosius of Cordoba, who presided, Alexander of Alexandria, and Alexander's young secretary, a brilliant theologian in his late twenties named Athanasius, who would go on to be the most famous figure in the entire Arian Controversy. Arius had a few supporters from Libya and one major ally, Eusebius of Nicomedia, bishop of the city where the imperial court was based. The vast majority of the bishops present may not have had a clear idea what the issues were until after they arrived, but Hosius and his allies easily convinced virtually everyone that Arius's ideas of a creaturely son and salvation as an ascent to God were incompatible with Scripture and the Christian faith. The question of what to place in opposition to Arius was more nettlesome, however. Various Greek baptismal symbols were brought forward as models, and on the basis of these, the Creed of Nicaea was composed.

What Does the Creed of Nicaea Emphasize?

The creed written and adopted at Nicaea in 325 reads as follows (my translation, with sections divided and numbered for reference):

> 1. We believe in one God, the Father who rules over all, the creator of all things visible and invisible.

2a. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father as only begotten, that is, from the *ousia* of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not created, *homoousios* with the Father, through whom all things came into being, both in heaven and in earth.

2b. Who for us human beings and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became human. He suffered and the third day he rose, and ascended into heaven, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

3. And in the Holy Spirit.

4. But those who say, "Once he did not exist," or "Before he was begotten he did not exist," or "He came into existence out of nothing," or who assert that he, the Son of God, is of a different *hypostasis* or *ousia*, or that he is a creature, or changeable, or mutable, these the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes.

The earlier Greek baptismal symbols typically had three sections, one each on the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (sections derived from the three baptismal questions of the interrogatory creeds). In comparison with those templates, the Creed of Nicaea is very different in its proportions. The second section on the Son is vastly expanded from what was typical at the time, the section on the Holy Spirit is rather paltry in comparison, and a fourth section condemning various statements by Arius and the Arians about the Son is added. It is obvious that the bishops' attention was on the relation of the Son to the Father. As a result, we can see that at this council, a creed whose primary purpose had been to declare Christians' allegiance to the three trinitarian persons was modified in order to address a particular theological problem. Although the creed did not take its *origin* from the Arian Controversy, it has certainly been influenced significantly by the need of the hour. Accordingly, to see the main emphases of the Creed of Nicaea, we need to look carefully at the vast expansion of the typical section on the Son into sections 2a, 2b, and 4. When we do that, three major emphases emerge.

First, the creed goes to great lengths to assert the Son's eternity and equality to the Father. He is not begotten in the sense of being created and coming into existence, as Arius claimed. Instead, he is begotten in the sense of belonging to the very essence (*ousia*) of God, sharing the same characteristics that describe what it means for God to be God. Although

he is *from* God the Father, he *is* God, light, and true God, just as God the Father is. One may not say that there was ever a "once" (in time or before it) when he did not exist.[6]

Second, the creed insists that our salvation depended on the Son's coming down to earth, not (as Arius thought) on creatures' ascent to God. The very heart of the creed is its ringing statement about the Son's mission, "Who for us human beings and for our salvation came down and was incarnate and became human." To be saved, we human beings need more than just instruction from God, assistance from God, or even the indwelling of God to help us rise up to him. We cannot ascend to God, with or without divine assistance. If we are to be saved, the one who is himself Light from Light and true God from true God had to come down to us, and the creed affirms in no uncertain terms that he has done so.

Third, in the midst of a host of words and phrases taken from the Bible, the creed uses three philosophical words not found in Scripture. One of the words used to show the Son's equality to the Father is *homoousios*, which means "of the same essence" or "of the same being." And in section four, the creed condemns those who say the Son is "of a different *hypostasis* or *ousia*" than the Father, that is, of a different substance or essence. Why did the bishops at Nicaea use these strange, philosophical words? Three decades later, Athanasius would answer this question by saying that the delegates wanted to stick to biblical words and phrases alone, but as they brought up various biblical expressions, the Arians in the room were caught winking among themselves as they imagined how they might twist those expressions to support their view. Athanasius insists that that bishops believed they needed to collect the sense of the Scriptures using a single word that the Arians could not twist.[7] The use of philosophical words for "substance," "essence," and especially "one in essence" was driven by this concern.

Overall, then, the main thrust of the Creed of Nicaea is very clear. We cannot ascend to God, so if we are to be saved, God has to come down to us. Therefore, Jesus cannot be a created being who himself had to ascend to God. He must be, and he is, the eternal Son of God himself, who has personally come down to earth through the incarnation in order to accomplish our salvation. When we affirm our faith in Father, Son, and Spirit using the Creed of Nicaea, it is *this* Son whom we affirm, because we affirm that the descent of this Son to earth is what we needed to be saved.

Why was there Still Controversy after Nicaea?

The Creed of Nicaea was formally ratified on June 19, 325. Only three people, Arius himself and two Libyan bishops, refused to sign. All three were exiled, and Arius's writings were condemned. One might have thought that this would be the end of the matter, but in fact, controversy continued for more than half a century, leading up to the Council of Constantinople in 381. Why the continuing conflict?

There were various reasons, including a great deal of political instability in the newly-Christian Roman Empire. After Constantine died in 337, his sons vied for control of the empire, and one of his sons, Constantius, leaned more toward the idea that God the Son is inferior to the Father. Constantius put a great deal of pressure on the church over the next few decades. But more important than such imperial meddling was uncertainty about the philosophical words the bishops had felt compelled to use at Nicaea. As we have seen, they used *hypostasis* and *ousia* as synonyms, referring to the essence or substance of God. That is, the two words described what all three persons share in common. But many Greek-speaking Christian theologians used the word *hypostasis* in the sense of "person." Thus, some people were speaking of one *ousia* and three *hypostases* (that is, one essence and three persons, although it could sound like one essence and three substances) in God, while others were speaking of one *ousia* and one *hypostasis* (that is, one essence and one substance, although it could sound like one essence and one person). The different uses of the word *hypostasis* created massive confusion in the middle of the fourth century. The word *homoousios* was even more confusing. It had a checkered past, because a famous but shadowy heretic named Paul of Samosata had allegedly used the word in the third century, and many people thought it meant not just that the Son has the same essence as the Father, but even that the Son is the same person as the Father himself.

As a result, even though the central affirmations of the Creed of Nicaea were clear, these three words created problems and led to on-going confusion and conflict. That conflict and its resolution at the Council of Constantinople in 381 are a story for another article. But the confusion generated by these words should not blind us to the great achievement of Nicaea. For our salvation, Jesus Christ had to be, and he is, true God from

true God, equal to the Father in all ways. For our salvation, Jesus who is true God from true God had to, and did, come down by genuinely becoming truly human in order to live, die, and be raised on our behalf. This is the Christian faith, based on the testimony of the Scriptures.

Conclusion: Nicaea and Evangelicals Today

In this article, we have seen that the church fathers who gathered at Nicaea in 325 did not at all intend to write a document that would take the place of Scripture or diminish its authority. Instead, they sought to modify existing creeds — documents that functioned as pledges of allegiance to Father, Son, and Spirit — in order to specify precisely who Jesus Christ is, as he is described in the Bible. Moreover, we have seen that the fathers at Nicaea believed they needed to use a few words not present in the Bible itself. The fact that those words were controversial might lead us to say we should use only biblical words, but we need to remember that Arius himself used the words of Scripture. He disastrously misunderstood those words, and in the process heretically misunderstood Jesus Christ, so much so that a "Christ" who was like Arius said he was could not have saved us. When the truth of the Gospel is at stake, precision is necessary in order to convey biblical and saving teaching accurately, and sometimes even non-biblical words can be crucial in distinguishing truth from error. That is why the word *homoousios* — although controversial at the time — has gone on to become the most famous theological term in Christian history. And the Creed of Nicaea — augmented later to include a fuller description of the Holy Spirit — has become the most authoritative Christian document outside the Bible itself.

To deviate from the Creed is to deviate from Scripture itself — to embrace a Jesus who is less than God and a salvation that is about human ascent rather than divine descent. As evangelicals today, we would do well not only to celebrate the Nicene Creed, but to embrace it as authoritative for our churches and recite it as congregations. For 1,700 years, this creed has served as one of church's first bulwarks against heresies by clarifying what the Bible teaches about Christ and the salvation he came to earth to accomplish. Let us hold fast to Nicaea and keep our sheep protected in the truth, safe from the persistent falsehoods this creed rebuffs.

1 This article is closely related to chapters two and four of the following book: Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019). It was also originally published at https://christoverall.com/theme/the-nicene-creed-1700-years-of-homoousios/.

2 Nicaea was on the south side of the Bosporus, in what is today the Asian side of Istanbul.

3 See Fairbairn and Reeves, *Story of Creeds and Confessions*, 26-36, for some of these.

4 Arius, *Letter to Alexander of Alexandria*, in *The Trinitarian Controversy*, ed. William G. Rusch (Sources of Early Christian Thought; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1980), 31-32.

5 I write "younger" in quotes because Arius did not say the Son came into existence at some point *in time*. Rather, he believed that the Son came into existence before there was time. For Arius, God's very first act was to bring his Son into existence, and then after that he made space and time, and the clock started ticking, as it were. So, there was no "time" when the Son did not exist, and he was not technically "younger" than the Father, but he *did* (according to Arius) come into existence at some point. Arius' view differs radically from the biblical teaching that the begetting of the Son is not only outside of time, but it is truly an eternal begetting. The Son is just as eternal as the Father is; there has never been a point — either in time or before it — when he did not exist.

6 See footnote five above for a more detailed discussion on the difference between the Nicene theologians and Arius on questions on the Son's begottenness in relation to time and eternity. The Nicene theologians held what would later become known as the doctrine of eternal generation of the Son.

7 Athanasius, *Defense of the Nicene Definition* 20, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, vol. 4, 163-4.

From Nicaea to the Full Nicene Creed: Sixty Years of Confusion and Controversy[1]

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Although church history has bequeathed many famous heroes to posterity, few people have ever heard the name of Cadmus of Bosporus. Even the most knowledgeable church historians would be hard pressed to place him. He was an obscure bishop from the Crimean Peninsula along the coast of the Black Sea. His contributions to church history remain entirely unknown to us except for one thing: his signature. In the ancient manuscript lists for the Council of Nicaea, Cadmus (or *Kadmos* in Greek) appears as the final signatory — number 220 — who put his name to the Creed of Nicaea.

When the ink of Cadmus's signature had dried on the parchment and all the bishops went home after the summer of 325, it's tempting to believe the Trinitarian controversy had been solved forever. We like our history in neat packages. We tell ourselves that once the council had done its job, orthodoxy reigned forever after. The good guys had won the day. The bad guys — the instigator Arius and two recalcitrant Libyans who joined him — had been crushed underfoot like heretical snakes. Greek Orthodox icons still depict Arius groveling at the feet of the triumphant councilmen. Some icons even show St Nicholas of Myra — the inspiration for the later figure of Santa Claus — giving

the rebellious heretic a well-deserved slap to the face. The deity of Christ had triumphed, never again to be questioned. All of this sounds great to our ears — except it's not what happened. The real events that unfolded in the decades after the council were much more messy.

The Fate of Arius

Though Arius had been excommunicated, he didn't disappear into the dustbin of history. He hung around Palestine and the eastern Roman Empire, where his theological ideas found widespread support even if few people attributed them to their ostensible founder. Among those who sympathized with Arius's type of thinking was the great church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea. To complicate matters, another prominent supporter of Arius — perhaps the most powerful bishop of his age — also bore the name Eusebius. His church at Nicomedia was a see in one of the main imperial capitals, so this second Eusebius was well connected to the political world. He was a close confidante of Emperor Constantine's sister, Constantia. Through her, he had access to Constantine himself. In fact, he was distantly related to the imperial family.

Even after the Council of Nicaea rejected Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia continued to support the exiled cleric. This action angered Constantine, who wasn't particularly committed to any particular form of Trinitarian theology but wanted ecclesiastical unity above all else. He sent Eusebius away for continuing to stir the Arian pot. Though Eusebius had put his name on the Nicene Creed, it was widely recognized that he had "agreed to subscribe with hand only, not heart."[2] And he refused to sign his name to the condemnations of Arius.

Constantine wanted his impressive council to put a final end to the debate and bring the empire back into theological agreement. But when a few years passed and it became obvious that "Arian" kinds of thinking (more on that term in a moment) would continue to proliferate, Constantine found himself open to compromise. Since the Arian perspective hadn't faded away but only grew stronger, Constantine decided the best path to unity would be to fudge the language of Nicaea in ways that all parties — or at least the main ones — could live with.

Eusebius of Nicomedia saw his chance at restoration. He humbly—though perhaps not entirely honestly—told a council of churchmen, "If you should now think fit to restore us to your presence, you will find that we agree with you on all points, and agree fully in your decrees."[3] Since the emperor regarded this recantation as satisfactory, Eusebius found himself ushered back into the hallways of the imperial palace and the churches of the tetrarchic capital. He began to advocate for Arianism in impactful ways that a minor prelate like Arius never could have achieved.

In the end, Arius faded off the stage of church history, but not before going out with a bang. His cataclysmic demise was preceded by seeming success. With help from his supporters, he managed to get himself reinstated into church fellowship at a Jerusalem council in 335. He was even granted an audience before Constantine where he swore allegiance to the Nicene Creed. But in stating his personal faith, Arius only affirmed that God's Son was begotten of God "before all ages," not that he was—and here is the crucial Nicene point—*eternally* begotten and thus always existent. Arius left open the possibility that there was a time when Christ "was not."[4] Nevertheless, his creedal affirmation was good enough for Constantine, who sent Arius back to Alexandria in good standing.

Controversy immediately broke out in Egypt because the city's young bishop, Athanasius, knew about Arius's theological duplicity and refused to accept him into fellowship. Nicaea's vital and inviolable doctrine taught that Christ was consubstantial and coeternal with the Father, which Arius actually denied no matter what Constantine believed. The complex politics of the times, which were intertwined with theology, caused Athanasius to be exiled. Yet Arius was also summoned back to Constantinople (newly established as the main imperial capital) to account for his problematic doctrine and the ongoing church strife.

The local bishop at Constantinople, Alexander, adhered to Nicene Trinitarianism, so he rejected Arius just like the leaders in Egypt had done. He refused to admit Arius to communion. But over in Nicomedia, Eusebius was pulling strings to get Alexander deposed from church office. In response, Alexander doubled down, not into logical arguments and politicking, but prayer and fasting. He shut himself in the Constantinople's greatest church, Holy Peace, and prostrated himself before the altar, adding a flood of tears to his prayers for several days

and nights. His petition was simple. If Arius's views were right, Alexander prayed he wouldn't have to witness the day appointed for their discussion; but if the Nicene view was correct, Arius should suffer God's righteous punishment for heresy.

Soon enough, Alexander was proven right in a dramatic way. According to the church historian Socrates Scholasticus (not the same man as the philosopher of similar name), a divine judgment struck Arius the day before he was to be admitted to communion at Constantinople. Socrates records that "a terror arising from the remorse of conscience seized Arius, and with the terror a violent relaxation of the bowels: he therefore enquired whether there was a convenient place near, and being directed to the back of Constantine's Forum, he hastened thither. Soon after a faintness came over him, and together with the evacuations his bowels protruded, followed by a copious hemorrhage, and the descent of the smaller intestines: moreover portions of his spleen and liver were brought off in the effusion of blood, so that he almost immediately died."[5]

In Socrates's day, passers-by would still whisper and point at the dreadful latrine where the arch-heretic had met his ghastly end. The original account of these events came from the pen of Arius's mortal enemy, Athanasius. He interpreted the scene biblically, equating it with the death of the traitor Judas who "fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out" (Acts 1:18). But it's debatable whether these events happened to Arius exactly like the ancient historians described. Exaggeration and over-spiritualization characterize the narratives. Some modern scholars have even suggested an alternate theory: instead of divine judgment, Arius might have been poisoned by his opponents.

Whatever the case, Arius had been suddenly removed from the stage. Shortly thereafter, Bishop Alexander died, and so did Emperor Constantine (though not before being baptized on his deathbed by Eusebius of Nicomedia). As the decade of the 340s began, the views of Arius had been invigorated with new life despite the death of their namesake. It was time for the next generation of orthodox theologians to rise up and defend Nicaea. The energetic Athanasius was ready to go to war against the adherents of "Arianism." But what exactly did that term mean?

Athanasius against "Arianism"

Athanasius found it convenient to lump all his opponents together and brand them with the name of the heretic who had died such an ignominious death. His four-volume broadside *Against the Arians* takes his enemies to task without remorse. But modern scholars aren't keen to use "Arianism" as a catch-all term. For one thing, the various outlooks differed from one another, as well as from Arius's own views. Sometimes, the groups mutually condemned each other. Furthermore, the adherents of these views didn't necessarily trace themselves to Arius as some sort of honorable founder. They derived their views from the pages of Scripture and what they considered long-standing Christian principles that pre-dated the rise of Arius.

Nevertheless, one key element bound these views into a single category: their shared opposition to Nicaea's term *homoousios* (the Greek word *homos* means "one, same" and *ousia* means "substance"). The various anti-Nicene parties viewed that repugnant term as a form of Sabellianism (today often called modalism) which collapsed the Trinity into a unity that wrongly conflated the three persons as a single being. Although that wasn't Nicaea's intent, its opponents thought it did precisely that. Their collective denial of consubstantiality between the Father and Son made Athanasius view them as a single "Arian" enemy, like a hydra with many snarling heads but the same essential body. For the sake of convenience, we'll use the term "Arianism" to describe the anti-Nicene views that Athanasius spent his life combatting.

Because of all the political intrigue that went along with the theological wrangling, Athanasius was kicked out of his Alexandrian church five different times. The emperors either commanded that he leave or local threats made it too dangerous for him to stay. Sometimes, he managed to escape to the Egyptian countryside or the remote deserts of the Upper Nile, where the ascetic monks took him in and gave him shelter. Other times, Athanasius was exiled all the way to the western empire, to Rome or even as far away as Trier in Germany.

Athanasius being gone from his church gave Arianism the freedom to gain more ground. One eyewitness of those times, the great biblical scholar Jerome, remarked that despite the seeming victory at Nicaea, a few years later, Arianism had triumphed in its place. When an Arian creed

was published at another council as an attempted replacement for the one from 325, Jerome could scarcely believe it. "The Nicene Faith stood condemned by acclamation," he lamented. "The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian."[6]

For many years, Bishop Athanasius represented a lone voice striving to preserve the doctrine of the Trinity against those who would water it down by making Christ in some way inferior to his Father. Despite such fierce opposition from every direction, Athanasius took his stand on the full deity of Christ and would not budge. Because of his dogged determination to defend the Trinity, church history has described him with the slogan *Athanasius contra mundum*. This Latin phrase means "Athanasius against the world"—and in a very real sense, during the middle decades of the fourth century, that was true. Almost everyone had taken up a different view from Nicaea.

What were those erroneous views? Three main forms of Arianism developed in the mid-fourth century: (1) *Homoeans*: Christ is "similar" to the Father, yet nothing is said about his essence or substance; (2) *Homoiousians*: Christ's essence (*ousia*) is "similar" (*homoi-*) to the Father's yet not exactly equivalent (*homo-*), and therefore is inferior; (3) *Anomoeans*: the prefex "an-" turns "similar" into "dissimilar." This was the most radical Arian view, stating that Christ was fundamentally dissimilar to the Father and therefore a lesser divine being.

Whatever the nuances of these outlooks, Athanasius viewed them as a common enemy. He rightly understood the Christian gospel required a Savior who was one with God in every way, yet also fully human. Only then could Christ bind himself to the people of salvation, internalize them into his very being, and elevate them back to the divine life from which he had come. In Peter's terminology, Christians would become "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet 1:4). Or as Jesus himself had declared to his Father about believers, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:22). Athanasius understood that only a fully consubstantial Son of God could achieve "so great a salvation" (Heb 2:3).

Labors of the Three Cappadocians

Bishop Athanasius, the courageous yet often lonely torchbearer of Nicaea, finally received some heavy-duty theological assistance during the last ten years of his life. Two brothers and one of their friends burst onto the church scene, offering their substantial intellectual firepower to the Nicene cause. They were Gregory of Nazianzus (329–390); Basil of Caesarea (330–379); and his younger brother, Gregory of Nyssa (335–395). Because the cities where they ministered were all located in Cappadocia, these three men are often grouped together based on their home region. Down in Egypt, the beleaguered Athanasius definitely appreciated this newfound source of support!

And it came just in time. A group of non-Nicene theologians had emerged with a problematic doctrine about the Holy Spirit. They are known to history as the *Pneumatomachians,* which means the "Spirit Fighters"—not that they fought against the Spirit himself, but only his deity. Their main leaders didn't accept the *homoousios* term from Nicaea. On the other hand, they weren't extreme Arians who called Christ a creature. Instead, they accepted the *homoi–* prefix that allowed Christ to be "similar" to the Father, possessing a lower kind of deity. But when it came to the Holy Spirit, the Pneumatomachians denied his deity altogether. The Spirit was even less similar to God than Christ—a high-level being, yet in the distant third rank. He wasn't to be worshiped or glorified equally with the Father.

The Three Cappadocians took it upon themselves to engage the Spirit Fighters and refute their low view of the Holy Spirit. Along with Athanasius, the Cappadocians articulated a doctrine of the Spirit's full and equal deity to that of the Father and Son. Due to these combined efforts, the Arians and Spirit Fighters found themselves pushed back in ways they hadn't been for decades. Even when Athanasius died in 373, the Cappadocian fathers continued their Trinitarian work. At last, the theological balance seemed to be tipping in favor of Nicaea and the *homoousios* clause. The ecclesiastical world was ready to apply this term to all three Trinitarian persons. And at that very moment, as the sovereign timing of God would have it, things were beginning to change in the political realm as well.

Triumph of Nicene Orthodoxy

In the year 379, six years after the death of Athanasius, a man came to power in the eastern half of the empire whose religious policies the Alexandrian bishop surely would have appreciated. Contemporary accounts portray Theodosius the Great as a strong Christian, but like Constantine before him, today's historians debate how authentic his piety may have been. There are good reasons to think he grew up in Spain in a theologically conservative environment that affirmed the creed of Nicaea as orthodox. So when Theodosius came to power, that was the kind of Christianity he wanted to see established.

He immediately got busy. His so-called *Edict of Thessalonica* (380) decreed that all his subjects must follow the faith held by the bishops of Rome and Alexandria. The edict declared that "we shall believe in the single Deity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, under the concept of equal majesty and of the Holy Trinity. We command that those persons who follow this rule shall embrace the name of Catholic Christians."[7] At this historical moment, the Roman Empire legally embraced Nicene, "catholic" Christianity as its official replacement for paganism.

Upon his arrival in Constantinople, Theodosius summoned its Arian bishop and asked him to recant. When the man refused, Theodosius banished him, then selected an orthodox substitute: Gregory of Nazianzus, the leader of the Three Cappadocians. With Gregory as the official civic bishop, the churches of the eastern imperial capital would be under the supervision of a staunch Nicene Christian, just like at the great cities of Rome and Alexandria.

Yet one task remained unfulfilled. Law courts and government edicts couldn't properly explain sound doctrine; only the church could do that. Theodosius understood that while the Council of Nicaea's authority should remain unquestioned, the precise meaning of its creed needed clarification. Not only did it have the awkward anathemas attached to it, the creed also didn't spell out Trinitarian pneumatology with enough specificity. It was time for a second great council to address these matters and entrench Nicene orthodoxy once and for all.

According to ancient tradition, over three hundred church fathers had gathered at Nicaea for the original council in 325. Five and a half

decades later in 381, the number of attendees was half as large. The second convocation of bishops was also less worldwide than the first. No one came from the western empire, not even from Rome, and even some of the easterners had to leave early. Nevertheless, the Council of Constantinople is considered the second of the seven greatest councils in all of church history. Its creed is the one that Christians recite today as the "Nicene Creed."

Unfortunately, we know even less about the actual proceedings of the second council than we do the first. No single venue housed the council meetings; apparently it convened in various churches across the eastern capital. Its main, overriding purpose was to reaffirm the faith that had been laid down at Nicaea.

At some point, a creed was put together. The traditional view of its formulation, held through many centuries of church history, claims the new creed was just an expansion of Nicaea's original version. But in modern times, attentive scholars have questioned this. Out of the 178 Greek words in the Nicene Creed, only thirty-three can be attributed to the earlier version from the first council. The word order varies as well. Apparently, the council members at Constantinople used a different confession of faith to put together the second version of the creed.

One of the most obvious differences from the 325 version is the omission of the anathemas at the end. Those curses had arisen in the highly polarized context of the first council. But the second council, consisting of already-convinced Nicene delegates, didn't feel the need to include any such denunciations. Today's Christians can be grateful for that. Churchgoers who recite creeds want to confess their faith in common with the saints of the ages, not call down divine judgment on heretics.

The Nicene Creed's first article about the Father differs from the 325 version only in its wording, not its content. Just like before, so here, God the Father is identified as the maker of everything that exists. All ancient creeds began with a statement about the Creator God.

The second article on the Son contained more variance from the 325 version. Many of these differences amounted to nuances of wording or noncontroversial expansions. The new references included Christ's crucifixion "under Pontius Pilate," his burial, his resurrection "according to the Scriptures" (1 Cor 15:4), his seat "at the right hand of the Father" and his return "in glory." The claim that the incarnation happened "by the power

of the Holy Spirit" and "from the Virgin Mary" was nothing more than a clarification based on Luke's account of the Annunciation in his gospel. These Christological adaptations didn't change anything essential from the original Nicene formula. They were long-standing confessions of the ancient church that appeared often in other baptismal creeds.

Yet there were some meaningful changes as well. The assertion in the 325 version that Christ exists "out of the substance [*ousias*] of the Father" was omitted in 381. Probably, this was because the *homoousios* clause already covered that ground, so there was no need to repeat it.

The most significant expansion between the creeds of 325 and 381 occurred in the third article. The original creed had simply said, "We believe in the Holy Spirit." But since that time, the Spirit Fighters had come on the scene and the Three Cappadocians had engaged them with a theological counteroffensive. In the end, the creed affirmed that the Holy Spirit is to be worshiped and glorified with the Father and Son. Yet the text didn't call the Spirit consubstantial—a potential shortcoming of the Nicene Creed.

A final important change to the pneumatological third article was its inclusion of some assertions about the church and the end times. The new wording affirmed that there is "one holy catholic and apostolic church." The council fathers also stated, "We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come."[8] With these new affirmations clearly laid out, the final version of the Nicene Creed was ready for use in the Christian centuries to come.

The Trinity as the Gospel

Why does all this matter? Was it just pointless wrangling about theological minutiae? Not at all. The essential distinction between Nicene Trinitarianism and any type of Arianism hinges on one key question: Does the Son share equally in the deity of the Father? If the two of them are consubstantial and coeternal—as Athanasius and the Cappadocians insisted—it means their deity is entirely equal. But if the Son is only "similar" to the Father, or perhaps even "dissimilar," it demotes the Son's deity so he falls short of being fully God. While a glorified creature could serve as a moral example in a system of works salvation, a grace-based gospel requires the Son's full deity.

Athanasius and the Nicene fathers stood firm on their belief — against the whole world, when necessary — that the biblical gospel proclaims a Savior who is God in the flesh, come down to us for the sake of our salvation. The full impact of the Son's descent can only be appreciated when we recognize how far he came: *all the way down* from a place of equality with God (Phil 2:6-11). Any God so loving as to condescend like this can also be trusted to take his people into his bosom, unite them to himself, and grant them the abiding gift of eternal life.

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1 This article is adapted from Bryan Litfin, *The Story of the Trinity: Controversy, Crisis, and the Creation of the Nicene Creed* (Baker, 2025). It was also originally published at https://christoverall.com/article/longform/from-nicaea-to-the-nicene-creed-sixty-years-of-confusion-and-controversy/.

2 Rufinus of Aquileia, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 10.5, trans. Philip R. Amidon, *The Church History of Rufinius of Aquileia, Books 10-11* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

3 *Letter of Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nicaea to a Council* 5, trans., Glen Thompson at https://www.fourthcentury.com/letter-of-eusebius-of-nicomedia-and-theognis-of-nicaea-to-a-council/.

4 Technically, the ancient discussion was not about "Christ," but about the Logos, or Word, who became incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth. The term "Christ" functions in this article as a shorthand way to refer to the second person of the Trinity.

5 Socrates Scholastics, *Ecclesiastical History* 1.38, trans. A. C. Zenos in Philip Schaff, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Series 2, 2:35 at https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202/npnf202.ii.iv.xxxviii.html.

6 Jerome, *Dialogue Against Luciferians* 19, in *NPNF²*, Philip Schaff, 6:319 at https://ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf206/npnf206.vi.iv.html.

7 *Theodosian Code* 16.1.2, in *The Theodosian Code and Novels and the Sirmondian Constitutions: A Translation with Commentary, Glossary, and Bibliography*, trans., Clyde Pharr (Princeton University Press, 1952), 440.

8 "The Nicene Creed," *Book of Common Prayer* at https://www.bcponline.org/HE/he2.html.

God the Father Almighty: The Trinitarian Depth of the First Article of the Creed[1]

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Throughout Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, God reveals himself as Father. He comes to the aid of Israel, his firstborn son, to rescue them from the land of Egypt (see Exod 4:22-23 and Hos 11:1). Centuries later, Isaiah appeals to this special Father-son relationship when he pleads with God to "rend the heavens and come down" (Isa 64:1). He cries out, "You are our Father; we are the clay and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand" (Isa 64:8). In the NT, the Lord Jesus repeatedly identifies God as his Father and invites his followers to do the same (e.g., Matt 6:9; John 20:17). The full revelation of the gospel of Jesus Christ discloses to us the truth that God is our Father because of the union we have with Jesus the Son by the mighty working of the Holy Spirit. The apostle Paul puts the matter succinctly and profoundly: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying,

'Abba! Father!' So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal 4:4-6).

It is hard to imagine a more precious name by which the redeemed can address God than this one: "Abba! Father!" It is no wonder then, that the Nicene Creed, perhaps the most widely beloved ancient confession of the Christian faith, would begin its confession by evoking the name Father:

> I believe in one God,
> the Father almighty,
> maker of heaven and earth,
> and of all things visible and invisible.[2]

This first article of the creed resonates with believers, in part because of the simplicity of the truth contained in it. Nevertheless, these simple words invite those who confess them into the unfathomable depths of the beauty and mystery of God's very life. In this brief article, my aim is to help readers see how the first article of the Nicene Creed gives faithful expression to a double truth revealed in Scripture: (1) God is Father to creatures in his work of creation and redemption, and (2) the first person of the Trinity is the eternal Father of the eternal, only begotten Son.

The Central Question of Nicaea: Who is Jesus?

The Council of Nicaea (325), the Council of Constantinople (381), and the resulting Nicene Creed came about because of the Arian controversy, a fourth-century debate that revolved around the ever-important question of the true identity of Jesus Christ. Recall Jesus's question to the disciples at Caesarea Philippi. "Who do you say that I am?" (Matt 16:15). The two sides of the fourth-century debate answered that question in radically different ways. The Arians claimed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is not truly God. Rather, they contended that he is a creature — exalted above all other creatures, to be sure — but a creature nonetheless. For them, only the Father is the true God; the Son is not. Faithful Christians, whose view was eventually enshrined in confessional form in the Nicene Creed, recognized that Scripture presents Jesus as truly God, equal with the Father, worthy of all worship, and true author of all the works of God. The Son of God, the

orthodox contended, is not a creature but the eternal Creator of heaven and earth (John 1:1-3; 5:18-19; 10:30; Phil 2:6; Col 1:16; Heb 1:1-4, etc.).

Nicaea and the Father

Although the true identity of the Son was central to the controversy, the Nicene fathers understood that the disagreement about the Son was also a disagreement about the Father, indeed, a disagreement about the very nature and identity of the one true God. For them, the divine name *Father* names God in two distinct ways, one of which the Arians blatantly denied — to the detriment of their souls and the souls of all who would imbibe their erroneous teaching.

God as Father to Creatures

Both parties agreed that the one true God reveals himself as Father in relation to creatures. Scripture is clear that there is a sense in which God is a father to all creatures by virtue of the fact that he made them. When Isaiah refers to God as the Father of Israel, he refers, not only to the covenant God entered with Israel but to the fact that God created them — "You are our Father ... we all are the work of your hand" (Isa 64:8). Paul acknowledges this fact when he favorably quotes the Athenian poet, who said, "We are indeed his offspring" (Acts 17:28). The Nicene fathers seem to have this great truth in view in the first article of the creed because they confess faith in "God the Father Almighty" and then follow that immediately with the recognition that he is the "maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." The Nicene fathers also seem to have in view the fact that the one true God is the Father of the redeemed in a special way since, in the second article of the creed, they specify that the Lord Jesus assumed a human nature in the incarnation "for us men and for our salvation." It is those whom Christ came to save, therefore, that are confessing their faith in "God the Father Almighty." The fact that God is Father to all creatures in one sense and the special Father of the redeemed in another sense is a glorious truth that we should not pass over quickly or take for granted. However, this is not the only rich truth about divine Fatherhood that the Nicene fathers wanted the church to believe and confess.

Eternal Father of the Eternal Son

For the church fathers at Nicaea (and later at Constantinople where the creed came into the form more familiar to us today), the divine name Father also names the first person of the Trinity in his eternal relation to the second person, the only begotten Son. One does not discern this merely by reading the first article of the creed, the article about the Father. Rather, one must read on and contemplate the claims of the second article of the creed, the one about the Son, in order to understand the meaning of Father as a divine name more fully. It should not be surprising that the article about the Son is needed to fully understand the article about the Father (and vice versa) since the names Father and Son are irreducibly relational names. The name Father only has meaning in relation to another, in this case the Son. And the name Son only has meaning in relation to another, in this case the Father.

The second article of the creed refers to the "one Lord, Jesus Christ" with a series of descriptive phrases to help Christians understand who Jesus is. He is "the only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds," a statement which clearly locates the sonship of Jesus as logically prior to the creation of the universe. Furthermore, the creed describes the Son as "very God of very God, begotten, not made." Thus, the Son, though eternally begotten of the Father, is not a creature. Rather, in terms of his being (his nature or substance), he is the same thing the Father is—"very God"—a phrase that could be translated as "true God." The creed is saying that Jesus is not some lesser divine spirit, like an angel. Rather, he is the one true and living God. Cementing this fact, the Nicene fathers describe Jesus as "being of one substance with the Father." The phrase "being of one substance" translates the Greek word *homoousios*, which is perhaps the most famous word of the whole creed. The authors of the creed want Christians to understand the biblical teaching that the Son is truly equal to the Father, sharing identically the same divine nature with him. Everything it means for the Father to be God is true of the Son, and vice-versa. The deity of the Father and Son is identical.

Having established the unity of the Father and the Son in one divine nature, the creed then instructs Christians regarding the unity of the Father and the Son in their works. The first article says that "God the Father almighty" is "maker of heaven and earth." The second article then says that the Son is the one "through whom all things were made." According to the Nicene Creed,

it is *not* the case that the Father creates and the Son is created. Rather, the Father creates, and the Son also creates.[3] Thus, the Nicene Creed teaches the classical Christian doctrine of the inseparable operations of the Trinity.[4]

For the Nicene fathers, as for Scripture, the name Father is doing more than naming the relation between God and creatures. It is naming the divine person who eternally begets the eternal Son. Thus, the fatherhood of God is an eternal and necessary reality, in no way contingent on the existence of creation. This is exactly what the Arians denied. In their denial that the Son is God, they denied that God is eternally Father. For the Arians, the fatherhood of God *only* names the relation between God and creatures, never the relation between one truly divine person and another. This is detrimental to the splendor of the gospel, robbing this glorious message of its coherence. If the eternal relation between the Father and the Son is not true, then our union with the Son is *merely* a union with a created person, and the claim that such a person could forgive our sins and make us right with God becomes incoherent.

Conclusion

When Christians confess the Nicene Creed, we are confessing profound and glorious truths revealed in holy Scripture. When we confess the first article of the creed, "I believe in God the Father almighty," we are confessing faith that God is *our* Father because of our union with the Son by the Spirit. But we are also confessing a truth far more sublime. Infinitely more glorious than God's relationship to me as my Father is the eternal relation of God the Father with the eternal and only begotten Son. Apart from the more sublime truth of the eternal relation between Father and Son, there could be no relation between God and me by which I cry out to him as "Abba, Father!"

[1] This article was originally published at https://christoverall.com/article/concise/god-the-father-almighty-the-trinitarian-depth-of-the-first-article-of-the-creed/.

[2] All quotations of the Nicene Creed are taken from Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, vol. 2, *The Greek and Latin Creeds* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984), 58-9.

[3] Though not the focus of this article, we should also observe that the Nicene Creed (381) also describes the Holy Spirit as Creator by referring to him as "Lord and Life-giver." For more on this see my article, "In the beginning was the Spirit: The Third Person in Genesis 1," at https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/in-the-beginning-was-the-spirit.

[4] For an introduction to inseparable operations, see my article, "What God Hath Done Together: Defending the Historic Christian Doctrine of the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity, *JETS* 56.4 (2013): 781-800. For a full treatment of the doctrine, see Adonis Vidu, *The Same God Who Works All Things: Inseparable Operations in Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2021).

One Lord Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God[1]

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Introduction

In this article our focus is on the biblical basis for the Nicene Creed's identification of our Lord Jesus Christ as the only begotten (*monogenēs*) Son of God, which means that he is the eternal Son of the Father who is truly God and not a created being. As the divine Son, he fully shares in the one, simple divine nature with the Father and the Spirit. This is why the Creed affirms that the Son is *homoousios* (of one nature), namely, that *he* wholly subsists in the identical nature with the Father and Spirit so that he, along with the Father and Spirit, is fully and equally God.

We cannot do an exhaustive survey of the biblical data teaching the truth of Christ's deity. Instead, we will focus is on some key texts that summarize the NT witness to Christ and also teach significant truths that were foundational to the Church's formulation of the Nicene Creed. It's crucial to recognize the continuity between what Scripture teaches and what

the Church confesses. The Jesus of the Bible is *not* different than the Jesus confessed in the Nicene Creed, although a different theological vocabulary is used to communicate the biblical teaching.

It's also important to see that our Lord Jesus's divine Sonship is unveiled across the Bible's covenantal story. As Jesus's eternal Sonship is revealed to us, he is first disclosed as the promised Messiah, David's greater Son, who inaugurates *God's* saving rule and reign. As the *human* son-king, he was first promised in Eden (Gen 3:15), given greater definition through the covenants, and then epitomized in the Davidic king (e.g., Isa 7:14, 9:6–7, 11:1–16; 52:13–53:12; Ezek 34). As the human son he fulfills the role of previous *sons* (e.g., Adam, Israel, David). But, as the OT unfolds, it becomes clear that this human son-king is *not* merely human; he is also the *divine* Son who *alone* does what God can do. This latter emphasis identifies the human Messiah with Yahweh in a unique Father-Son relation that transcends the human, thus becoming not only the seedbed for the NT's presentation of Christ, but also for the Trinitarian dogmatic construction of the Nicene Creed. Jesus, the Messiah, is not merely human; he is also one with Yahweh: the eternal divine Son of the Father, who for us and salvation became human.

The NT evidence for Jesus's eternal Sonship and deity is abundant. Building on the Law and the Prophets, the NT opens by identifying Jesus with Yahweh since he alone establishes God's promised rule by inaugurating *God's* kingdom through a new covenant in fulfillment of God's covenant promises — thus doing what only God can do (Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–10; Jer 31:31–34; Ezek 34:1–31). Also, along with the Father and Spirit, the Son fully and equally shares the one divine name and nature (Matt 28:18–20; John 8:58; Phil 2:9–11; Col 2:9). Further, as we will discuss below, the Son *is* identified as God (*theos*) (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom 9:5; Titus 2:13; Heb 1:8; 2 Pet 1:1) because *he* is the exact image and correspondence of the Father (Col 1:15; Heb 1:3). As the Son, he inseparably shares with the Father and Spirit the divine rule, works, and receives divine worship (Ps 110:1; Matt 1:21; Eph 1:22; Phil 2:9–11; Col 1:15–20; Heb 1:1–3; Rev 5:11–12). This is why Jesus has the authority to forgive sin (Mark 2:3–12), to say that all Scripture is fulfilled in him (Matt 5:17–19; 11:13), and to acknowledge that he is *from* the Father *as the Son*, but also equal to the Father *as the Son* (Matt 11:25–27; John 5:16–30; 10:14–30; 14:9–13).

With this basic overview in mind, let us now focus on five key texts that gloriously teach that our Lord Jesus Christ is the only begotten divine Son — texts on which the Nicene Creed was based and on which the Church faithfully formulated Trinitarian and Christological orthodoxy.

John 1:1–18

We cannot overstate the importance of John's prologue for the entire Gospel and the NT. It reminds us that Jesus *is* the divine Word, the eternal Son of the Father, become human. In fact, these verses summarize, as D. A. Carson reminds us, "how the 'Word' which was with God in the very beginning came into the sphere of time, history, tangibility — in other words, how the Son of God was sent into the world to become the Jesus of history, so that the glory and grace of God might be uniquely and perfectly disclosed. The rest of the book is nothing other than an expansion of this theme."[2] This is also true of the entire NT.

How does the prologue identify our Lord Jesus Christ as the divine Son who became human? It does so by its use of "Word" (*logos*) and "God" (*theos*). John is the only biblical author to identify Christ by the title, "Word." To establish its meaning, we need to locate it within the OT, instead of looking outside of Scripture (despite its widespread use in Greek thought). In the OT, "Word" is closely associated with the *God* who creates, reveals, and redeems — all by his Word (Gen 1:3ff, 3:8–19; 12:1; Ps 33:6, 9; 119:9, 25; Isa 55:11). By the use of this title, John identifies Jesus, the Son, with God. But, second, by his use of "God," John not only closely identifies the Word *with God*; he also teaches that the Word *is* God, yet simultaneously *distinct* from God (the Father).

In John 1:1, John uses a triadic structure to make these points. Each of the three clauses has the same subject, "Word," and an identical verb "was" (ēn), and each clause progresses to the next. The first clause, "In the beginning was the Word" (John 1:1a) teaches that the Word is eternal; hence Jesus as the Son *is* eternal. The second clause, "the Word was with God" (John 1:1b) affirms that although the Word is eternal he is also distinct from God (the Father), hence affirming an eternal Father-Son relation. The last clause, "the Word was God" (John 1:1c) affirms that the Word shares the full deity of God. Since there is only one God, this entails that within God there is

a Father-Son relation that shares the one divine nature, hence a foundational verse in the Church's dogmatic formulation of the Trinity. In this key verse, then, John declares that the Word has an eternal existence in personal intercommunion with God and that both share the same nature. And, as John will now explain, it's *this* Word, God's own self-expression — true God of God — who becomes human and *is* our Lord Jesus Christ (John 1:14).

However, before we turn to John's teaching on the incarnation, it's significant that John's predication of "God" (*theos*) to Christ is not limited to him; it's done at least seven times in the NT (John 1:1, 18; 20:28; Rom 9:5; Titus 2:13; 1 Pet 1:1; Heb 1:8). Why is this important? Scripture applies many titles to Christ, but most of them refer to Christ's deity *and* humanity, e.g., "Son," "Son of Man," and "Messiah." But *theos* applied to Jesus is an *explicit* assertion that he *is* God. No doubt, the title "Lord" (*kurios*) is similar, but *theos* is more explicit.

Why is "God" not used more often, given its clear affirmation of Christ's deity? Three reasons may be given. First, let's not forget that Scripture states that the Son is "God" at least *seven* times and in key places. In fact, four different authors state it (John, Paul, Peter, author of Hebrews) and they do so consistently — immediately after the resurrection (John 20:28), into the 90s AD (John 1:1, 18), and in Jewish and Gentile contexts. Second, the predication of "God" to Jesus is carefully done in order to preserve Trinitarian personal relations. Normally, *theos* refers to God the Father, yet because the Son *is* God, *theos* can also be predicated of Christ. However, in order to preserve the personal distinctions within God, *theos* predominately denotes the Father and *kurios* the Son. Third, Jesus is *God the Son* but he is also human. If *theos* had become a personal name for Christ, it's possible that Christ's humanity could have been downplayed. But with that said, we must not forget that when *theos* is predicated of Christ, it explicitly teaches that he *is* the *divine* Son.

Let's now return to John 1:14. Here we discover that the divine Word/Son became flesh (*sarx*), and thus fully human.[3] But, *who* exactly became flesh? *Who* is the *subject* of the incarnation? John is emphatic: It's the *Word* who became human, *not* the divine nature, nor even the Father or the Spirit. The *acting subject* (what the Church will later call, "person" [*hypostasis*]) of the incarnation *is the Word*. It's *he* who united himself to a human nature ("flesh"), and now, *he* subsists in two natures. As *God the Son*, he remains

what he has always been in relation to the Father and Spirit, fully and equally sharing the divine nature (John 1:1). But now, the Word/Son has assumed a human nature to reveal the divine glory and achieve our redemption. In that human nature, the Son is now able to live and experience a fully human life, yet without any change to the Son's deity since this would preclude him from displaying the fullness of the Father's glory (John 1:14, 18) and accomplishing his mission to save.

This point is reinforced by the *inclusio* that concludes the prologue: "No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is God (*monogenēs theos*), who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (John 1:18). In the OT some saw visions of God (e.g., Exod 33–34; Isa 6), yet they never truly saw God other than in theophany. But now, in the incarnate Son, the full disclosure of God is now made visible.[4] John, along with the entirety of Scripture, teaches the exclusive, unique identity of Christ. Who is Jesus? *He* is the *divine Son*, one with the Father and Spirit, who now in his incarnation has become human to reveal and to redeem.

Colossians 1:15–20

Here is another key text that teaches that Jesus is the divine Son and which was also foundational for the Nicene Creed and the later Christological formulation. In the Patristic era, this text was used by the Arians to argue that Christ was the "firstborn," i.e., the first created being and not *God* the Son. This interpretation continues today among Jehovah's Witnesses, and sadly, numerous self-identified evangelicals are also confused on this point.[5] However, against the Arians, the text unambiguously teaches the full deity of the Son, and significantly, that even as the *incarnate* Son, *he* continues to do the *divine* work of providence, inseparably with the Father and the Spirit — a truth that the Church's formulation of the *extra* seeks to capture.[6]

The text is divided into two main stanzas (Col 1:15–17 and 1:18b–20) with a transitional stanza between the two (Col 1:17–18a). In the first main and transitional stanzas, Jesus is presented as *God the Son* since he is the true image of God, the agent of creation, and the sustainer of the universe. In the second main stanza, Jesus is presented as the *incarnate* Son, who due to his incarnation and cross-work is our only Redeemer. Jesus, then, is supreme

over all because he is our Creator *and* Redeemer. Let's further look at the text in three steps.

First, the Son's full deity is taught in Colossians 1:15–16 in three staggering affirmations. The Son is first described as "the image of the invisible God," which means that he possesses the very nature of God. The same thought is found in Hebrews 1:3a, where Christ is described as "the exact representation (*charaktēr*) of his being." Although different expressions, they both teach that Christ is *God* the Son. In addition, "image" also suggests an echo back to our creation in God's image. The idea is that the Son is the original image of God *in his full deity* (archetype), and that humans were created to reflect him (ectype). This makes sense of why the Son is not only the pattern of our creation, but also the one who becomes human to redeem us, and that in salvation, we are patterned after his glorified humanity (Eph 4:22–24; Col 3:9–10).

Furthermore, the Son is "the firstborn of all creation." Contrary to the Arian interpretation, the context speaks of "firstborn" in terms of "pre-eminence" in rank and authority (see Ps 89:27)—"supreme over." This interpretation is confirmed by Colossians 1:16—"for (*hoti*, because) in him all things were created." The Son is *not* the first created being or part of creation, but its Creator. This truth is further confirmed by the third affirmation. The divine work of creation is attributed to the Father *through the Son* (hence Trinitarian agency), but also the extent of the Son's supremacy in relation to creation is stated: all things were created "*in* him, *through* him, and *for* him (Col 1:16). All of these affirmations together teach that Jesus is *God the Son*.

Second, the intervening stanza (Col 1:17–18a) teaches the same point as it transitions to the work of the *incarnate* Son. The opening line, "And he is before all things," looks back to Colossians 1:15–16. The last line, "and he is the head of the body, the church," introduces a focus on Christ's reconciling work that is developed in Colossians 1:18b–20. The middle line, "and in him all things hold together," looks both directions as it presents Jesus as LORD because of who he has always been as the divine Son *and* because of what he does now as the incarnate Son. Specifically, Colossians 1:17 teaches the Son's preexistence and supremacy over the entire universe as its Creator *and* providential Lord. In fact, by the use of the perfect tense (*sunestēken*), the emphasis is on the Son's *continuous* providential rule: prior

to *and after* his incarnation. This entails that even as the *incarnate* Son, Jesus continues to uphold the universe and exercise divine cosmic functions. This seems to require that Jesus is able to act in and through both his divine and human natures, something that the Church's affirmation of the *extra* tries to capture. No doubt, this raises some legitimate theological questions, yet here we simply note that in Christological formulation we must account for all the biblical data, namely, that the Son, even in the incarnation, continues to act as *he* has always done in relation to the Father and Spirit.

Third, turning to the second main stanza (Col 1:18b–20), Jesus's work as the *incarnate* Son is accented. The same Creator and providential Lord is also head over his people, the church, because of his cross-work for us. Thus, Christ is Lord twice, first as our Creator, and second as our Redeemer. But Paul is still not finished. In Colossians 1:19, he again stresses Jesus's deity: "For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." This is not a temporary dwelling either (see Col 2:9). What is true of God the Son prior to the incarnation is true of him post-incarnation: the entire fullness of deity (nature and attributes) resides in him.[7]

In this text, as in the entire NT, we see the constant emphasis on *the only begotten Son*, who is truly God (and thus *homoousios* with the Father) *and* who became truly man by his assumption of a human nature, and who, as the Son, acts in both natures.

Philippians 2:6–11

This text has also been at the center of critical Trinitarian and Christological debates. It has served as a proof-text for the "kenotic theory," a phrase taken from the Greek verb, *kenoō* (Phil 2:7), "to empty." In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, some theologians taught that the Son "gave up" or "emptied" himself of some of his divine attributes in becoming human. The problem with such a view is that this text (and the entire Bible) doesn't teach it. The incarnation is *not* an act of subtraction; it's an act of *assumption* (or addition). In the incarnation, God the Son acts, *from* the Father and *by* the Spirit, to assume a human nature so that now and forevermore *he* subsists in two natures without loss of attributes in either nature. Also, it's due to the incarnation that the Son is now able to live a fully human life and achieve our

redemption as our new covenant head. Let's look at how this text teaches these truths in five steps.

First, the text is broken into two parts, Philippians 2:6–8 and 9–11. In each section, two verbs describe the Son's humbling himself in taking our human nature (i.e., "the state of humiliation") *and* the Father exalting Christ because of his cross-work (i.e., "the state of exaltation"). The movement of the text is from the preexistent Son to his humiliation that results in his exaltation as the Son in a *new* role due to his obedience to the Father. When this text is read alongside other texts, we see evidence for triune agency and inseparable action terminating on the Son. The incarnation, then, is an act of the triune God by which the Father sends the Son; the Son assumes a human nature by the Spirit (Luke 1:26–38); and the entire action terminates on the Son and not the Father or Spirit (John 1:14; Phil 2:6–8).

Second, the Son's deity is taught by the phrase, "who, though he was in the form of God." Here is an affirmation of the full deity of the Son with the Father. The text provides a contrast between two forms of existence of the Son: the glory he had from eternity as the divine Son *and* what he became by taking the "form of a servant" (Phil 2:7). The Son who was and remains eternally and fully God has become fully and truly human.

Third, the next phrase is best translated, "he did not think equality with God something to be used for his own advantage." The issue is *not* whether Jesus gains equality with God *or* whether he retains it since the text stresses that the Son shares full "equality with God" (Phil 2:6). Instead, the issue is one of Jesus's *attitude* regarding his divine status. The Son did not take advantage of or exploit his full equality with God to excuse him from the task of becoming our Redeemer. In this way, Jesus becomes an example for us (Phil 2:5), while remaining in a category by himself.

Fourth, the controversial phrase in Philippians 2:7, "but he emptied himself" (or, "made himself nothing") does not mean that in the incarnation the Son subtracted his divine attributes. The nature of the Son's "emptying" was by the *assumption* of a human nature. Those who affirm the kenotic view make this text say something it does not say.

However, with that said, we must not miss the staggering point: the divine Son did humble himself by becoming human and choosing to die on a cross for us (Phil 2:8), which is breath-taking. In fact, apart from the humbling of the Son in terms of incarnation *and* the cross, there is no salvation for us.

But this is not the end of the story. Although the glory of the Son in the incarnation and the cross is hidden (*krypsis*) by his flesh, that hiddenness is only our perception of it. The only begotten Son of the Father did not become less than God. As he clothed himself in our human nature, he also bore our sins in that very nature. And in that act of obedience, as our last Adam and new covenant representative and substitute, he turned his great moment of vulnerability into the moment of greatest victory over sin, death, and the evil one.

Fifth, Philippians 2:9–11 concludes where the text began, with the Son exalted in the heavens. Only now, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Christ is LORD in his "state of exaltation." In Philippians 2:6–8, Christ is the subject of the verbs and participles, but in Philippians 2:9, it's the Father who exalts the Son *due to his work and obedience*. The Father vindicates his Son and exalts him to the highest position and bestows on him the name LORD/Yahweh (from Isa 45:22–23).[8]

In this magnificent text, Paul captures beautifully *who* Jesus is and *why* the incarnation took place. Jesus as the divine Son, along with the Father and Spirit, is Lord of all. However, to redeem us, the only begotten Son of the Father had to become human and die for us. In fact, apart from him becoming the last Adam and obeying for us in his life and death, there is no salvation for us. But as a result of his incarnation and work, the Father has highly exalted his Son so that now Jesus is Lord twice: first as the *divine* Son, and second as the divine Son *incarnate*.

Hebrews 1:1–4 & Hebrews 2:5–18

The entire book of Hebrews is centered on Christ and his glory and Lordship. Furthermore, in Hebrews, we find exactly what the entire NT teaches: Jesus is *God* the Son (e.g., Heb 1:2–3) who by virtue of his incarnation and work has won our eternal redemption (e.g., Heb 2:5–18). Jesus, then, is truly God *and* truly man and both must be affirmed without dilution. God the Son cannot redeem us apart from his incarnation and cross-work, but because *he* became human, all of God's plan and promises are fulfilled in him. In Christ alone we are justified, reconciled, and restored to the purpose of our creation — to know, obey, and love our triune God.

From the opening single, complex sentence, built around, "God … has spoken" (Heb 1:1), the author unfolds the glory of Christ. As the author spans redemptive history, he reminds us that God has spoken in the Prophets but that the ultimate purpose of that revelation reaches its fulfillment in God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ — David's greater Son who is also the LORD — the promised "last days" and God's long-awaited kingdom have arrived.

How does the author warrant such staggering claims? He does so by describing *who* Jesus is by giving a number of identity statements that remind us of the Son's deity, humanity, and work. He first states that the Son is the "appointed heir of all things" (Heb 1:2b). This appointment is best understood as referring to the *incarnate* Son's work that installs him at God's right hand as the Messianic King. Yet, the author also insists that Jesus is *God the Son* since *he* is the agent of creation (Heb 1:2b), the radiance of God's glory, "the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1:3a), and the Lord of providence (Heb 1:3b). All of these latter identity statements are explicit references to the Son's deity. Also, like Colossians 1:15–20, the author reminds us that even post-incarnation, the Son remains fully God and continues to act as God, as evidenced in his cosmic functions (Heb 1:3b). The author then returns to Christ's work as the *incarnate* Son by stressing his work as our great High Priest — a work that he did for us and which no mere human (or angel) could ever achieve.

Then in Hebrews 2:5–18, the author finishes his argument that Christ is superior to angels. In doing so he develops further *who* Jesus is as the divine Son *and what* he alone can do for us in his incarnation and cross-work. By the Son taking on our humanity, he has become the representative man of Psalm 8 — the last Adam — who as a result is now able to undo the first Adam's failure by his own obedient life and death for us. In Christ, the promised "world to come," tied to the new creation, is now here.

This text is significant for at least two reasons. First, in a succinct way the author gloriously unpacks the Bible's story and explains *why* God the Son became man. Yet, there is also a second reason why this text is so important. In explaining the *why* of the incarnation, the author establishes that the kind of Redeemer we need *must* be truly God and truly human. He *must* be human because the only way to restore fallen man is by a greater Adam

who obeys for us as our covenant head. Yet, he *must* also be the *divine* Son otherwise there is no full forgiveness of sin.

Concluding Reflection

The Church's Trinitarian and Christological formulation as defined by the Nicene Creed and the later Chalcedonian Definition is confessing exactly what Scripture teaches. As the Church confessed Christ as the only begotten divine Son of the Father, the Church rightly explained all that Scripture taught, namely that Jesus *is* Lord and Savior because *he* is God the Son incarnate. Although, the Nicene Creed employed a slightly different language to explain who Jesus is such as *homoousios* (although most of it was directly from Scripture), the language used conveys the exact same meaning as what Scripture teaches. Also, the Church was extremely careful in her Trinitarian and Christological formulation because she knew that what was ultimately at stake was the glory of Christ and our salvation. For Christians, this must never become a minor point. Given who Jesus is, *he* must be our glory, command our obedience, and receive our complete trust and devotion. There are many good things to be concerned about in our lives, but none so central than knowing rightly our Lord Jesus Christ.

1 This article was originally published at https://christoverall.com/article/concise/one-lord-jesus-christ-the-only-begotten-son-of-god/.

2 D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1992), 111.

3 See Carson, *John*, 117, where he notes how strong John's language is. It's possible that John is responding to an early form of Docetism (Gk. *dokeō*, to appear; this is the heretical teaching that Christ only *appeared* to be human). John is emphatic: to deny the genuineness of the incarnation is to deny the Jesus of the Bible and the Gospel (see 1 John 1:1–4; 4:1–3).

4 A comment needs to be made about *monogenēs*. Historically, *monogenēs* (from *monos* + *gennaō*) has been translated, "only begotten" (KJV) and used to warrant the Son's "eternal generation" from the Father. Today, many think the etymology of *monogenēs* derives from *monos* + *genos* to mean "unique, only." It is best to interpret it as "only begotten." For this case, see Charles Lee Irons, "A Lexical Defense of the Johannine 'Only Begotten' " in *Retrieving Eternal Generation*, ed. Fred Sanders and Scott R. Swain (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2017), 98–116.

5 See the 2025 Ligonier Ministries and LifeWay Research Survey entitled "The State of Theology," statement number seven at https://thestateoftheology.com.

6 The "extra" means that Jesus, as the divine Son, is able to act in and through his human nature but also, he is able to act "outside" of it in his divine nature, inseparably with the Father and Spirit.

7 The truth that the Son possesses all of the divine attributes is taught throughout the NT. Think of God's communicable attributes. Scripture defines God's *love* in relation to the Son (Rom 8:35–39; Gal 2:20; 1 John 4:10–12); Jesus is the *righteous* one (Acts 3:14; 7:52; 22:14), even the one whose *wrath* is God's wrath (Rev. 6:16). In terms of *truth*, Jesus is full of grace and truth (John 1:14)—an allusion to Yahweh in Exodus 34—and the truth (John 14:6). Jesus is the perfect revelation of God (Heb 1:1–3; cf. John 1:18; 14:8–9). Also, think of God's incommunicable attributes. For example, the Son shares in the Father's eternity (John 1:1; 17:5; Heb 1:2). The Son possesses omnipotence (Eph 1:19–20; Col 2:10), omnipresence (Matt 18:20; 28:20; Eph 4:10), immutability (Heb 1:10–12; 13:8), and omniscience (John 1:48; 2:25; 6:64; 21:17; Acts 1:24; 1 Cor 4:5; Col 2:9; Rev 2:23). No doubt, in regard to omniscience, biblical authors also affirm, including Jesus, that the Son grew in knowledge and that he does not know certain things (Luke 2:52; Mark 13:32). How one reconciles this tension is part of Christological formulation, but it's important to see that Scripture predicates both communicable and incommunicable attributes of Christ.

8 This is not the only text that declares "Jesus is LORD/Yahweh." The apostles repeatedly apply various Yahweh texts from the OT to Jesus, thus identifying him *as God*. For example, see Exod. 3:14 with John 8:58; Isa 44:6 with Rev 1:17; Ps 102:26–27 [LXX] with Heb 1:11–12; Joel 2:32 with Rom 10:12–13), etc.

On the Holy Spirit[1]

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In the original Nicene Creed, after expressing magnificent truths of the Father and the Son, we find this curiously short statement regarding belief in the Holy Spirit: "And in the Holy Spirit." According to Jehovah's Witnesses,[2] the brevity of this original statement is evidence that the Holy Spirit was not considered a divine person by Christ or the apostles. But is this true? Absolutely not. What I hope to do in this essay is, first, give you a brief glimpse of how this simple Nicene statement on the Holy Spirit developed over time. Then, I want to show you how the creedal statement on the Holy Spirit *emerges from* biblical truth and properly befits the God we adore.

We Believe in the Holy Spirit

For the Western Church, the development of Nicene teaching on the Holy Spirit progresses in three stages. The first two stages are clearly demarcated by the Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381). The third stage was more extended, rife with controversy, and surrounded the addition of the *filiqoue* ("and the Son") clause in the West. Here is a summary of the changes in each stage (new additions *italicized*).

First, stage 1 is at the Council of Nicaea (325). The statement on the Holy Spirit reads: "And in the Holy Spirit." Second, stage 2 is at the Council of Constantinople (381). The statement on the Holy Spirit reads: "And in the Holy Spirit, *the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets*." Third, stage 3 is at the Council of Toledo (589 AD).[3] The

statement on the Holy Spirit reads: "And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father *and the Son*, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets."

Given that we are celebrating the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (i.e., the first version of the creed), our first task will be to answer the question: "Why is this five-worded phrase about the Holy Spirit all that those original bishops could muster?"

Why So Short? The First Nicene Creed

First, keep in mind that this simple statement affirms that *the Holy Spirit must be included in our confession*. The same "We believe in" (*pisteuomen eis*), is directed first to the "one God, Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," is then applied equally and without qualification to both the Son ("and in," *kai eis*) and the Holy Spirit ("and in," *kai eis*): "We believe (*pisteuomen eis*) in one God, the Father, *and in* (*kai eis*) one Lord Jesus Christ, and in (*kai eis*) the Holy Spirit." The fuller statement from the Council of Constantinople in 381 lies here in nascent form, placing the Holy Spirit without reservation in the triune framework of the creed.

Second, remember *the heretical context*. The preeminent concern for the bishops gathered at the Council of Nicaea in 325 was Arianism (and related heresies) that attacked the true nature of the Son by denying his deity and declaring him to be a creature. The purpose was *not* to address errors regarding the Holy Spirit, for these had not yet been fully articulated.

Third, it was only *after* the Council of Nicaea that fresh heresies emerged explicitly denying the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit.[4] According to Gregory of Nazianzus, when men became "weary in their disputations concerning the Son," they struggled "with greater heat against the Spirit."[5] The early church fathers fought valiantly against these heretics, who were called, among other things, the *Pneumatomachians* or "Spirit-fighters." The Spirit-fighters, while often affirming the Son's consubstantiality with the Father, were eager to maintain that the Holy Spirit was a creature, like an angel, or, even less — a mere activity. What we find post-Nicaea, then, alongside a resurgence in Arianism, is a new slate of questions regarding the Holy Spirit. These received an answer in 381 at the Council of Constantinople.

The Biblical Foundation of the Longer Creed

Let us now take a look at this expanded version of the original creed in 381, which included the church's responses at Constantinople to the "Spirit-fighters." This Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed — which is usually the version that people today refer to when they speak of the Nicene Creed — proclaims four central truths about the Holy Spirit. Each has deep biblical roots, and each is essential for the worship of our Triune God.

1. The Holy Spirit is the Lord and Giver of Life.

First, it should go without saying that, given the Bible's own categories, the Lord alone is the "giver of life." Thus, it is not surprising that the fathers of the creed identified the Spirit as 'the Lord' in the same breath that they called him the 'giver of life.' But is this biblical? If we attend closely to the storyline of Scripture, will we see the Holy Spirit presented as this "life giver" and therefore the very Lord God himself?

From the beginning, we see the Holy Spirit participating in the divine work of creation and providence (Gen 1:1; Ps 104:30). He also empowered his people for certain tasks requiring great skill (Exod 31:1-5), might (Judg 14:6), and prophetic inspiration (Num 11:25; 2 Sam 23:2). And it was he, as the confession also declares, who came upon Mary with "the power of the Most High" (Luke 1:35) and created the incarnate life of our Lord Jesus.

But that's not all. When the Holy Spirit is poured out on God's people, he gives their cold and dead hearts new spiritual life (Ezek 36:27; 37:14) by his "washing of regeneration and renewal" (Titus 3:5-6), just as Jesus declared he would: "It is *the Spirit who gives life*, the flesh is no help at all" (John 6:63, emphasis mine). Even the new creation will evidence the Holy Spirit's powerful life-giving work. When he is poured out at that time, even the parched wilderness will become a fruitful field (Isa 32:15).

And if even this brief survey of the Holy Spirit's person and work is not enough to convince you of the fittingness of these names, what if Paul gave them both to us in one fell swoop? This he does in 2 Corinthians 3. Here, Paul introduces to us the glory of the new covenant, inaugurated in Christ, as the *life-giving* covenant administered by the Holy Spirit, "the Spirit *who gives life*" (2 Cor 3:6, emphasis mine). Paul

then calls the Holy Spirit *the Lord* (2 Cor 3:16-18), the God of Mt. Sinai (Exod 34), evoking the tetragrammaton of Exodus 3:14.[6] With such power, holiness, and life-giving authority, who else could the Spirit be but the one Lord himself?

2. The Holy Spirit Proceeds from the Father and the Son.

Now, let's focus on the next clause: that the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, *proceeds* from the Father and the Son. This statement is grounded in a few central truths regarding the nature of our God.

First, the three persons (*hypostases*) of the Trinity are one in essence/nature (*ousia*). Therefore, each person equally and fully possesses the glorious attributes of the divine nature (e.g., omniscience, omnipresence, simplicity, goodness, holiness, love, etc.), as well as one mind, will, and power (which are capacities of rational natures, not of persons).

Second, the three persons of the Trinity are distinguished by their "personal properties" or "modes of subsistence." These terms help us answer the question (bear with me here): If the three persons subsist in the one, simple[7] divine essence, what uniquely distinguishes the Father as *the Father* (and not the Son or the Spirit), the Son as *the Son* (and not the Father or the Spirit), and the Holy Spirit as *the Holy Spirit* (and not the Father or the Son)? Traditionally, classical Trinitarian theology has affirmed that:

- The Father is distinguished from the Son and the Spirit by paternity (i.e., fatherhood). He is unbegotten, yet he eternally begets the Son, and, with the Son, spirates the Holy Spirit.[8]
- The Son is distinguished from the Father and the Spirit by filiation (i.e., sonship). He is begotten (by eternal generation) from the Father and, with the Father, spirates the Holy Spirit.
- The Holy Spirit is distinguished from the Father and the Son by procession. He is neither unbegotten nor begotten but proceeds from the Father and the Son, who spirate Him.

Each of these personal properties indicates the way, or "mode" that each of the three persons eternally subsists in the one divine *ousia*. While other articles this month will demonstrate the biblical warrant and fittingness of Father and Son's personal properties, my mission here is to simply give

a sense of how the Holy Spirit's personal property emerges from Scripture. This leads me to my next point.

Third, the idea that the Holy Spirit "proceeds" is a concept that originates, not from idle speculation, but from Jesus himself in John 15:26, "But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me."[9] Gregory of Nazianzus enjoyed pointing this out to the Spirit-fighters, stating the rather obvious: Jesus was "a better Theologian than you."[10] Indeed. It sure is helpful when Jesus says it plainly. Our Savior instructs us even further regarding the nature of the Spirit's procession, comparing it to his own personal property and relation to the Father. For just as the Son does nothing *of himself* but does only what he sees and hears the Father doing (John 5:19, 30), so too the Holy Spirit does not speak *of himself*, but only declares that which he hears from the Son (John 16:13-15). And just as the sending of the Son into the world by the Father *alone* exhibits the Son's personal property (filiation), the sending of the Holy Spirit by the Father *and the Son* exhibits the Spirit's personal, incommunicable property of procession, as Jesus called it.

As you can see, the language of Scripture leads us to affirm the personal properties of triune persons in similar ways. Each is irreducibly grounded in biblical teaching. No doubt, much more could be said about the Holy Spirit's personal property of procession. But for now, as you consider the creedal formula — *we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son* — remember that the Holy Spirit is the third, distinct person of the Trinity, sharing fully in the one divine essence according to his distinct personal property, or mode of subsistence.

3. The Holy Spirit Should be Worshiped and Glorified.

The creed's third affirmation regarding the Spirit is arguably its most important implication — the Holy Spirit should be worshiped and glorified. In the words of the early church father Basil, "Should we not exalt him who is divine in nature, unbounded in greatness, powerful in his energies, and good in his deeds? Should we not glorify him?"[11] Those who diminish the ontological status of the Holy Spirit by calling him a *creature* or *impersonal force* seek to undermine the worship and glory he is due. Today, both the Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses are contemporary Spirit-fighters. The

former calls the Holy Spirit a divine "personage," rejecting his omnipresence and eternality. The latter, with even greater boldness, denies the Spirit's existence altogether, calling the "holy spirit" God's "power in action, his active force."[12] Beware of those fighting the Spirit. For they fight not only against him, but against the triune God himself, and they seek to slay true worship.

4. The Holy Spirit Spoke by the Prophets.

Finally, we gladly affirm with Peter that "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet 1:21). This affirmation warns us against many who have *and will* come "under the pretense of the name and work of the Spirit" to deceive and abuse the members of Christ's church.[13]

We gladly affirm that the Holy Spirit *has spoken*. And what he said was an all-sufficient word through the apostles and prophets. For God "spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son" (Heb 1:1-2). And in these last days, because the Spirit searches the depths of God (1 Cor 2:10-13), he has taken what is the Son's and declared it to us (John 16:14-15). It is by him that the Scriptures were written. And it is by him that the eyes of our hearts are enlightened (Eph 1:18), that we may have spiritual discernment (1 Cor 2:14) and come to behold the glory of our triune God and the exceedingly precious gift of the gospel.

Conclusion

In summary, we have seen how the creedal statement on the Holy Spirit matured in light of heretical challenges and how its truths are derived chiefly from Scripture. Let us join together then to confidently give our triune God the glory he is due and be prepared to defend the deity and personhood of the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son.

1 This article was originally published at https://christoverall.com/article/concise/on-the-holy-spirit/.

2 For example, see https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/what-is-the-holy-spirit/.

3 For the sake of simplicity, I have chosen the Third Council of Toledo as the marker to indicate the emergence of the *filioque* clause's formal approval in the West. This council was regional and did not amount to the kind of ecumenical approval that was forged in Nicaea and Constantinople. From this point on, the *filioque's* formal acceptance in the churches of the West would continue to increase. Ultimately, of course, the Eastern Orthodox have contended that no ecumenical agreement with the churches of the East was ever achieved. For those interested in a full treatment of this historical and theological controversy, see Gerald Bray, "The Filioque Clause in History and Theology," *Tyndale Bulletin* 34:1 (1983): 91-144.

4 Some important primary sources countering these errors, between stages one and two of creedal development, are Athanasius's *Letters to Serapion*, Basil of Caesarea's *On the Holy Spirit*, and Gregory of Nazianzus's *Oration 31*. In many instances, you find strong resonances between their work and the Niceno-Constantinople Creed of 381.

5 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31*, ii.

6 Two things are critical to see here regarding the Holy Spirit's Lordship, aside from his connection to God's covenant name, namely (1) Paul calls this Lord "the Spirit," not just "spirit" (without the article) (*ho de kurios to penuma estin*) and (2) Paul links the new covenant's sanctifying work to the Lord, the Holy Spirit. This is what we should expect, as sanctification is appropriated to the Holy Spirit by the biblical authors (1 Pet 1:2). To be transformed from one degree of glory to another is the work of the Holy Spirit, which Paul says "comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit."

7 Among other things, divine simplicity means that God is "not composed of parts." So, in this context, the three divine persons are not parts of the Trinity. Instead, each person fully subsists in (that is, exists in and fully possesses) the one undivided divine nature in a particular way.

8 "Spiration" can be defined as "breathing out," which theologians have found to be a fitting judgment considering the Holy Spirit's name as Spirit, as well as the biblical testimony regarding Christ's breathing the Spirit on his disciples (John 20:22). Generally, we can also recognize "spiration" as "the act by which the Father (and the Son if the *filioque* is affirmed) is the eternal source of the Holy Spirit, who proceeds without division, change, or imperfection" (D. Glenn Butner, Jr., *Trinitarian Dogmatics: Exploring the Grammar of the Christian Doctrine of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 229. Strictly speaking, since spiration is common between the Father and Son, it is not a distinguishing property.

9 It is worth pointing out that in John 15:26, Jesus says that the Spirit of truth proceeds from the Father. He does not include the Son. But this is no cause of concern, as Francis Turretin notes: "Although the Spirit may be said to proceed from the Father (Jn. 15:26), it is not denied of the Son. Indeed it is implied because the mission of the Spirit is ascribed to him and whatever the Father has, the Son is said to have equally (Jn. 16:15)" (Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, I.3.31.5, ed., James T. Dennison, Jr., trans. George Musgrave Giger [Phillipsburg: P&R, 1992], 309-10). In other words, in the same verse that Jesus says that the Spirit proceeds from the Father, he affirms that he too (with the Father) sends the Spirit. As I show briefly in the next paragraph, this suggests that the Holy Spirit also proceeds from the Son. For a more rigorous account, see Anselm's defense of the *filioque* clause in his work *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*.

10 Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oration 31*, viii.

11 Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, trans. Stephen Hildebrand (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladmir's Seminary Press, 2011), 93.

12 For example, see https://www.jw.org/en/bible-teachings/questions/what-is-the-holy-spirit/.

13 See John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, vol. 3, *Pneumatologia: Or, A Discourse Concerning the Holy Spirit*, ed., William H. Goold (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 29.

Augustine's Maximally Nicene Texts

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Introduction

While Augustine (354-430) is one of the most prominent church fathers who wrote on the Trinity in the century following the Council of Nicaea (325), rarely in his writings did he explicitly invoke the council and its creed. Augustine's Nicene commitments are evident in earlier texts to some degree, but they appear most clearly in his late debates with the Homoian bishop Maximinus, where Augustine explicitly appeals to Nicaea and presents his most mature trinitarian theology. This essay explores how the Nicene Creed functions in Augustine's debate with and separate response to Maximinus. Although Augustine devotes most of his labor to exegesis of scriptural texts, he clearly presupposes Nicene theology as essential for understanding these texts. He seeks to demonstrate that the scriptural witness can only be harmonized by assuming Nicene reasoning. The result is a set of texts that supply Nicene orthodoxy with abundant biblical proof-texts and lines of theological argumentation. These maximally Nicene writings in Augustine's corpus helped secure the eventual triumph of Nicene orthodoxy.

Background to the Debate

In the background of this debate is the Nicene opposition to Arianism and the anti-Nicene response to the Council. Arianism emerged from but is not synonymous with the views of the presbyter Arius (250-336). Even Augustine in his writings distinguishes between the views of Arius and later Arians.[1] Arius, a presbyter in Alexandria, began publicly opposing his bishop's teaching that the Son of God was unbegotten and eternal like the Father.[2] Arius taught that the Father is uniquely divine and that the Son, a created being, has a derivative and subordinate nature capable of suffering, unlike the uncreated Father. Arius's theology logically entailed different natures between Father and Son.

In Augustine's writings, the term "Arians" functions as a broader label for groups that, unlike Arius, sometimes affirmed the Son's eternity but, like Arius, denied his consubstantiality with the Father, often endorsing some form of subordinationism. The Father alone is the one true God and fountain of deity, while the Son is seen as inferior, existing between God and creation.

The Council of Nicaea was convened in the year 325 to deal with the Arian errors. The creed that emerged from the council declared that the Son is begotten, not made, introducing the extrabiblical term homoousios ("consubstantial") to affirm the Son's full divinity and equality with the Father. This was a direct refutation of Arian subordinationism.

In the decades following the Council of Nicaea, there was pushback from certain corners regarding the language of its creed. Some worried about a modalist tendency in the language of Nicaea, which strongly affirmed the unity and shared nature within the Trinity but provided little exposition of the uniqueness of each divine hypostasis. One could even include the "neo-Nicenes" here, who, although they were committed to the theology of Nicaea and endorsed the term homoousios, wanted to give more attention to the distinctions between the hypostases. In their exegesis of the relevant biblical texts, such as 1 Corinthians 1:24, they tended to distinguish between the persons by identifying certain predications such as "power … and wisdom" uniquely with the Son.

Stronger opposition came from more explicitly anti-Nicene groups. Following Constantine's death, Arianism gained ascendancy, bolstered

by the deposition and exile of Athanasius (296-373)—a leading Nicene advocate—and the political ascendancy of Eusebius of Nicomedia (300-342)—an ally of Arius.[3] A series of councils convened in the 350s to promote anti-Nicene theology. Out of these emerged the most important anti-Nicene party: the Homoians.[4] The Homoians were a set of Arians[5] who gained influence in the 350s-360s, taking inspiration from the Councils of Sirmium (357), Ariminum (359; also known as Rimini), and Constantinople (360). They promoted the term homoios ("like" or "similar to") as a compromise to unify various factions. With this term, they presented the Son as characterized by a general likeness to God the Father, but not sharing the same substance. Thus, the unity among them was of the will, not of nature. The Son and the Father were similar in substance, but not the same—and, therefore, not equal. The Homoians strongly rejected the Nicene homoousios, arguing that this term was not scriptural and tended toward modalism.

The particular strand of Homoians whose thought Augustine engages throughout his works are the Western Homoians, who taught that the Father alone is the "true God," distinguishing him sharply from the Son who was "caused," which thus disqualified him from being identified as the "true God." Citing such texts as John 5:19, 14:28, and 1 Corinthians 15:28, they argued that the Son is subordinate the Father.[6] Homoianism was not declared illegal in the West until the year 387,[7] and Augustine opposed it in his trinitarian writings up to his death.

The "pro-Nicenes" offered a more robust defense of homoousios than the neo-Nicenes. They were staunch defenders of the full divinity of the Son. They perceived that the unity between Father and Son is anchored in a common nature, and that all of the predicates that are non-relational in nature—such as "power" and" wisdom," as opposed to "begotten" and "proceeding"—refer equally to each person. Whatever is said of one person non-relatively is said of each, because they refer to the substance shared among the divine persons who are equal.

Augustine, from his earliest writings on the Trinity, aligns with the Latin pro-Nicene tradition,[8] though he does not engage directly with pro-Nicene exegesis on some of the relevant biblical passages until later.[9] As early as the year 393 in Faith and the Creed,[10] Augustine had assumed Nicene reasoning on the shared substance between Father and Son.[11] And from this

point on, he increasingly challenges anti-Nicene thought.[12] He was indebted to pro-Nicenes prior to him in their defense of homoousios as key for orthodox trinitarian doctrine and in their deployment of partitive exegesis to make sense of texts that seem to suggest the subordination of the Son.[13] Augustine directly takes on the Homoians, whom he labels "Arians," arguing along lines established by earlier Latin pro-Nicene polemicists.

In his most famous work of trinitarian theology, The Trinity, Augustine endorses Nicene theology by affirming the consubstantiality and equality of Father and Son and their inseparable operations.[14] He devotes significant attention to 1 Corinthians 1:24, a key text in post-Nicene debates.[15] Homoians interpreted Paul's reference to Christ as the "power and wisdom of God" as indicating the Son's derivative and subordinate status in relation to God the Father.[16] Augustine, however, reads this Pauline text as indicating the equality and shared substance of Father and Son, in line with Nicaea's language of "light from light, true God from true God."[17] God can generate another who is equal, which is what occurred in the Father's begetting of the Son.

One prominent scholar of Augustine's trinitarian theology has argued that in The Trinity Augustine exhibits some discomfort with neo-Nicene exegesis,[18] which could seem to suggest that the Father lacks attributes such as wisdom *until* he begets the Son; this would entail that the Father's being depends upon begetting the Son. In earlier writings — such as *Faith and the Creed* and his "Third Tractate on John" (dated 404-406) — Augustine appears to adopt the neo-Nicene views.[19] But in *The Trinity*, he gestures toward pro-Nicene exegesis by treating "power" and "wisdom" as substantial predicates which apply equally to Father, Son, and Spirit inasmuch as each is God.[20] However, Augustine only fully arrives at a distinctly pro-Nicene reading of 1 Corinthians 1:24 in his later texts against Maximinus[21] — his most explicitly Nicene texts.[22]

Maximinus and His Anti-Nicene Views

Maximinus was a Homoian bishop who was ordered by the Gothic ruler Count Flavius Sigisvult to seek peace between the Homoians and Nicenes,[23] prompting this episcopal debate between himself and the bishop of Hippo in the year 428. Maximinus affirmed the Council of Ariminum and its

creed, which he invokes at the outset of the debate.[24] In line with that creed, Maximinus states his basic views on the Trinity: "I believe that there is one God the Father who has received life from no one and that there is one Son who has received from the Father his being and his life so that he exists and that there is one Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, who enlightens and sanctifies our souls."[25] Maximinius denies the Son's full equality with the Father. He argues that the Father alone is the true God, since he is "incomparable, immense, infinite, unborn, and invisible."[26] Since these descriptors do not apply to the Son, he can be called a god, but not the true or great God. The Spirit, meanwhile, is identified as enlightener and sanctifier, but he is not to be worshipped.

Maximinus defends his views on scriptural grounds. He claims that the Ariminum creed reflects biblical teaching[27] and challenges Augustine to make his case "from the divine scriptures," which all the parties in the debate share, and then "[all] shall have to listen."[28] He is not convinced that Augustine can make his case from the "testimonies [of the scriptures]" that the persons of the Trinity "are the same and equal."[29] Maximinus insisted on a narrow biblicism, rejecting terms not found in Scripture and warning against "idle and superfluous" language and "cleverness of mind."[30] This is an indirect critique of the Nicene Creed and its defenders for going beyond the witness of Scripture. If one sticks with the language of Scripture, according to Maximinus, one would identify the "one God" as the Father, "because he is unborn, because he has received life from no one, and that the Son received life from the Father."[31] "[W]e speak of one God," argues Maximinus, "because there is one God above all, unborn, unmade." As a result of this logic, Maximinus says that for the Son to be one with and equal to the Father, he would need to be the same as the Father, and thus unborn.

Maximinus believes that Scripture definitively points to the Son's subordination to the Father.[32] It clearly portrays the Son as praying to the Father (Matt 6:9-13; 26:36-44; Mark 14:32-39; Luke 11:2-4; 23:34, 46; 22:39-46; John 11:41-42; 17:1-26), praising the Father (Matt 11:25-26; Luke 10:21), obeying and doing the will of the Father (1 Cor 11:3; John 6:38, 8:29; Mark 14:36; Phil 2), declaring that the Father is greater (John 14:28) and his God (John 20:17; cf. Eph 1:17; 2 Cor 1:3; 11:31; Rom 15:6), and identifying God (whom Maximinus conflates with "Father") alone as good (Mark 10:18) and wise (Rom 16:27). Jesus calls the Father "my God"

(John 20:17) and Paul seems to assume a distinction between "the great God" and "our Savior Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13), between "God our Father" and "the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2).[33]

As a result of this reading of Scripture, Maximinus concludes that the Son who is born and obeys is not the one, true, great God, even though he may be "a great God."[34] If the Son were truly equal to the Father, he should be unbegotten.[35] Since the Son is begotten — unlike the Father — he cannot, according to Maximinus, be the one, true, great God. Maximinus argues that the unity shared between Father and Son assumed in Christ's high priestly prayer (John 17) is not of nature or substance, but of will and love.[36] It consists in "agreement, in harmony, in charity, in unanimity."[37] This unity is the model for the type of unity among humans for which Christ prays: as the Son and Father are united in love, so humans should be united in love.

Maximinus also believes that Scripture presents the Holy Spirit as subordinate. He challenges Augustine to provide a quotation from Scripture to show that the Spirit is worshipped.[38] Maximinus directly contests the logic of Nicaea, saying that if the Spirit were equal to the Son and of the same substance of the Father, then Christians should apply to the term "brother" to the Spirit — this would invalidate the Son's status as only-begotten, which was affirmed by Nicaea.[39] Maximinus narrows the Spirit's identity to guide, enlightener, and sanctifier — not Creator (like the Son, according to John 1:3) or author (like the Father).[40] He claims that there is nothing in Scripture indicating that the Spirit is God, Lord, King, Creator, maker, seated with Father and Son, adored, and so forth.[41] Again, Maximinus challenges his interlocutor to stick with the clear teaching of Scripture to make his case for the full and equal divinity of Son and Spirit with the Father.[42]

Augustine and His Pro-Nicene Defense

Augustine strongly opposed Maximinus's stated positions and underlying reasoning. In his debate and separate response, Augustine directly appeals to the Council of Nicaea and its creed at multiple points. However, Augustine does not rely on such appeals to this authority in his argumentation.[43] It is clear, though, that Augustine aligns with the Council of Nicaea and wants his interlocutor to embrace its creed in order to read Scripture rightly and

properly honor the persons of the Trinity. He engages Maximinus primarily over interpretation of biblical texts, but he indicates that the biblicism employed by Maximinus is liable to error. Now, Augustine does not affirm just any council and its creed, and he clearly asserts that the Council of Ariminum has no authority over him. Therefore, Augustine agrees with Maximinus that they should focus their debate on Scripture.[44] But in his opposition to the Homoian bishop's theological conclusions, Augustine targets Maximinus's arguments from silence and selective readings of biblical texts in isolation from the rest of Scripture. Augustine is convinced that Nicaea does a superior job to Maximinus's biblicism at attending to *tota Scriptura* — making better sense of all of the data and, therefore, aiding reading of individual texts to properly honor the trinitarian God revealed.

There are three major threads woven throughout Augustine's arguments against Maximinus. First, he repeatedly turns to the Shema of Deuteronomy 6:4 ("Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one") and its NT counterpart in 1 Corinthians 8:4 ("we know that … 'there is no God but one'"). Augustine invokes these texts throughout the debate and in the response, prominently in his concluding remarks of the debate and opening of the response.[45] In contrast to Maximinus's rebuttal that Christians do not seek to confess God as one in the same way as the Jews,[46] Augustine argues Christians should "want to be Israel" — to be counted among those who are permitted to see God; and thus, they should confess God as one, worship only one God, and not conceive of the Father and Son as two gods (even if unintentionally).[47] The only way to avoid this, in Augustine's estimation, is to affirm the trinitarian doctrine — particularly, homoousios — promulgated by Nicaea. One must begin with that creedal belief in order to understand the God revealed throughout Scripture.[48] Second, Augustine counters Maximinus's narrow biblicism on texts which refer to Christ — to the incarnate mission of the Son — that seem to suggest the subordinate status of the Son. To make sense of these texts, Augustine promotes hermeneutical methods which have come to be referred to as partitive exegesis. And thirdly, pushing back against Maximinus's arguments from silence to deny the Spirit's divinity, Augustine promotes the doctrine of inseparable operations,[49] which carries forward the logic of the Nicene Creed. Underneath all of these threads, Augustine assumes Nicene

orthodoxy as the guide to a right reading of Scripture, and one which aligns with reason.[50]

From here we will briefly summarize Augustine's five major points of contention with Maximinus, which are informed by the three threads above.

1. God Begot God

The Father can, and is willing to, beget an equal. Maximinus was willing to affirm that the Son is begotten, but was unwilling to affirm him as equal to the Father.[51] Augustine takes on Maximinus's argument that if the Son were equal, he should be unbegotten.[52] Augustine defends Nicene orthodoxy here, but he also employs analogous reasoning. Adam, Augustine explains, could exist without being born and still generate what he was; *a fortiori*, God can generate God equal to himself. With creatures, what is begotten shares the substance of that which generated it; thus, to deny that the Son has the same nature as the Father is to deny the Son is a true son, since children always share the nature of their parents.[53] To be able to affirm that Christ is a true son of God (1 John 5:20; cf. John 10:30), one needs to affirm that he is the same substance as the Father.[54] To secure this affirmation, one needs Nicaea, Augustine argues; he calls Maximinus to affirm Nicene orthodoxy in order to call Christ the true Son of God. "Hold with us then the Council of Nicaea," Augustine pleads, "if you want to say that Christ is the true Son of God."[55] He appeals not only Nicaea in general, but explicitly to the doctrine of *homoousios*.[56] What is begotten shares the nature of the one who begot and is equal in nature with the begetter.[57] To deny the generation of one with the same nature is to view God's generation as defective; therefore, the only way to avoid this erroneous logic is to embrace the *homoousios* of Nicaea.[58]

Augustine's argument that the Father begot an equal is a clear rejection of any form of subordinationism. Maximinus's subordinationism of the Son implies that the Father either could not or would not beget a Son as equal; but Augustine firmly denies both possibilities.[59] If the Father lacked the power to beget an equal, his omnipotence would be called into question. If God could beget an equal, but refused, this would suggest envy—an unworthy attribute that runs counter to the goodness of the Father.[60] In either case, Maximinus dishonors both the Father and the Son by denying the Son's full equality.[61] Augustine rebukes Maximinus for assuming that to properly honor the Father he must disparage the Son.[62]

This equality between Father and Son is further grounded in Augustine's defense of divine simplicity[63]—a doctrine implicit in the Nicene Creed's affirmation of the Son's full divinity and unity with the Father. In his response to Maximinus, Augustine delivers his most explicitly pro-Nicene interpretation of the Son as the power and wisdom of God. He frames this interpretation in light of divine simplicity, arguing that the attributes of wisdom, power, and goodness are equally and substantially predicated of both Father and Son—analogous to the Creed's phrase "light from light."

Augustine begins with John 16:15[64]—where Christ declares, "All that the Father has is mine"—to argue that the Father gave power to the Son in full equality. The Father did not give less that he had:[65] "the Omnipotent begot an omnipotent Son, since 'whatever the Father does, these things the Son does in a like manner' (John 5:19)."[66] In discussing John 5:21 and 5:26, Augustine reiterates that the Father gave nothing less than the Father has, including the power to give life in unity with himself,[67] underscoring their shared substance and inseparable operations.[68]

Turning to "wisdom," Augustine challenges Maximinus's reading of Romans 16:27,[69] whereby Maximinus claims that only the Father is wise. Augustine contends that Paul's reference to "God" in this passage designates the Trinity, not the Father alone. Appealing to Deuteronomy 6:13 and 1 Corinthians 1:24, he argues that divine wisdom is not confined to one person but is shared equally by all three.[70] Maximinus, by affirming that the Son is God and Lord yet claiming that only the Father is the one Lord God to be worshipped, creates a theological contradiction. This logic leads to a de facto ditheism and contradicts the Shema. For Augustine, the Trinity is the God who alone is wise, and has always been wise, and is thus worthy of our worship.

Maximinus similarly asserts, based on Mark 10:18 ("No one is good except God alone"), that only the Father is good. Augustine counters that this too refers to the Trinity.[71] The Son is not less good simply because he receives from the Father. "[F]ullness begot fullness; the source of goodness begot the source of goodness,"[72] Augustine writes, echoing the Nicene formula "light from light, true God from true God." This reasoning is reinforced by John 1:1-14, where the Son is identified as the life that gives life, the light that radiates light.[73]Thus, the Son is the same goodness and source of life that the Father is—source from source, yet the two are together one God.

2. The Son is Fully God

Because the Son shares the same nature as the Father, he is one with the Father and is rightly worshipped without violating the *Shema*. Augustine emphasizes that worshipping Christ as God cannot be reconciled with monotheism unless the Son is fully divine. He critiques Maximinus's logic as theologically incoherent: to worship Christ while claiming only the Father is God implies ditheism. Such reasoning contradicts foundational biblical affirmations of divine oneness, including Deuteronomy 32:39 ("there is no god beside me") and 1 Corinthians 8:4 ("there is no God but one").[74] For Augustine, the only way to uphold both monotheism and the worship of Christ is through the Nicene doctrine of *homoousios*, which affirms the consubstantiality of the Father and the Son.

Augustine is convinced that Nicene theology is vital to avoid theological incoherence and pitting Scripture against itself. To preserve both the unity of God and the full divinity of Christ, in line with the Nicene Creed, Augustine relies on partitive exegesis — distinguishing between what is said of the Son according to his divine nature and what is said according to his assumed human nature. This hermeneutical method allows Augustine to account for the many biblical texts that describe the Son's subjection or inferiority. He instructs Maximinus: "[W]henever you read in the authoritative words of God a passage in which it seems the Son is shown to be less than the Father, interpret it as spoken in the form of the servant, in which the Son is truly less than the Father, or as spoken … to show that one has his origin from the other."[75] This is a paradigmatic articulation of partitive exegesis.[76]

Augustine applies this framework to Philippians 2:6–11, the so-called "Christ-hymn." The Father is "greater" than the Son only in the Son's assumed human form.[77] As man, Christ is less than the Father and receives commands which he obeys; as eternal Son, he does not have less power.[78] The "name above every name" given to Christ refers to the man Jesus, who receives what the eternal Son has always possessed by nature.[79] Similarly, 1 Corinthians 15:25–28 refers to the subjection of all things to Christ in his human nature.[80] Augustine insists that Maximinus fails to demonstrate that the Son, as God, is inferior to the Father.[81] Even Christ's prayers and expressions of submission — such as in Gethsemane (Mark 14:36) — are uttered according to his humanity.[82]

Continuing to apply partitive exegesis to defend Nicene orthodoxy, Augustine explains that when Scripture refers to the Father as Christ's "God," it speaks according to the Son's human nature. Drawing on Psalm 21:11 ("From the womb of my mother you are my God"), Augustine asserts that "he who is his Father is also his God on account of the human nature which he has assumed and in which he was born from the womb of his mother without intercourse with a human father."[83] He cautions against reading obedience or subjection into the eternal divine relations. To suggest that the Son's obedience stems from an inferior nature or unequal status not only misreads Scripture but dishonors the Son.[84] Augustine argues that such a misreading ultimately impugns the Father as well — either by implying that the Father begot an inferior, or by suggesting that the Father requires obedience from a being of lesser nature.[85] Both conclusions are theologically untenable. Again, Augustine proposes partitive exegesis to make sense of the statements in Scripture about the subjection of Christ: "the statement that the Son is subject to the Father is also correctly understood insofar as he is man."[86] To read submission into the Trinity apart from the servant form of the Son in Christ is to disparage the Father and the Son.[87] Augustine agrees that the Son is subject to the Father according to the form of man; but Christians must refuse any conception that requires them to espouse two gods. Both Father and Son are, along with the Spirit, one Lord.[88]

3. The Spirit is Fully God

According to Augustine, contrary to Maximinus, the Holy Spirit is properly worshipped. Maximinus made an argument from silence when he insisted that Scripture never declares the Spirit as Creator, even as it explicitly connects the Son to the act of creation to the Son in John 1:3. Augustine challenges this selective reading by highlighting the insufficiency of relying on isolated texts. He offers an analogy: to determine in whose name Christians are baptized based solely on Acts 2:38 ("be baptized … in the name of Jesus Christ") would miss the fuller witness of Scripture, especially Matthew 28:19, where baptism is commanded in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Augustine argues that one needs the doctrine of inseparable operations to make sense of this.[89] Augustine's pro-Nicene theology leads him to insist that the Spirit does everything the Father and

Son do;[90] therefore, inseparable operations and the equality of the Spirit are entailed in Augustine's commitment to Nicene orthodoxy.

Maximinus appears to treat the Spirit as subordinate to the Father, but Augustine presses him to apply his own hermeneutical standards consistently. If Scripture never indicates that the Spirit is lesser, then Maximinus's argument is not simply scriptural but speculative.[91] For Augustine, Scripture as a whole testifies to the unity and equality of the three persons of the Trinity.[92]

He reinforces this point by returning to the theme of the Spirit as Creator. Citing Psalm 33:6 and 104:29–30, Augustine emphasizes the role of the divine "breath" in creation.[93] (The Spirit is closely associated with "breath" throughout Scripture—the Hebrew word ruach is often translated as "breath," "wind," or "spirit," and the same is true of the Greek word pneuma.) Augustine further notes that the incarnation itself—the formation of Christ's human nature—was effected by the Spirit, as testified in Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:35.[94] These texts indicate that the Spirit is not a mere agent of sanctification but active in divine creation, implying shared power and nature with the Father and the Son.

Augustine's strongest argument for the Spirit's full divinity comes through Paul's temple imagery. In 1 Corinthians 3:16, Paul identifies the church as God's temple in which the Spirit dwells. In chapter 6, he declares that the believer's body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. For Augustine, this language is decisive: the temple is the dwelling place of God, and if the Spirit dwells there, he must be God. Consequently, the Spirit is not only Creator but also Lord, King, and true God—worthy of the same worship and reverence accorded to the Father and the Son.[95]

4. The Spirit is Not Greater than the Son

While Augustine strongly affirms the full divinity of the Spirit, he is equally emphatic that the Spirit is not greater than the Son. He exposes the internal inconsistency of Maximinus's Homoian hermeneutic by pressing its logic to an absurd conclusion. The rules of Homoian exegesis, if followed consistently, would terminate in a form of hyper-pneumatology, in which the Son is subordinated to the Spirit. According to Maximinus's hermeneutic, Scripture (John 14:28) seems to suggest that the Father is greater than the Son because the Son took on flesh, whereas the Spirit never took anything

creaturely into union with his person.[96] If Maximinus were consistent, Augustine argues, he would have to conclude that the Spirit is superior to the Son[97]—a view he does not explicitly affirm but which follows from his reasoning.[98]

Augustine thus turns Maximinus's method against him, using *reductio ad absurdum* to reveal the flaws in Homoian exegesis. More broadly, Augustine insists that theological coherence requires attention to the full scope of Scripture's witness, not isolated proof-texts. This, in turn, necessitates the interpretive guidance of Nicene theology, which alone preserves the equality and unity of the divine persons without introducing hierarchy or contradiction.

5. Unity in Nature and Will

As mentioned above, Maximinus argues that the unity shared by the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as described in texts like John 17—is one of will, agreement, and love, not of nature. Interestingly, Augustine in earlier texts had also interpreted John 17 as teaching that the unity between the Father and the Son serves as a model for the unity of redeemed humanity.[99] As the Father and Son love one another, so believers are called to love one another. However, Augustine is clear that this unity of love presupposes ontological unity.[100] The divine persons are one not only in will but also in nature; likewise, humanity, which shares a common nature, is to become one in love.[101] Father and Son are one in accord with their nature, and Christ prays that Christian persons—who share a nature with all other humans—would be perfected in their shared nature by becoming one in love.[102]

For Augustine, this dual unity—of nature and of will—is central to understanding both the Trinity and the church. The shared divine nature is reflected in the shared divine "name" into which Christians are baptized (Matt 28:19),[103] a name that testifies to the indivisible unity of the three persons. Augustine links this unity with the Shema (Deut 6:4) and 1 Corinthians 8:4, declaring that the trinitarian confession is the "Catholic faith," the "correct faith," the "true faith."[104]

Augustine concludes his response to Maximinus by reiterating this trinitarian monotheism. He invokes the Shema ("Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one"), 1 Corinthians 8:4 ("there is no God but one"), Deuteronomy 6:13 ("It is the Lord your God you shall fear … [and] serve"),

and Deuteronomy 32:39 ("there is no god beside me").[105] These texts, he argues, must include the Son within their vision of the one true God; otherwise, Christ becomes a second god alongside the Father. This is precisely what Nicene theology denies. The Nicene position affirms that the Father and the Son are one God. In contrast, Maximinus's reading effectively posits another God beside the Father, contradicting both Deuteronomy's strict monotheism and Paul's affirmation in 1 Corinthians.

Conclusion

Augustine's debate with Maximinus and his subsequent written response represent his most fully developed and explicitly Nicene reflections on the Trinity. He opens his response with an appeal to Maximinus to embrace the "correct faith" of the Catholic church, which he identifies in thoroughly Nicene terms.[106] Later, he calls on Maximinus to explicitly embrace the teaching of the Council of Nicaea,[107] with special emphasis on the *homoousios* — the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father.[108] While Augustine's primary mode of engagement is scriptural interpretation, he makes clear that the whole of Scripture, when rightly read, affirms the trinitarian faith articulated in the Nicene Creed.

For Augustine, the Nicene framework is indispensable for harmonizing the diverse scriptural witness to the persons of the Trinity. It prevents theological incoherence and guards against misreading the Bible in ways that either fragment divine unity or subordinate the Son.[109] The Creed, therefore, does not stand apart from Scripture but summarizes its total witness, serving as a guide for faithful interpretation of individual texts. Augustine insists that one must begin with the trinitarian faith enshrined in Nicaea: three persons, equal in substance, with no division in nature or will.[110]

To defend these Nicene commitments, Augustine advances theological concepts that were implicit in reasoning of Nicaea. His use of partitive exegesis — distinguishing between what is predicated of Christ according to his divine and human natures — provides a crucial interpretive strategy for preserving the Son's full divinity. Though this method would gain prominence in later Christological debates, such as those surrounding Nestorius and Chalcedon, Augustine already assumes its necessity in his refutation of Homoian theology.

Similarly, the doctrine of inseparable operations — though not explicitly defined at Nicaea — is implicit in the Creed's affirmation of the Son's consubstantiality with the Father. This laid the groundwork for later development of the doctrine of inseparable operations. Augustine had already begun advancing this doctrine in The Trinity, and he extends it in these anti-Homoian texts as a way of defending the Spirit's full divinity and the unified action of the three persons. His robust articulation of inseparable operations goes beyond Nicaea itself, providing further doctrinal clarity on the unity of divine agency.

In these late works of this fourth-century North African bishop, Augustine develops lines of argumentation, tools of interpretation, and exegetical offerings that would help secure the victory of Nicene orthodoxy for centuries to come. He affirms the dogmatic pronouncements of Nicaea and advances its logic in service of orthodox trinitarianism. Trinitarian Christians are forever indebted to his labor in these maximally Nicene texts.

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1 Michel R. Barnes, "*De Trinitate* VI and VII: Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 193.

2 See Michel R. Barnes,"Arius, Arianism," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*; edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 59.

3 See Barnes, "Arius, Arianism," 59-60.

4 For an introduction to the Homoians, see Uta Heil, "The Homoians," in *Arianism: Roman Heresy and Barbarian Creed* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

5 See Heil, "The Homoians," 98. Heil explains that the Homoians were commonly identified as "Arians."

6 Western Homoianism was more unabashedly subordinationist than Eastern Homoianism. See Barnes, "Arius, Arianism," 60.

7 See Michel R. Barnes, "Anti-Arian Works," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*; edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 32.

8 See Lewis Ayres, "The Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology," in *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 369; *Augustine and the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 179-181; "'Giving Wings to Nicaea': Reconceiving Augustine's Earliest Trinitarian Theology," *Augustinian Studies* 38, no. 1 (2007): 38.

9 See Barnes, "Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," 200-202; "Augustine's Last Pneumatology," *Augustinian Studies* 39, no. 2 (2008): 232-233.

10 This essay will use the English titles, citations, and translated text supplied in the New City Press editions of Augustine's works.

11 See Ayres, "Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology," 370; *Augustine and the Trinity*, 180.

12 See Barnes, "Anti-Arian Works," 31.

13 See Barnes, "Anti-Arian Works," 32-33. Barnes explains that Augustine was particularly influenced by the hermeneutical approaches of Athanasius (263-273) and Hilary of Poitiers (310-367).

14 See Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 180-198.

15 See Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 221ff; "Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology," 370-371; Barnes, "*De Trinitate* VI-VII," 190.

16 See Barnes, "Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," 194.

17 See Ayres, *Augustine and the Trinity*, 225.

18 See Barnes, "Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," 200-201.
19 See Barnes, "Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," 195.
20 See Barnes, "Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," 201.
21 See Barnes, "Augustine and the Limits of Nicene Orthodoxy," 201-202.
22 See Joseph T. Lienhard, "Creed, *Symbolum*," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*; edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 255. In those texts are found Augustine's most explicit appeals to the Council of Nicaea and its creed. Also, one could argue that those are the writing in which Augustine's most mature trinitarian theology is expounded. See Barnes, "Augustine's Last Pneumatology," 227-234.
23 See Barnes, "*Maximino Arianorum episcopum, Conlatio con*," in *Augustine Through the Ages: An Encyclopedia*; edited by Allan D. Fitzgerald (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 549.
24 See *Debate with Maximinus*, republished in *Arianism and Other Heresies*; translated by Roland J. Teske; edited by John E. Rotelle (Ellicott City, MD: New City Press, 1995), 2: "Maximinus answered, 'If you ask for my faith, I hold that faith which was not only stated, but was also ratified at Ariminum by the signatures of three hundred and thirty bishops."
25 *Debate with Maximinus*, 4.
26 See Barnes, "*Maximino Arianorum episcopum, Conlatio con*," 549.
27 *Debate with Maximinus*, 4: "I wanted the decree of Ariminum to be present … to show the authority of those fathers who handed on to us in accord with the divine scriptures the faith they learned from the divine scriptures. … I state [my views on the Trinity] on the basis of the scriptures."
28 *Debate with Maximinus*, 1.
29 *Debate with Maximinus*, 12.
30 *Debate with Maximinus*, 13.
31 *Debate with Maximinus*, 13.
32 See *Debate with Maximinus*, 13.
33 See *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 23.
34 *Debate with Maximinus*, 13. Emphasis added.
35 See the editorial footnote 61 associated with *Debate with Maximinus*, 13. The commentator mentions that the Arians lack the distinction between absolute and relative predicates that Augustine provides in *The Trinity* VI.2, 3 and VI.7, 8. According to this distinction, Augustine argues that whatever is said of one person non-relatively is said of each of the persons, while relative terms such as "begotten" and "unbegotten" can apply to one person within the Trinity but not the others.
36 See *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 22: "I believe what I read; he speaks of love, not substance."
37 *Debate with Maximinus*, 12.
38 See *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 3.
39 See *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 15.
40 See *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 5.
41 See *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 21.
42 *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 20-15, 21: "We ought to accept all the things that are brought forth from the holy scriptures with full veneration. The divine scripture has not come as a source of our instruction so that we might correct it. How I wish that we may prove to be worthy disciples of the scriptures! … The truth is not obtained by argumentation, but is proved by certain testimonies."
43 See Robert B. Eno, "Doctrinal Authority in Saint Augustine. *Augustinian Studies* 12 (1981): 165.
44 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus*, 3. See also *Answer to Maximinus*, republished in *Arianism and Other Heresies*; translated by Roland J. Teske; edited by John E. Rotelle (Ellicott City, MD: New City Press, 1995), II.XIV, 3. There Augustine explicitly defends the teaching of the Council of Nicaea, particularly the *homoousios*, but also admits that not all have accepted this teaching, and that the Council of Ariminum struggled to understand it due to "the novelty of the word, even though the ancient faith had given rise to it." But Augustine goes on to explain his method in these debates with Maximinus. He will refuse to merely invoke the teaching of Nicaea, since his interlocutor does not recognize its authority, as he does not recognize the authority of the Council of Ariminum. Rather, he will work from the scriptures, which are "the common witnesses for both of us," seeking to make his case through biblical interpretation and the use reason.
45 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 25; *Answer to Maximinus*, republished in *Arianism and Other Heresies*; translated by Roland J. Teske; edited by John E. Rotelle (Ellicott City, MD: New City Press, 1995), I.I. See also, *Debate with Maximinus*, 11.
46 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus*, 15, 23.

47 Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 15, 25. See also *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 1.

48 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 15, 23: "First, believe that these three are and three in their individual persons and that they are, nonetheless, not, taken together, three lord gods, but one Lord God. Then, the Lord God will grant you understanding to you who believe and pray that you may deserve also to see, that is, to understand what you believe."

49 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.V. This is one of the earliest and more clear articulations of inseparable operations in these texts. Augustine argues that all three persons are involved in creation, illumination, and sanctification; to think otherwise courts the implication that there are multiple gods.

50 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIV, 3.

51 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XV, 5.

52 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, I.XX.

53 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XV, 2.

54 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 14; *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIV, 2.

55 Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XV, 2.

56 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIV, 3.

57 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 14; *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIV, 6.

58 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVIII, 1: "Do you not see that you believe God's generation to be defective, that you preach it as monstrous, when you dare to say that a different nature has come forth from the womb of God? But if you shrink from this, as you ought, and reject it with us, then at last praise and hold with us the Council of Nicaea and *homoousios*."

59 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.VII.

60 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XV, 5.

61 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.I; II.XVIII, 4.

62 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, I.VI.

63 Augustine had already expounded on divine simplicity in *The Trinity*, books V-VII and XV, and also in *City of God*, XI.10.

64 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.IX.

65 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XI-XII.

66 Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XII, 13.

67 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIV, 7.

68 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XII, 2.

69 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIII, 1-2.

70 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, I.XVI; II.XIII, 2.

71 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 5.

72 Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 7.

73 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 7.

74 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 14; *Answer to Maximinus*, II.X, 10; II.XXIII, 1-3.

75 Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIV, 8.

76 Another articulation is found in Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XX, 3: "If you pay attention to the distinction of substances, the Son of God came down from heaven, the Son of Man was crucified; if you pay attention to the unity of the person, both the Son of Man came down from heaven and the Son of God was crucified."

77 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, I.V; II.XV, 1; II.XV, 5. See also *Debate with Maximinus*, 14.

78 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XIV, 9. The Son, even in his earthly existence, retains the power to take up his life again (John 10:18).

79 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.II.

80 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVIII, 5.

81 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVIII, 6.

82 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, Book II.XX, 2.

83 Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVIII, 2.

84 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XV, 5.

85 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVIII, 3.

86 Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, I.XVIII.

87 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVIII, 4.

88 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 2.

89 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.VII, 1; II.XXII, 3. See also Ayres, "Grammar of Augustine's Trinitarian Theology," 369. Ayres explains that Augustine had already espoused inseparable operations as early as 389 in in Letter 11 and in and book I of *The Trinity*, but here in the response to Maximinus, Augustine explores this doctrine more fully with reference to the Spirit.

90 See Barnes, "Augustine's Last Pneumatology," 231.

91 See Barnes, "Augustine's Last Pneumatology," 230.

92 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 1.

93 See Barnes, "Augustine's Last Pneumatology," 231-234. Barnes explains that this is the first time Augustine uses Psalm 33 for a trinitarian argument. Presenting the Holy Spirit as Creator, also, goes beyond what he had argued in *The Trinity*.

94 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVII, 2.

95 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 15, 23; *Answer to Maximinus*, I.XI; II.III; II, XXI,1-3.

96 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, I.XIX.

97 See Barnes, "Augustine's Last Pneumatology," 230. Augustine's argument is summarized aptly by Michel R. Barnes: "If, as the Homoians insist, the silence of Scripture is adequate ground for a doctrinal conclusion, then the fact that Scripture says that the Son obeys and glorifies the Father but it says nothing about the Spirit obeying and glorifying the Son, or, for that matter matter, the Father. If taken seriously, the rules of Homoian exegesis actually produce a conclusion opposite to what the Homoians teach."

98 See Heil, "The Homoians," 113. Maximinus articulated the view that the Holy Spirit was subordinate to the other persons, "because according to Romans 8:26, the Holy Spirit pleads for us in front of the Father."

99 See Augustine, *The Trinity*, IV.7, 11-IV.9, 12; VI.3, 4. See the discussion in Austin Sheen, "Augustine's Exegetical Rule for Oneness," *Augustinian Studies* 55, no. 2 (2024): 241, 247-258.

100 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 14; *Answer to Maximinus*, I.X; I.XII. See also the discussion in Eno, 255.

101 See Eno, "Doctrinal Authority in Saint Augustine," 258.

102 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXII, 1.

103 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXII, 2.

104 Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 1-3. Cf. II.X, 3.

105 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXVI, 14.

106 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, I.I.

107 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XV, 2.

108 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XVIII, 1.

109 See Augustine, *Debate with Maximinus,* 15, 26; *Answer to Maximinus*, II.XXIII, 1-3.

110 See Augustine, *Answer to Maximinus*, II.X, 2.

Between two Creeds: Cyril of Jerusalem's Theology of the Father and the Son[1]

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The debates that ensued around the Creed of the Nicaea in the fourth century are well documented and well known.[2] One dubious figure from this period is Cyril of Jerusalem (313–386).[3] Cyril is a theologian who, as Lewis Ayers put it, "is difficult to place in the standard categories of the fourth century."[4] The key debate around Cyril concerned the use of the term *homoousios* employed at the Council of Nicaea. Some have argued that Cyril was initially against this term. Edward Yarnold argues that this does not need to be the case, even though it is true that this is not a word that Cyril used in his writings.[5] While earlier in his career he is labelled by Socrates of Constantinople and Sozomen as a subscriber of *homoiousian* theology (whether fairly so or not), it is clear he aligned himself fully with pro-Nicene theology by the time of the Council of Constantinople.[6]

Cyril's major work is known as the *Catechetical Lectures*.[7] These lectures were penned around 350, the same period in which he was appointed as bishop of Jerusalem.[8] The dating of these works is important. With Nicaea written in 325 and the Nicaea-Constantinopolitan Creed written in 381, the *Catechetical Lectures* are placed approximately in the middle of these two creeds. Considering Cyril's theology of this time, a topic to engage with concerns his relation to these two creeds.

The creed that Cyril expounds throughout his *Catechetical Lectures* has been termed the Creed of Jerusalem. While the text of this Creed is not extant, Stephenson has looked to reconstruct it based on Cyril's citations of it throughout his lectures.[9] When one compares the Creed of Jerusalem with the Creed of Nicaea-Constantinople, one sees the many similarities shared between the writings. Due to this reality, Stephenson has argued that it may have been the case that the council of 381 "commissioned Cyril to expand his creed into a form which should, taking into account present needs, represent the faith of the East."[10] Building on this research, Drijvers writes,

> Cyril's influence on the enactment of the so-called Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed (NC) was substantial as it appears from the remarkable resemblance between the Jerusalem Creed (J) and the one established in Constantinople. Unfortunately, we do not have a text of J, nor do we know that there ever was one, but the creed as preached in Jerusalem can be very well reconstructed from Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures*. The resemblance is so striking — of the 174 words of NC, 100 occur in J — that it is not far-fetched to infer that J was the basic model for the creed formulated in Constantinople and that Cyril was one of the driving forces behind it.[11]

Seeing as the *Catechetical Lectures* are situated between the councils of 325 and 381, and seeing as Cyril's work became central in the development of the Nicaea-Constantinopolitan Creed, it is fitting to reflect on a selection of Cyril's lectures for an insight into the vision of a fourth-century post-Nicaea theology. Despite the non-use of the famous *homoousios*, his theology is nonetheless in broad agreement with both creeds.[12] By looking at Cyril's thought and his comments upon the phrases that are found in both the Creed of Jerusalem and the Creed of Nicaea, one can see the many other theological insights that can be gleaned from the Creed of Nicaea that do not depend on the *homoousios*.[13] Therefore, this article will focus on providing an exposition of Cyril's theology concerning God the Father and the Son in so far as they expand on the phrases found in the Creed of Nicaea. Based on Stephenson's reconstruction, this will look at Article I and II of the Jerusalem Creed, as they parallel the theology of the Father and the Son in the Creed of Nicaea, stopping prior to the Creed's statements on

the incarnation.[14] Thus, the focus of this essay will be on Cyril's theology as found in Catecheses 4, 6–11. Such an exercise will help us to reflect on the theology of Cyril and the way phrases from Nicaea were understood in his writings.

On the Father

We Believe in one God the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible.

The Creed of Jerusalem, like the Creed of Nicaea, begins with an emphasis on the oneness of God. Cyril emphasizes the point that God is one in response to a variety of different heresies. Cyril argues that God "is both good and just, and so if ever you hear a heretic saying that the just God is one and the good God another, you may at once be warned and recognize the poisoned shaft of heresy." Cyril thus rejects the dualist heresy that argues "that the Creator and Master of the soul was one, and that of the body another." In contrast, Cyril argues, in line with the creed, that there is one God. And this one God is the creator of all things. He is the creator of "souls and bodies" and is "the Creator of heaven and earth."[15] This connection between God's oneness and God's role as creator of things seen and unseen is reflected on by Cyril as a clear refutation of such dualist heresy.

Cyril takes issue with several other heretical positions that deny God's essential oneness as well. He addresses Cerinthus, Menander, Carpocrates, Ebionites, and Marcion. In addressing their teaching, he rejects those who believe one god is good and another god is just. Cyril rejects that one god is Father and another is creator. And he rejects Marcionism which tried to eradicate the Old Testament from the New.[16] Cyril also rejects Basilides and Valentinus.[17] The latter set Christ apart from the Creator, as Valentinus posited "that Christ came to lead men in rebellion against the Creator of the world."[18] But of all the heretics one is to reject, one is to especially detest Mani.[19] Mani claimed that "The God of the Old Testament is the inventor of evils."[20] The rejection of all of these heresies is based in the unity of God — that we believe in one God.[21] There is not a good god in opposition to a just god. Nor is there a god of the soul and a god of the body. As the creeds make clear — there is one God.

And in Cyril's thought, it is evident that this one God is to be understood as God the Father. Cyril states, "For, with the thought of God, let the thought of Father be joined, that Father and Son may be perfectly and indivisibly glorified."[22] And again, "For not only should we believe in One God, but also devoutly accept that He is Father of the Only-begotten (Μονογενοῦς), our Lord Jesus Christ."[23] Cyril's understanding of God as God the Father is, according to John Behr, in line with other Greek thinkers of this time and in line with the Creed of Nicaea. Behr mentions that the Greek Fathers speak of God as God the Father in a way that is unique to how Augustine will later speak of God to refer to the Trinity.[24] Thus Cyril, according to Behr, follows Nicaea and the Greek tradition in understanding God to be denoting God the Father.

However, the Father cannot be understood apart from the Son. As Cyril states, "The very mention of the name of the Father suggests the thought of the Son, just as, in turn, the mention of Son implies the thought of the Father. For, if He is a Father, He is surely Father of a Son."[25] Therefore, since he is eternally Father, then the Son must be eternal as well — "He did not attain Fatherhood in the course of time, but He is eternally Father of the Only-begotten (Μονογενοῦς)."[26] God is the Father of Christ "by nature and not by adoption." Therefore, God is Christ's Father, not in time, but "before all time (πρὸ χρόνων)."[27]

This argument for God as Father is connected with an argument against Judaism. To speak of One God who is Father is to argue that the existence of the Son is necessary. A person, then, cannot argue for one God and believe that this one God is God the Father and also at the same time deny the existence of the Son.[28] Moreover, this refutes not only Judaism, but also Arianism. If there was a time when the Son was not, then the Father would not have been the Father. The eternality of the Father, then, demands the eternality of the Son.

Cyril also focuses on the importance of the term "Almighty." This term, when paired with "One God," communicates that this one God has power over all things. God is not limited in power, as some of the Greek gods are.[29] This statement also rejects the heresy which argues "that there is one Lord of the soul and another of the body" and in so doing displays that there is a lack in each god's power.[30] No, the one God is almighty. God does not lack in anything. God "has dominion over all things, yet tolerates many things

because He so wills."[31] So while God allows for evil in this world for a time, God has "determined a fixed time for requiting each, that they who, granted a long reprieve, remain impenitent may suffer the greater condemnation."[32] Although God allows evil for a time, this does not mean God is not all powerful. To the contrary, God will, at the perfect time, show his power through the condemnation of the unrepentant.

In conclusion to Catechesis 8, Cyril states, in continuity with Nicaea, that "There is, then, One God the Father, the Almighty." This statement that God is one and is the "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ," rejects "polytheism and all heresy."[33] In Catechesis 9, Cyril first quotes from the Creed of Jerusalem — which parallels almost exactly with the Creed of Nicaea — before then giving an exposition of it:

> "We believe in One God, Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible"; that we may remember that He who is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is the very same who made heaven and earth; that we may be made secure against the aberrations of the impious heretics, who have dared to speak ill of the All-wise Artificer of all this world; they see with eyes of flesh, but the eyes of their understanding are blinded.[34]

In his comments on the Father, Cyril is concerned with refuting heresies that uphold the belief in more than one god. The belief in one God who created all things and who is all powerful refutes such heterodox thinking. Cyril also clearly portrays that when one speaks of God, one is speaking of God the Father, and to uphold God as Father is to believe in the eternality of the Son. In this way, Cyril also refutes the teachings of Judaism and Arianism.

On the Son

> *And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, Only-begotten — that is, of the substance of the Father — God of God, Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father; through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on earth.*

In turning to write on the Son, Cyril argues that "Those who have been taught to believe in One God Father Almighty ought to believe also in His

Only-begotten Son (Υἱὸν μονογενῆ). For he that denies the Son has not the Father."[35] This Son is defined as "One Lord Jesus Christ," and he is "'One,' that you may not suppose another; we say 'One,' that you may not impiously distribute among many sons the many names of His power."[36] These many titles, such as Christ, Lord, and Son, do not depict more than one person. One is not, as the heretics teach, to say Christ is one person and Jesus is another. Rather, "though the titles are many, their subject is one."[37] The titles ascribed to the Son, although many, all depict the one Jesus Christ.

Cyril next speaks of how Christ's role in creation is connected to his role as Lord. He states that Christ "is Maker, then Lord; first, by the will of the Father, He made all things; then He assumed the Lordship over the things made."[38] This Lordship was not taken by Christ, but was received "by nature, of the Father's own will (αὐτοπροαιρέτου λαβὼν φυσιχῶς)."[39] The fact that Christ is Lord, then, cannot be separated from the reality that all things were made by him.

The Son "is called by two names, Jesus Christ; Jesus because He is a Savior, Christ because He is a Priest."[40] In Hebrew the name Jesus denotes 'saviour,' whereas in Greek it means 'healer.' Christ in his work first heals one's soul and then, by extension, heals the body as well.[41] By stating that Jesus is the Christ, Christians reject Judaism, which grants the name Jesus, but deny that Jesus is the Christ.[42] Hence, Cyril gives ample testimony to the fact that Jesus is who he says he is — he is the Christ.[43] In making this statement clear, Cyril shows how the teaching of the creeds further refute the beliefs of Judaism.

Cyril also uses language similar to that of Nicaea in his description of the Son's begotteness. In the section "Of Christ" in his summary of the ten articles of the Jerusalem Creed, he writes:

> Believe also in the One and Only Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, begotten God of God, begotten Life of Life, begotten Light of Light, like in all things (τὸν ὅμοιον κατὰ πάντα) to Him who begot Him; who received not His being in time, but before all ages (πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων) was eternally and incomprehensibly begotten of the Father; who is the Wisdom and Power of God and co-essential Justice; who before all ages (πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων) sits at the right hand of the Father.[44]

The Son is to not be divorced from the Father; nor is the Son to be mixed with the Father, either. Instead, one is to "believe that of One God there is one Only-begotten (μονογενὴς) Son, who is before all ages (πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων) God the Word."[45] In this way, Cyril anticipates the inclusion of Christ's generation "before all ages"—a clause used at Constantinople but not at Nicaea.

The phrase that Christ is "like in all things" to the Father is used elsewhere in Cyril's Catechesis 11.[46] Here Cyril states that Christ "was begotten Son from the beginning, Son of the Father, like in all things (ἐν πᾶσιν ὅμοιος) to His Genitor, begotten Life of Life, Light of Light, Truth of Truth, Wisdom of Wisdom, King of King, God of God, Power of Power."[47] And again, "the Son is like in all things (Ομοιος γὰρ ἐν πασιν) to Him who begot Him, begotten Life of Life, Power of Power, God of God."[48] While Cyril does use the *homoi* term here, it is important to clarify that it is not being used in reference to the word *ousia.* For this reason, Giulea rightly states that Cyril is neither an Arian nor a Homoiousian.[49] Instead, in his use of the "like in all things" formula, Giulea argues that Cyril is writing in line with the *Ekthesis makrostichos,* a statement connected to the Antioch Council of 345.[50]

Concerning eternal generation, Cyril mentions that Christ was "eternally and ineffably begotten of the Father in substance (ἐν ὑποστάσει)."[51] One reads here of Cyril's use of the term *hypostasis* to refer to God's being, akin to how it is used in Hebrews 1:3 and in the anathema of the Creed of Nicaea. It is notable that Cyril uses the language of the NT to speak of God's nature as *hypostasis*, rather than Nicene word *ousia* which is not used for God's nature in the NT. This reality hints at why Cyril may have avoided the use of the word *homoousios* in his *Catechetical Lectures*. As expounded later, in Catechesis 16, he states, "There is One God, the Father; One Lord, His Only-begotten (μονογενὴς) Son; One Holy Spirit, the Advocate. It is enough for us to know this much; inquire not curiously into His nature (φύσιν) and substance (ὑπόστασιν). For if it had been written, we would have spoken about it; what is not written let us not essay."[52] Along with the word ὑπόστασιν, Cyril here also uses φύσιν, which is used in connection to God in 2 Peter 1:14. Seeing as he cautions over speculation and the idea of not going beyond what is written, it may be that, at this point in his career, Cyril avoided the terms *ousia* and *homoousios* as they are not used to describe God's nature in Scripture.[53] This potential reasoning helps

readers in the twenty-first century to be mindful of why someone in the middle of the fourth century might be initially hesitant to adopt the Creed of Nicaea's *homoousios*. It was not because they were Arian. To the contrary, they were engaging with how best to preserve the truthfulness and faithfulness of Scripture while also refuting the heterodox teaching — Arian and otherwise — that was prevalent. And, although Cyril and others would not use the term at this point in the fourth century, time did aid in showing the benefits of adopting the term *homoousios*, something Cyril would do in the years ahead.[54]

Continuing on in Catechesis 11, Cyril argues that — reminiscent of the language of Nicaea — "Since the Father is Very God (Θεὸς γὰρ ἀληθινὸς) He begot the Son like to Himself (ὅμοιον ἑαυτῶ), Very God (ἀληθινὸν Θεὸν)."[55] To understand the distinction between God the Father and God the Son, Cyril clarifies that the Father is "Unbegotten (ἀγέννητος) (for He is Unbegotten who has no father)," and the Son is "begotten eternally of the Father, not begotten in time, but before all ages (πρὸ αἰώνων γεννηθεις)."[56]

The Father and the Son will the same things. Moreover, all things are created by the Father through the Son.[57] Cyril states that "the Son is Very God (Θεὸς τοίνυν ἀληθινὸς Υἱὸς), having the Father in Himself, not changed into the Father." He then proceeds to mention that the Father did not become incarnate; the Son did. Moreover, "The Father did not suffer (Ού Πατὴρ ἔπαθεν) for us, but the Father sent Him who suffered (παθόντα) for us."[58] Here Cyril refutes Patripassianism, an early heresy that confused the Father and the Son and therefore claimed that the Father suffered as Christ on the cross.[59] Following this condemnation, Cyril next condemns Arianism — "Never let us say: There was a time when the Son was not." Furthermore, there is not to be a confusion between the Son and Father. The Son is not to be called Father nor the Father the Son.[60] Nor is anyone to say, as the Modalists do, "that the Father is at one time Father and at another Son."[61] To the contrary, Cyril is careful to refute such errors of Patripassianism, Arianism, and Modalism. Cyril is adamant that God the Father and God the Son are to be known and worshipped rightly.

Coming to the close of Catechesis 11, Cyril claims — again, very similarly to Nicaea — "let us believe in One Lord, Jesus Christ, the Only-begotten (μονογενῆ) Son of God, begotten of the Father before all ages, Very God

(Πατρὸς γεννηθέντα Θεὸν ἀληθινὸν πρὸ πάντων τῶν αἰώνων), through whom 'all things were made.'" He made all things "visible or invisible." Thus, he explains again, "all things were made through Him, the Father working through the Son."[62]

In the same way that Cyril was concerned to refute heresies when speaking of the Father, he is likewise concerned to refute heresies in writing on the Son. Cyril is careful to defend the full eternality of the Son and to clearly distinguish the Father and the Son. He does not use the *homoousios* at this point but utilizes words that are used in the NT. He also cautions against speculating too deeply into things that the Scriptures do not expound on. Nevertheless, as history shows, while he does not use the term *homoousios* at this point in his career, he will move to adapt it by the time of the Council of Constantinople in 381.

Conclusion

In surveying Cyril's writings on the Father and the Son as expounded in his *Catechetical Lectures,* we see that there is broad agreement between his theology and the Creed of Nicaea, despite the fact that he did not use the Nicene term *homoousios*. One sees in Cyril's thought a clear desire to uphold orthodox theology by refuting heterodox views that reject the oneness of God, the eternality of the Son, or confuse the Father and the Son. In looking at Cyril's concerns and refutations, one sees that there was more than just Arianism that early theologians were concerned with. One can also see how it would be an easy transition for Cyril to move from this period of his life toward becoming a leader at the Council of Constantinople (381).

The *Catechetical Lectures* are indeed between the Creeds of Nicaea and Nicaea-Constantinople. They provide expositions that are in much continuity with the breadth of Nicaea, but it also does not endorse the core tenet of Nicaea that made it unique. But Cyril one day would. This change probably communicates less a change in his theology and more an openness to adapt a word that became crucial in the defence of orthodoxy — a pursuit that was evidently close to Cyril's heart.

1 A thank you to Matt Maw for reading through and commenting on this article.

2 See Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2004) and Donald Fairbairn and Ryan M. Reeves, *The Story of Creeds and Confessions: Tracing the Development of the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 48 – 79.

3 On Cyril of Jerusalem, see Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy,* 153-57, Edward Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, The Early Church Fathers (London: Routledge, 2000), Anthony A. Stephenson, "General Introduction," in St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Works, Volume 1*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 61 (1969; repr. ed. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2005), 1 – 65, Jan Willem Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem: Bishop and City*, Supplements to Vigiliae Christianae 72 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2004), and Peter Van Nuffelen, "The Career of Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 348 – 87): A Reassessment," *Journal of Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (April 2007): 134 – 146.

4 Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy,* 153.

5 He may have used the word *homoousios* once in a letter, but the authenticity of its inclusion is doubted. See Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 60 – 61.

6 Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy,* 154 and Stephenson, "General Introduction," 32.

7 These lectures can be found in St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Works, Volume 1*, and St. Cyril of Jerusalem, *Works, Volume 2*, trans. Leo P. McCauley and Anthony A. Stephenson, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation 64 (1970; repr. ed. Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000). The citations in this paper will be to these translations. Greek phrases will be added in parentheses. Greek citations are from *Patrologiae Graeca* 33.

8 See Yarnold, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 22.

9 See A. A. Stephenson, "The Text of the Jerusalem Creed," *Studia Patristica* III, pt. 1 (1961): 303 – 13.

10 Stephenson, "General Introduction," 33.

11 Drijvers, *Cyril of Jerusalem*, 46.

12 On this point, Stephenson writes, "Cyril's substantive orthodoxy, of course, is attested from the first by the *Catecheses*. If we measure orthodoxy by the confession of the true divinity of Christ and not by acceptance of a philosophical term, Cyril never wavered in orthodoxy" (Stephenson, "General Introduction," 32). This also aligns with his theology of the Son, in that Stephenson elsewhere states, "Holding the true divinity of the Son, his co-eternity, co-equality and consubstantiality with the Father, the Cyril of the *Catecheses* was perfectly orthodox, even by the standard of the Nicene Creed" (A.A. Stephenson, "S. Cyril of Jerusalem's Trinitarian Theology," *Studia Patristica* XI, Pt. 2 (1972): 240).

13 Kelly states that Cyril "declined to incorporate anything of the Nicene doctrine into the creed" of Jerusalem since he did not use the term *homoousios* (J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd ed. [London: Continuum, 1972],183). While the *homoousios* is the central and defining component of the Creed of Nicaea, the theology of the creed nevertheless extends beyond this one word. However, as is seen in the comparison between the Creed of Jerusalem and the Creed of Nicaea, the major unique contribution of Nicaea is the employment of *homoousios*.

14 For a comparison of creeds, see Stephenson, "General Introduction," 63 – 65. The last line in the Creed of Nicaea this paper will address is "through whom all things were made, things in heaven and things on earth." I will start each section with the relevant lines from the Creed of Nicaea. These sections are in italics. The translation of the Creed of Nicaea is the one provided in Stephenson.

15 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 4.4.

16 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.16.

17 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.17.

18 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.18.

19 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.20.

20 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.27.

21 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.36.

22 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 6.1.

23 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 7.1.

24 See John Behr, "Calling upon God as Father: Augustine and the Legacy of Nicaea," in *Orthodox Readings of Augustine*, ed. George E. Demacopoulos, and Aristotle Papanikolaou (2008; repr. ed. New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2020), 153 – 165.

25 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 7.4.

26 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 7.5.

27 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 7.10.
28 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 8.1.
29 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 8.2.
30 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 8.3.
31 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 8.4.
32 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 8.5.
33 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 8.8.
34 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 9.4.
35 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.1.
36 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.3.
37 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.4.
38 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.5.
39 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.9.
40 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.11.
41 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.13.
42 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.14.
43 See Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 10.17–20.
44 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 4.7.
45 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 4.8.
46 Stephenson claims that Cyril's phrase "like the Father in all respects" was also used by Athanasius in his earlier writings. Stephenson also mentions that Athanasius "made little use of the word" *homoousios* pre-357. This dating is notable as Cyril's *Catechetical Lectures*, which does not use the word *homoousios*, is dated circa 350. See Stephenson, "Introduction," 40. See also Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 257–258.
47 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.4.
48 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.18.
49 Dragoș Andrei Giulea, *Antioch, Nicaea, and the Synthesis of Constantinople: Revisiting Trajectories in the Fourth-Century Christological Debates*, Studies in the History of Christian Traditions 200 (Leiden, NL: Brill, 2024), 116.
50 See Giulea, *Antioch, Nicaea, and the Synthesis of Constantinople*, 44–48, 116–121, here 118.
51 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.10.
52 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 16.24.
53 On this point, see Stephenson, "S. Cyril of Jerusalem's Trinitarian Theology," 240. Later Cyril will comment on trying to understand more about the generation of the Son than Scripture describes. For those who speculate in this way, he asks, "Why then do you busy yourself about things which even the Holy Spirit has not written of in the Scriptures?" Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.12.
54 For a brief and accessible history around the use of the term *homoousios* at Nicaea and how it was received in the years following the Council, see Kevin DeYoung, *The Nicene Creed: What You Need to Know about the Most Important Creed Ever Written*, Foundational Tools for Our Faith (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2025), 43–52.
55 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.9.
56 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.13.
57 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.16.
58 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.17.
59 On Patripassianism, see my dictionary entry, Jonathan N. Cleland, "Patripassianism," in *The Essential Lexham Dictionary of Church History*, ed. Michael A. G. Haykin (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2022).
60 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.17.
61 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.18.
62 Cyril, *Catechetical Lectures* 11.21.

John Calvin on the Work of God the Father

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Introduction

As we commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed here in 2025, we are reminded of the theological battles that shaped Christian orthodoxy. This historic confession was not crafted in the quiet halls of academia but forged by pastors and bishops in the crucible of controversy. When Arius began teaching that the Son was a created being, subordinate to and not of the same substance as the Father, the very foundation of Christian faith was threatened. At the Council of Nicaea in 325, church leaders like Athanasius defended the full deity of Christ, articulating the equality of the Father and the Son. Their struggle resulted in a creed that has defined Trinitarian orthodoxy for seventeen centuries, establishing that the Son is "begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father." This same theological vigilance would be required again and again throughout church history, as faithful leaders defended the doctrine of the Trinity against those who would distort it.

During his ministry, John Calvin faced several Trinitarian controversies. He was compelled to defend and clarify his Trinitarian doctrines in response to several men in and around Geneva who either accused him of heresy or promoted their anti-Trinitarian views.[1] Like Nicaea, the disputes were mainly

focused on the issue of the "eternal generation of the Son,"[2] and thus led Calvin to emphasize the unity of the Godhead in his ministry and writing.[3] For Calvin, this was simply continuity with the pro-Nicene Fathers[4] and their doctrine of inseparable operations.[5] Nevertheless, in Calvin's mind, the united work of the Trinity also included particular actions in the economy of salvation[6] that could be distinctly appropriated to a particular person of the Godhead.[7]

Nowhere is this more clearly seen than in section 1.13.17 of Calvin's *Institutes*: "Indeed, the words 'Father,' 'Son,' and 'Spirit' imply a real distinction — let no one think that these titles, whereby God is variously designated from his works, are empty — but a distinction, not a division."[8] Thus, for a faithful understanding of Calvin's theology, whether concerning the unity or trinity of God, a careful study must keep both tensions in mind.

This balance between unity and distinction mirrors the structure of the Nicene Creed itself. While assuming the inseparable operations of the Godhead, the creed's Trinitarian shape deliberately distinguishes the particular works of each divine person in the economy of salvation. We confess belief in "one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," in "one Lord Jesus Christ... by whom all things were made... who for us and for our salvation came down from heaven," and in "the Holy Spirit, the Lord and giver of life." The creed thus maintains the unity of divine action while recognizing the distinct roles each person plays in creation and redemption. Calvin's theological method follows this same pattern, acknowledging both the undivided work of the Trinity and the personal appropriations within that work.

The goal of this article is to examine John Calvin's Paterology (doctrine of God the Father), particularly as it relates to salvation.[9] When the Nicene Creed begins with "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," it establishes the Father as the first person of the Trinity and the source or principle (*principium*) of divinity. From the Creed, it is evident that this primacy of the Father in the creedal order does not suggest superiority in essence but reflects the economic ordering of divine persons that Calvin himself maintained. The Father is portrayed as Creator and sovereign ruler, the one who initiates the divine plan of salvation that the Son and Spirit carry out. Yet despite this emphasis on the Father in both the ancient creeds and Calvin's theology, systematic reflection on the Father's

person and work has been surprisingly neglected in theological discourse. This article seeks to address this gap by examining first, Calvin's understanding of the inseparable works of the Triune Godhead, and then, Calvin's writings on the works that can be particularly appropriated by the Father.[10]

The Work of the Triune God

Calvin is careful to nuance the name of God in Scripture. For him, "God" cannot be synonymous with the Father, for then "thus would the Father be the deifier; nothing would be left in the Son but a shadow; and the Trinity would be nothing else but the conjunction of the one God with two created things."[11] Context is the determining factor for Calvin. For example, he often demonstrates the deity of the Son when the Son takes the name "Jehovah."[12] Nonetheless, Calvin clarifies, "so often as mention is made of the Father and the Son together, or the Spirit, the name of *God* is peculiarly applied to the Father."[13] Likewise, Calvin does not equate the Father with Creator.[14] Consequently, Calvin's understanding of the inseparable works of the Trinity is rightly arranged under two headings: God as Creator, and God as Governor.

God as Creator

At the beginning of his commentary on Genesis, Calvin assigns the work of creation to all three persons of the Godhead,[15] and in 1.13.7 of the *Institutes* he teaches that John 5:17 explains what Moses revealed in Genesis: "Therefore we conclude that God has so spoken that the Word might have his share in the work and that in this way the work might be common to both."[16] His most precise articulation of the Father's united work with the Son in creation is found in his discussion of Hebrews 1:2:

> According to the most usual mode of speaking in Scripture, the Father is called the Creator; and it is added in some places that the world was created by wisdom, by the word, by the Son, as though wisdom itself had been the creator, [or the word, or the Son.] But still we must observe that there is a difference of persons between the Father and the Son, not only with regard to men, but with regard to God himself. But the unity of essence requires that whatever is peculiar to Deity should belong to the Son as well as to the Father,

> and also that whatever is applied to God only should belong to both; and yet there is nothing in this to prevent each from his own peculiar properties.[17]

Calvin's exegesis aligns perfectly with the Nicene affirmation of the Father as "Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible." Calvin recognized that while creation is attributed to the Father, it remains an inseparable work of the Trinity. Likewise, the Creed confesses concerning the Son, "through him all things were made," and concerning the Holy Spirit, he is "the Lord, the giver of life."

God as Governor

Concluding his discussion of God as Creator in the *Institutes*, Calvin makes the natural transition to God as Governor. He asserts that his work as Creator and Governor are inseparably joined: "To make God a momentary Creator, who once for all finished his work, would be cold and barren, and we must differ from profane men especially in that we see the presence of the divine power shining as much in the continuing state of the universe as in its inception."[18] Furthermore, in his commentary on Exodus 3:14, Calvin is careful to attribute the work of governance to the "one God," rather than to the Father alone.[19]

What is governance? For Calvin, it consists in "nourishing and sustaining men"[20] and also "[making] a difference between good and evil, to help the miserable, to punish all wickedness, to check injustice and violence."[21] As such, Calvin subsumes God's role as "Judge" under his work as Governor.[22]

One crucial caveat exists in Calvin's understanding of God as "Judge." Whereas Calvin asserts that God's governance is an inseparable work of the Triune God, yet he also contends that the first person of the Godhead manifests to the wicked as "Judge" and to the elect as Father. For example, in his commentary on Colossians 1:20, he concludes that enmities are abolished in Christ, and "thus God becomes a Father instead of a Judge."[23] Accordingly, for Calvin, the Godhead performs the work of governance, and yet the Father sits in the office of Judge until the work of Christ is completed. Then the Father will hand over all judgment to the Son.[24]

The Nicene designation of the Father as "Almighty" (*Pantokratora*) captures what Calvin understood about divine governance — that

the Father's sovereign authority extends over all creation, both sustaining and ruling it with perfect wisdom.

The Work of the Father

In Calvin's thinking, the New Testament serves as the principal source that unveils the personal works of the Father, Son, and Spirit. In his writings on the OT, Calvin is hesitant to distinguish the works of each person of the Trinity. Still, in his commentaries on the NT as well as his theological literature, he clearly distinguishes the works of each person of the Trinity by their role in salvation. Although Calvin believes that salvation is an inseparable work of the Triune God, he nonetheless articulates a distinct work in salvation for each person of the Trinity.[25] Concerning the Father's particular work, Calvin's understanding can be divided into four stages. From the perspective of the Father, Calvin perceives salvation as the story of the gospel, (1) planned by the Father in eternity past, (2) provided in the sending of his Son, (3) produced by the pouring out of his Spirit, and (4) perfected in the eternal state.

The Father Planned Salvation in Eternity Past

Calvin places the Father's particular work from eternity in the doctrines of election and predestination. In his "Articles concerning Predestination," Calvin describes the Father's eternal counsel as "what he willed to be done with the whole human race," and delineates the plan as: (1) the fall of man in Adam, (2) distinction between the elect and the reprobate, (3) adoption of the elect, and (4) a reckoning of the elect as the Father's possession prior to him making the elect members in Christ.[26] Calvin calls this doctrine the "fountain and the first cause," namely, "God knew before the world was created whom he had elected for salvation."[27] Butin agrees: "The gracious will to make the divine nature known to fallen human beings through the gospel stems from the free election of the *hypostasis* of the Father."[28] According to Calvin, the Father's elective work defines the church,[29] and his purpose will never be changed.[30] This is because, for Calvin, the Father gives all of his elect to the Son:

> First, that all who come unto Christ, were before given unto Him by the Father; secondly, that those who were thus given unto Him were delivered, as it were, from the hand of the Father into the hand of the Son, that they may be truly his; thirdly, that Christ is the sure keeper of all those, whom the Father delivered over to his faithful custody and care; for the very end, that He might not suffer one of them to perish.[31]

Calvin understands the difficulty of sovereign election in human experience. Though the Father will never change his mind concerning the elect, amid chastisement and suffering, it may seem that the Father is rejecting them. Commenting on Isaiah 14:1, Calvin argues, "The Lord has treated his people as severely as if he had rejected them; yet by the actual event he will at length show and prove that he has adopted them, by giving abundant evidence of his election and by having compassion on them forever."[32] Ultimately, in the mind of Calvin, the permanency of salvation does not depend on man but the "secret election of God [the Father]," [33] whereby his chosen ones are "committed to his care and protection as their shepherd."[34]

Calvin is careful to root the Father's elective purposes in his eternal love. Meditating on 2 Corinthians 13:14, he says, "For God, viewed in himself, loved us before the creation of the world, and redeemed us for no other reason than this — because he loved us."[35] In 2.16.3 of the *Institutes*, he affirms, "Indeed 'because he first loved us', he afterward reconciles us to himself."[36]

Calvin not only ties the Father's elective purposes to his eternal love, but also to his good pleasure: "The intrinsic cause of this is in himself, for he is content with his own secret good pleasure."[37] Thus, in Calvin's Paterology, the Father purposes and plans salvation for his elect, motivated by love and resulting in his good pleasure. The Nicene Creed's placement of the Father first in its Trinitarian formula reflects the same ordering principle Calvin recognized — that the Father's eternal counsel stands as the fountainhead from which salvation flows.

The Father Provided Salvation in Redemptive History through the Sending of His Son

Calvin's view is that the sending of the Son was another one of the Father's particular or singular works,[38] and one to which all of the OT prophecies and promises pointed. Likewise, the Nicene Creed progresses from confessing

"one God, the Father Almighty" to declaring belief "in one Lord Jesus Christ... begotten of the Father before all worlds." Calvin similarly understood that the Father's promises in the OT pointed to this relation, the eternal Father sending his eternal Son.

In the Gospel, the Father Promised a Messiah.

Calvin, in his commentary on Genesis, expounds on the Father's promise in three key passages. First, in Genesis 12:3, Calvin asserts that the "covenant of salvation that God made with Abram is neither stable nor firm except in Christ."[39] Second, in Genesis 26:24, he says the statement, "I am the God of your father Abraham," was meant to be a reminder to Isaac of all the promises the Father had previously made.[40] Third, in Genesis 49:10, Calvin saw it as a confirmation of faith that "Christ has been not only promised, but that his origin had been pointed out, as with a finger, 2,000 years before he appeared."[41]

Calvin taught that the promises given to the fathers were confirmed through the prophets, summarizing prophetic ministry in his commentary on Numbers 22:8: "For those servants of His, to whom God intrusted [*sic*] the office of prophesying, He so directed by His Spirit, that they never spoke except out of His mouth... In fine, their business was to ratify God's covenant, whereby He reconciles men to Himself through Christ."[42] It is why in Psalm 2, Calvin can contend that verses 7 – 8 are not speaking of the eternal generation of Christ, but instead of his incarnation:

> He is not said to be begotten in any other sense than as the Father bore testimony to him as being his own Son. This passage, I am aware, has been explained by many as referring to the eternal generation of Christ … it only signifies that *He* who had been hidden from the beginning in the sacred bosom of the Father, and who afterwards had been obscurely shadowed forth under the law, was known to be the Son of God from the time when he came forth with authentic and evident marks of Sonship, according to what is said in John 1:14, "We have seen his glory, as of the only begotten of the Father."[43]

Perhaps Calvin's most concise summary of the Father's promises of a Messiah in the OT is found in his commentary on John 5:37:

> Long ago his Father had earmarked him in the Law and the Prophets, so that he would be recognized when he came with the Father. My explanation is that God witnessed to his Son whenever he offered to the ancient people the hope of salvation or promised that the kingdom of Israel would be completely restored. This is how the Jews would have gained an idea about Christ from the prophets before he was manifested in the flesh. When Christ was in front of their eyes, they despised and rejected him, thus showing their disdain for the law; and Christ reproaches them for this. Yet they boasted about their knowledge of the law, as if they had been educated on God's lap.[44]

In the Fullness of Time, the Father Sends his Son to be the Christ.

Again and again, Calvin affirms that the Son was sent by the Father into the world to be the Christ.[45] For Calvin, it is in the work of Jesus Christ that all of the Father's promises are accomplished.[46] As such, Calvin says, "Christ, then, is the foundation of our salvation, because he has been ordained for this end by the Father."[47]

Calvin sums up the anointing of Jesus by the Father in the offices of prophet, priest, and king.[48] As the prophet like Moses, Calvin teaches that the "Father is said 'not by measure to have given the Spirit of his Son,'"[49] and appointed the Son to be our "teacher."[50] As a priest after the order of Melchizedek, Calvin asserts that the Father appointed the Son a priest forever,[51] assigned him the "office of blessing the church,"[52] and accepted his sacrifice as a sufficient propitiation for sin.[53] As the final Davidic king, Calvin writes that the Father appointed the Son to be Lord,[54] exercising his government through him,[55] and to be judge of the living and the dead.[56]

Finally, as part of the Father's work in sending the Son, Calvin stresses that the Father vindicated the Son's work by raising him from the dead.[57] Calvin is careful to nuance the Son's part in the resurrection as well as the Spirit's part in the resurrection:

> Here [in John 2:19] Christ claims for himself the glory of his resurrection, though usually in Scripture it is declared to be the work of God the Father. But these two statements are thoroughly compatible. To commend God's power to us, Scripture expressly ascribes to the Father the resurrection of his Son from the dead; but here Christ particularly proclaims his own divinity. And

> Paul reconciles the two in Romans 8:11: "And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you." While Paul makes the Spirit the author of the resurrection, sometimes he calls him the Spirit of Christ and sometimes the Spirit of the Father.[58]

Thus, for Calvin, the Father is the one who made known his promises to the fathers through the prophets, and is the faithful, loving God, who has fulfilled all of his gospel promises in the person and work of his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Father Produces Salvation in His Elect through the Pouring out of the Holy Spirit.

In Calvin's "Summary of Doctrine concerning the Ministry of the Word and the Sacraments," he asserts that the Holy Spirit brings about union with Christ at the behest of both the Father and Son: "Whatever (*a*) the Father or (*b*) the Son does to bring the faithful to salvation, Holy Scripture testifies that each operates through the Holy Spirit; and that (*c*) Christ does not otherwise dwell in us than through his Spirit, nor in any other way communicates himself to us than through the same Spirit."[59] In doing so, Calvin reveals his agreement with the Western tradition of dual procession. Calvin also explains the work of the Father through the sending of the Spirit in several ways; namely, in the effectual calling of the elect, in union with Christ, in the perseverance of the saints, and in a new familial relationship.

The Father Sovereignly Calls his Elect through the Effectual Drawing of the Spirit.

Just as the Nicene Creed confesses the Spirit as "the Lord and Giver of life," Calvin saw the Father breathing spiritual life into his elect through the Holy Spirit's ministry. Calvin asks, "And whom does Paul consider to be those who believe in Christ?" His answer is clear: "Those only whom his heavenly Father has *drawn*."[60] In his comments on Isaiah 8:18, Calvin defines the elect as all those given to Christ by the Father and "those whom God drew by an inward and secret work of his Spirit."[61] This call is necessary in the mind of Calvin because "no one is ever able of himself to come to Christ unless God

first comes to him by his Spirit. So it follows from this that not everyone is drawn, but that God gives this grace to those whom he has elected."[62]

The Father unites his elect with Christ by the Spirit. Calvin divides union with Christ into two broad categories. The first is the forensic declaration of justification, which may be termed "Christ for us," and the second is the transformative experience of regeneration, which may be called "Christ in us." In his commentary on Genesis 7:1, Calvin teaches, "He [God the Father] adopts them to himself in Christ and justifies them through his sheer mercy. After he has in this way reconciled them to himself, he also regenerates them by his Spirit to new life and righteousness."[63]

Union with Christ begins by faith, and in Calvin's mind, it is a gift from the Father given through the ministry of the Spirit.[64] Those who exercise faith have "heard and have been taught by the Father."[65] The Father does this in two ways, according to Calvin, "within, through his Spirit; without through his Word. By his Spirit, illuminating their minds and forming their hearts to the love and cultivation of righteousness, he makes them a new creation. By his Word, he arouses them to desire, to seek after, and to attain that same renewal."[66]

The Father Gives Perseverance to his Saints through the Indwelling of the Spirit. Regarding John 10:28, Calvin says, "And as if this were not enough, he says that they will be kept safe by his Father's power. This is a remarkable passage, teaching us that the salvation of all the elect is as certain as God's power is invincible.[67] Again, about Philippians 1:6 in the *Institutes,* he says, "There is no doubt that through 'the beginning of a good work' he denotes the very origin of conversion itself, which is in the will. God begins his good work in us, therefore, by arousing love and desire and zeal for righteousness in our hearts; or, to speak more correctly, by bending, forming, and directing, our hearts to righteousness."[68]

Through the Spirit, the Father relates to believers as his children. Calvin calls the Spirit the Spirit of adoption, "because he is the witness to us of the free benevolence of God with which God the Father has embraced us in his beloved only-begotten Son to become a Father to us; and he encourages us to have trust in prayer. In fact, he supplies the very words so that we may fearlessly cry, 'Abba, Father!'"[69] For Calvin, this was eminently practical, especially in the midst of suffering. Writing to the martyr Mathieu Dimonet

while he was in prison awaiting execution, Calvin encouraged him with the Father's paternal love and care:

> If you have many trials do not be greatly amazed on that account, even although you feel such frailty in yourself that you are almost ready to be shaken. Rather learn that it is by such means that God would humble you, that His help should be the better recognised by your need of it; and, moreover, that He invites you to call on His name, and to have all dependence on His grace, seeing there is need that we be forcibly driven to do so …[70]
>
> And although this be difficult to the flesh, yet it is the true happiness of his faithful ones; and you must pray that it may please this gracious God so to imprint it upon your heart that it may never be effaced therefrom. For our part, we also shall pray that He would make you feel His power, and vouchsafe you the full assurance that you are under his keeping; that He bridles the rage of your enemies, and in every way manifests Himself as your God and Father.[71]

Thus, Calvin teaches that the Father's effectual call is through the proclamation of the Gospel, and in conversion, the Father unites the believer to Christ through the indwelling work of the Holy Spirit. The Father continues to sanctify his elect through the Spirit, so that they will persevere to the end, and relates to them in a new way, filling them with comfort and hope in his love.

The Father Will Perfect Salvation in the Consummation of His Kingdom for his Own Glory and the Believer's Joy.

Calvin does not speak often of the Father's role in the consummation, and yet a few things may be noted. In his preface to the Geneva Bible, Calvin gives a summary of redemptive history and concludes with a paraphrase of Matthew 25:31 – 34:

> JESUS CHRIST, verily, will come, after the time settled by His FATHER, and will sit upon His Throne with great Majesty, and will Judge all men, and will render to every one according to his Deeds, whether Good or Evil; and will say to those on His Right Hand, who in this World looked forward to good things to come, that is, to Life Eternal, "Come, you who are chosen of my FATHER

> to Life Eternal, take possession of the Kingdom which is prepared for you, and assigned to you from before the creation of the World."[72]

For Calvin, this possession includes the Father's bestowal of inheritance upon his children,[73] including the eternal enjoyment of "direct vision of the Godhead,"[74] their experience as the Father's "peculiar treasure,"[75] and the "heavenly renovation" of the body.[76]

Concluding Reflections

John Calvin was eminently pastoral and practical with his theology. For him, piety is the only proper response to a study of God the Father. In fact, in Calvin's writings, a Christian's response to the work of the Father is found in at least four aspects of spirituality. First for Calvin is worship. He writes in his *Institutes*:

> For God [the Father] has in his own right the reverence of a father and a lord. Therefore, he who would duly worship him will try to show himself both an obedient son to him and a dutiful servant. The Lord, through the prophet, calls "honor" that obedience which is rendered to him as Father. He calls "fear" the service that is done to him as Lord.[77]

Calvin's emphasis on reverence for the Father echoes the posture of the Nicene Creed, which begins with collective confession, "We believe" and concluding the section on the Holy Spirit "who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified," placing the worshipping community in proper relationship to "the Father Almighty."

Second, for Calvin, is spirituality in the form of hope. Calvin writes, "Let the first step toward godliness be to recognize that God is our Father to watch over us, govern and nourish us, until he gather us unto the eternal inheritance of his Kingdom."[78] Again, The Nicene confession of the Father as "Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible" grounds our hope in the same reality Calvin identified — that the One who created all things is committed to bringing his children into "the eternal inheritance of his Kingdom."

The third aspect is found in a desire to know the Father by means of Christ through the Word and prayer: "Since he [Christ] is the eternal wisdom of the Father, his unchangeable truth, his firm counsel, we ought not be afraid of what he tells us in his Word varying in the slightest from that will of the Father which we seek... The practice of this doctrine ought also to flourish in our prayers.[79]

Finally for Calvin, the believer's spirituality is manifested in living for the Father: "By partaking of him [Christ], we principally receive a double grace: namely, that being reconciled to God through Christ's blamelessness, we may have in heaven instead of a Judge a gracious Father; and secondly, that sanctified by Christ's spirit we may cultivate blamelessness and purity of life."[80]

As we commemorate the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed, we are reminded that Calvin's theological precision stands in a long line of faithful witnesses who sought to articulate the mystery of the Triune God with both accuracy and devotion. The Nicene confession has anchored believers for seventeen centuries, accomplishing what those fourth-century pastors intended: leading us not merely to believe in the Father Almighty, but to know him as the one who creates, who provides, and who welcomes us as children.

The creed's opening affirmation, "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth," continues to shape Christian worship and theology, not as a mere intellectual proposition but as a living confession that forms our identity as God's people. When we confess this faith, we join with Calvin and countless believers across time who have found in the Father not a distant deity but the source of all grace and the object of our deepest trust.

The Father who planned our salvation before the foundation of the world, who sent his Son to accomplish it, and who pours out his Spirit to apply it, is worthy of our reverent adoration and faithful obedience. As Calvin himself understood, true knowledge of God the Father leads inevitably to doxology, the proper end of all theological reflection.

1 Most notable were the controversies with Pierre Caroli in 1537, Michael Servetus in 1546, Giovanni Valentino Gentile in 1556–7, and Giorgio Blandrata in 1558. For a summary of the theological issues and responses see Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40–44, Wulfert de Greef and Lyle D. Bierman, *The Writings of John Calvin: An Introductory Guide*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008), 159–167, Karl Barth and Geoffrey William Bromiley, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 341–342, and H. van den Belt, ed., Restoration Through Redemption: John Calvin Revisited, Studies in Reformed Theology Volume 23 (Boston: Brill, 2013), 17–22.

2 For a history of various interpretations of Calvin's position, see Benjamin W. Swinburnson, "John Calvin, Eternal Generation, a Communication of Essence: A Reexamination of His Views," *Kerux* 25, no. 1 (May 1, 2010): 26–49. See also Kurt A. Richardson, "Calvin on the Trinity," in *John Calvin and Evangelical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 32–42. See also Brannon Ellis, *Calvin, Classical Trinitarianism, and the Aseity of the Son*, 1st ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). See also Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*.

3 Karl Barth argued that emphasis on the *unity* of the Godhead was true of all the reformers: "The reformers undoubtedly tended to stress the unity rather than the distinction in God, as we see plainly in Calvin." Barth, *The Theology of John Calvin*, 327.

4 Recent discussion is underway concerning the main influence of Calvin's Trinitarian theology; particularly, whether it was Augustinian or Cappadocian. The writings of Benjamin Warfield and Paul Helm argue that the main influence is Augustine, while Thomas Torrance argues for Gregory of Nazianzus. For an in-depth investigation see John Thomas Slotemaker, "John Calvin's Trinitarian Theology in the 1536 Institutes: The Distinction of Persons as a Key to His Theological Sources," in *Philosophy and Theology in the Long Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 781–810. For Calvin's consistency with the Nicene and Constantinople creeds contrary to Robert Reymond see, Paul Owen, "Calvin and Catholic Trinitarianism: An Examination of Robert Reymond's Understanding of the Trinity and His Appeal to John Calvin," *Calvin Theological Journal* 35, no. 2 (November 1, 2000): 262–281.

5 The doctrine of inseparable operations can be broadly defined by the Latin axiom, *opera trinitatis ad extra sunt indivisa* (The external works of the Trinity are undivided). Colin Gunton, a critic of inseparable operations and Augustinian Trinitarianism, pits the Eastern emphasis on the three persons of the Trinity against the Western emphasis on the unity of the Trinity. See Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Arie Baars, building on Gunton's premise, believes that Calvin modified Augustine's doctrine. See Arie Baars, "'Opera Trinitatis Ad Extra Sunt Indivisa' in the Theology of John Calvin," in *Calvinus Sacrarum Literarum Interpres* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), 131–141. Kyle Claunch, on the other hand, holds that pro-Nicene Fathers from both East and West embraced the Nicene Creed and Gunton's East vs. West paradigm is to be rejected. Claunch also concludes, contra Baars, that Calvin embraced Augustine's doctrine of inseparable operations. See Kyle Claunch, "What God Hath Done Together: Defending the Historic Doctrine of the Inseparable Operations of the Trinity," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 56, no. 4 (December 2013): 781–800.

6 For a thorough discussion of the relationship between the immanent and economic Trinity in Calvin's thought, see Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas*, 46–50, and Dennis Ngien, *Gifted Response: The Triune God as the Causative Agency of Our Responsive Worship* (Milton Keynes, U.K. ; Colorado Springs, Colo: Paternoster, 2008), 137–138.

7 Sometimes called "distinct personal appropriations." For example, even though all three persons of the Trinity were at work in the incarnation, only the person of the Son became incarnate. For a discussion on Calvin's nuance of inseparable operations and distinct personal appropriations see Robert C. Doyle, "Basic Expectations, Strategies and Consequences: Towards Understanding the Triune God in the Company of John Calvin," *Reformed Theological Review* 68, no. 3 (December 1, 2009): 151–174. Baars has read Calvin rightly when he says, "in Calvin's opinion the external works of the triune God are only undivided *intrinsically*. When we consider these works *extrinsically* - i.e. as God reveals himself in these works to *us* - it is quite possible for us to distinguish between the special activity of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Nevertheless, these distinct operations of the three Persons remain the work of the one and only triune God!" Baars, "'Opera Trinitatis Ad Extra Sunt Indivisa' in the Theology of John Calvin," 134.

8 John Calvin and John T. McNeill, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (London: SCM. Press, 1961), 1.13.17, 141 – 142. Calvin further explains in 1.13.18, "It [the distinction] is this: to the Father is attributed the beginning of activity, and the fountain and wellspring of all things; to the Son, wisdom, counsel, and the ordered disposition of all things; but to the Spirit is assigned the power and efficacy of that activity." See *Institutes*, 1.13.18, 142 – 143.

9 This theology has been largely assumed under the discipline of Theology Proper, but rarely given specific attention. For current studies, see Tom Smail, *The Forgotten Father: Rediscovering the Heart of the Christian Gospel*, (London: Paternoster Press, 1996), chapter 3 of Bruce A. Ware, *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: Relationships, Roles, and Relevance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), John Koessler, *God Our Father* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), and Daniel Bush and Noel Due, *Embracing God as Father: Christian Identity in the Family of God* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015).

10 I am not so much concerned with the metaphor of Father, as I am with the work of the first person of the Godhead. To see a thorough treatment of the metaphor of Father in Calvin, see Garret A. Wilterdink, "Fatherhood of God in Calvin's Thought," *Reformed Review* 30, no. 1 (September 1, 1976): 9 – 22.

11 *Institutes*, 1.13.25, 154.

12 For example, see his comments on Zechariah 2:10 in John Calvin and Owen, John, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 5 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 74 – 75.

13 *Institutes*, 1.13.20, 144.

14 "Calvin appears to studiously avoid using the terms *Father* and *Creator* as synonyms." Philip Walker Butin, *Revelation, Redemption, and Response: Calvin's Trinitarian Understanding of the Divine-Human Relationship.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 56. In this regard he is thoroughly exegetical. For example, writing on John 1:3, he says, "The Father made all things by the Son, and all things are made by God through the Son." John Calvin, *John*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1994), Jn 1:3, 16.

15 John Calvin, *Genesis*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), 18.

16 *Institutes*, 1.13.7, 130. This understanding helps give clarity to Calvin's arrangement of the 1559 *Institutes*. Benjamin B. Warfield's interpretation is most popular, "With the edition of 1559... a totally new arrangement was introduced, which reduced the whole to a simple and beautiful order - redacted into four books...These four books treat in turn of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, and the Holy Catholic Church...The order was suggested by the consecution of topics in the Apostles' Creed." Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield and Ethelbert Dudley Warfield, *Calvin and Calvinism* (New York; London: Oxford University Press, 1931), 375. However, Charles Partee has recently made a more compelling argument for bi-partite interpretation, with volumes 1 and 2 expositing "Christ for us," and volumes 3 and 4 expositing "Christ in us." See Charles Partee, *The Theology of John Calvin* (Louisville; London: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 35 – 40.

17 John Calvin and John Owen, John Calvin and Owen, John, Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 34.

18 *Institutes*, 1.16.1, 197.

19 John Calvin and Bingham, Charles William, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 73 – 74.

20 John Calvin and Anderson, James, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 94 – 96.

21 John Calvin and Owen, John, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 4 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 217.

22 [In Daniel 7:9,] Daniel now relates how he saw another figure, namely, God sitting on his throne to exercise judgment. We shall see it afterwards concerning Christ, but Daniel now teaches only the appearance of God in his character of a judge … But first it is worth while to consider here, why he says — *the Ancient of days*, meaning the eternal Deity himself, *ascended the throne of judgment*. This scene seems unnecessary, because it is the peculiar office of God to govern the world; and as we know this cannot be done without upright judgment, it follows that God has been a perpetual judge from the creation of the world." John Calvin and Meyers, Thomas, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 31.

23 John Calvin and Pringle, John, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 156. Cornelis van der Kooi and Donald H. Mader bring out this contrast as well, "As soon as man descends into himself and his conscience is summoned before the tribunal of God, according to Calvin he encounters God as Judge and Avenger. Wherever man may turn his gaze, above, or below, after the fall he encounters the curse against him. But that image of God dominates where Christ is not known. Outside of Christ, and does not get beyond it … For the believer God has another face. In Christ, God's countenance is full of grace and kindness. He appears as Father. Only in faith in Christ does one get sight of salvation, of eternal security with God." Cornelis van der Kooi and Donald H. Mader, *As in a Mirror: John Calvin and Karl Barth on Knowing God: A Diptych*, Studies in the history of Christian traditions (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2005), 151.

24 At Romans 2:16, he writes, "the Lord will execute judgment by Christ, for he is appointed by the Father to be the Judge of the living and of the dead." John Calvin and Owen, John, *Commentary on the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 100.

25 For example, commenting on Tit 1:3: "He applies the same epithet to the Father and to Christ, so that each of them is our Saviour, but for a different reason; for the Father is called our Saviour, because he redeemed us by the death of his Son, that he might make us heirs of eternal life; and the Son, because he shed his blood as the pledge and the price of our salvation. Thus the Son hath brought salvation to us from the Father, and the Father hath bestowed it through the Son." John Calvin and Pringle, William, *Commentaries on the Epistles to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 287.

26 J. K. S. Reid, *Calvin: Theological Treatises* (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 1954), 179–180.

27 Commenting on 1 Peter 1:1-2 in John Calvin and Owen, John, *Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 24.

28 Butin, Revelation, Redemption, and Response, 55.

29 According to the "Catechism of the Church of Geneva," the church is defined simply as, "the body and society of believers whom God has predestined to eternal life." Reid, *Theological Treatises*, 102. See also *Hebrews*, 70.

30 In 3.22.7 of his *Institutes*, Calvin declares, "God's firm plan that election may never be shaken will be more stable than the very heavens." *Institutes*, 3.22.7, 940.

31 John Calvin and Hendry H. Cole, *Calvin's Calvinism: A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 32.

32 John Calvin, *Isaiah* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 119.

33 John Calvin and Pringle, William, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 141.

34 *Romans*, 49.

35 John Calvin and Pringle, John, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 404.

36 *Institutes,* 2.16.3, 506. For Calvin, the proof of the Father's love is only understood in Christ. "Christ draws our attention to the eternal counsel of the Father to teach us that the Father cared so much about our salvation that he handed over to us his one and only Son, great as he is. Christ himself, who came into the world to be totally obedient to his Father, confirms that in everything his only aim is to think of us." *John*, Jn 10:18, 249. See also at John 3:35, where all of the blessings of the Father's election comes through Christ, *John*, 88.

37 *Institutes*, 3.22.7, 941. See also John Calvin and Pringle, William, *Commentaries on the Epistles of Paul to the Galatians and Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 28, where Calvin defines the Father's "will" as his "good pleasure." He elaborates in his commentary on 2 Thessalonians 1:11 – 12: "Paul goes to an amazing height in extolling the grace of God, for not contenting himself with the term *good pleasure*, he says that it flows from his goodness, unless perhaps any one should prefer to consider the beneficence as arising from this *good pleasure*, which amounts to the same thing. When, however, we are instructed that the *gracious purpose* of God is the cause of our salvation, and that *that* has its foundation in the *goodness* of the same God, are we not worse than mad, if we venture to ascribe anything, however small, to our own merits? For the words are in no small degree emphatic. He might have said in one word, *that your faith may be fulfilled*, but he terms it *good pleasure*. Farther, he expresses the idea still more distinctly by saying, that God was prompted by nothing else than his own goodness, for he finds nothing in us but misery. Nor does Paul ascribe to the grace of God merely the beginning of our salvation, but all departments of it." *Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 320. Calvin writes to Melanchthon that the elect and reprobate are distinguished by this same good pleasure. See Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 62.

38 For example, see his commentary on the servant song of Isaiah 42:1 – 8 in *Isaiah*, 257.

39 *Genesis*, 113.

40 *Genesis*, 232.

41 *Genesis*, 367.

42 John Calvin and Charles William Bingham, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 4 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 185.

43 John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 1 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 18.

44 *John*, Jn 5:37, 139.

45 For example, see his comments on Luke 1:31 in John Calvin and Pringle, William, *Commentary on a Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 35, *John*, Jn 19:30, 433 – 435, and *Institutes*, 3.11.18, 747 – 748.

46 *Institutes*, 3.2.32, 579 – 580. For his longest treatment, see John Calvin, *Christ the End of the Law: Being the Preface to the Geneva Bible of 1550* (London: William Tegg, & Co., 1850).

47 See comments on 1 Peter 2:6 – 8 in *Catholic Epistles*, 68.

48 Reid, *Theological Treatises*, 95, and *Institutes*, 2.15.1, 494 – 495.

49 *Institutes*, 2.15.5, 500.

50 *Institutes*, 4.8.7, 1155.

51 *Institutes*, 4.18.12, 1440.

52 See his comments on Genesis 14:19 in *Genesis*, 132.

53 See comments on Exodus 28:1 in *Four Last Books of Moses*, vol. 2, 193 – 194. Calvin has a number of statements describing the Father's work in redemption: 1) "our heavenly Father has restored righteousness to us by his Son" in *Romans*, 280 – 281, 2) "the Father, by an eternal purpose, decreed this atonement, and gave this proof of his love to us, that he "spared not his only-begotten Son, (Rom. 8:32) but delivered him up for us all" in *Galatians and Ephesians*, 26 – 27, 3) "the Father destroyed the force of sin when the curse of sin was transferred to Christ's flesh" in *Institutes*, 2.16.6, 510, 4) "the right and power of forgiving sins properly belong[s] to the Father" in *Institutes*, 3.4.26, 652, and 5) "Christ's death was ordained by God's eternal counsel … It is God's purpose for us to be subjected to death for our sins, and Christ's blood was the price of our death" in John Calvin, *Acts*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1995), Ac 2:23, 38.

54 Reid, Theological Treatises, 96.

55 *Institutes*, 2.15.5, 499 – 501, and Reid, *Theological Treatises*, 97 – 101.

56 John Calvin and Bingham, Charles William, *Commentaries on the Four Last Books of Moses Arranged in the Form of a Harmony*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1996), 78. See also his comments on John 5:22, 27 in *John*, Jn 5:22, 128 – 129 and Jn 5:27, 133.

57 Twelve Minor Prophets, vol. 1, 219, and Romans, 222.

58 *John*, Jn 2:19. See also his comments on Romans 10:9 in *Romans*, 393, and section 3.25.3 in *Institutes*, 3.25.3, 989 – 993.

59 Reid, Theological Treatises, 172.

60 John Calvin and Hendry H. Cole, *Calvin's Calvinism: A Treatise on the Eternal Predestination of God* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 149.

61 *Isaiah*, 86.

62 *John*, Jn 6:44, 152.

63 *Genesis*, 76. Likewise, in his commentary on John 1:17, he affirms, "Now, there are two parts to this: God freely reconciles himself to us by not imputing our sins; and also, he has engraved his law in our hearts and renews people inwardly by his Spirit to obey it." *John*, Jn 1:17, 18.

64 "And to the end that we may know this singular and excellent benefit which GOD has done for us, He gives us His HOLY SPIRIT, the fruit and effect of which is to make us Believe in GOD and in the King and Messias whom He hath sent" Calvin, *Christ the End of the Law*, 39.

65 *Institutes*, 2.2.20, 279.

66 *Institutes*, 2.5.5, 322.

67 *John*, Jn 10:28, 265.

68 *Institutes*, 2.3.6, 297.

69 *Institutes*, 3.1.3, 540.

70 Jules Bonnet, *Letters of John Calvin*, vol. 2 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 366–367.

71 Letters of John Calvin, vol. 2, 368.

72 *Christ the End of the Law*, 43–44. In his commentary at the same location, he writes, "*then* he will appear openly, to establish perfect order in heaven and earth, to crush his enemies under his feet, to assemble his believing people to partake of an everlasting and blessed life, to ascend his judgment-seat; and, in a word, there will be a visible manifestation of the reason why the kingdom was given to him by the Father." See *Harmony of the Evangelists Matthew, Mark, and Luke*, vol. 3, 175.

73 Calvin: Theological Treatises, 202.

74 *Institutes*, 2.14.3, 485.

75 Commenting on Mal 3:17: "The faithful are God's peculiar treasure, that they are valued by him, and that he shows to them peculiar love, as to his own inheritance." *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, vol. 5, 607. Commenting on 1 Thess 5:24 he says, "For he does not promise to be a Father to us merely for one day, but adopts us with this understanding, that he is to cherish us ever afterwards." *Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, 305.

76 See his comments on Rom 8:23–25 in *Romans* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 309. For Calvin's understanding of deification see Andrew J. Ollerton, "Quasi Deificari: Deification in the Theology of John Calvin," *Westminster Theological Journal* 73, no. 2 (September 1, 2011): 237–254, John McClean, "Perichoresis, Theosis and Union with Christ in the Thought of John Calvin," *Reformed Theological Review* 68, no. 2 (August 1, 2009): 130–141, J. Todd Billings, *Calvin, Participation, and the Gift the Activity of Believers in Union with Christ*, Changing paradigms in historical and systematic theology (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), and Sung-Sup Kim, "Engrafting: The Image of Union in Calvin's Commentary on John's Gospel," *Journal of Reformed Theology* 4, no. 2 (January 1, 2010): 112–128.

77 *Institutes*, 3.2.26, 572. For a discussion of how the theological role of the Trinity serves as an overarching paradigm for worship in Calvin's thought, see Dennis Ngien, "The Trinitarian Dynamic of Worship in John Calvin's Institutes (1559)," *Ephemerides theologicae Lovanienses* 83, no. 1 (April 1, 2007): 23–51.

78 *Institutes*, 2.6.4, 347.

79 *Institutes*, 3.24.5, 971. With regard to the Word, Calvin writes, "He [The Father] has ordained his Word as instrument by which Jesus Christ, with all his benefits, is dispensed to us. Yet it always remains true that our souls have no other pasture than Jesus Christ. Therefore the heavenly Father, in his care to nourish us, gives us nothing else, but rather recommends us to take our fill there, as from a refreshment manifestly sufficient, with which we cannot dispense, and beyond which it is impossible to find any other." Reid, *Theological Treatises*, 143. With regard to Calvin's view of prayer, Joel R. Beeke writes, "Calvin considered prayer to be holy and familiar conversation with God, our heavenly Father; reverently speaking, it is family conversation, or even intimate covenantal conversation, in which the believer confides in God as a child confides in his father." Burk Parsons, *John Calvin: A Heart for Devotion, Doctrine* (Lake Mary, FL: Reformation Trust, 2008), "Location 2626," Amazon Kindle edition.

80 *Institutes*, 3.11.1, 725.

Andrew Fuller and Nicaea: His Potential Response to Edward Sharman and His Anti-Trinitarianism[1]

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In the late 1740s, the American divine Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) described the intellectual *mentalité* of his day as "an age, as is supposed, of great light, freedom of thought, and discovery of truth in matters of religion, and detection of the weakness and bigotry of our ancestors, and of the folly and absurdity of the notions of those that were accounted eminent divines in former generations." As far as Edwards was concerned, however, the reality was there had never been "an age, wherein religion in general was so much despised and trampled on, and Jesus Christ and God Almighty so blasphemed and treated with open daring contempt."[2] Central among the ideas held in extremely high regard by "eminent divines in former generations" was the doctrine of the Trinity. Since its creedal codification

in the fourth century at the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381), Trinitarianism had been fundamental to Christian theology. The exaltation of human reason as the primary epistemological determinant of truth in the long eighteenth century, however, raised major questions about this foundational doctrine, along with other key aspects of the Christian Faith. A number of theological authors dismissed the doctrine of the Trinity as a philosophical and unbiblical construct of the post-Apostolic Church, and turned to classical Arianism as an alternate perspective, while others simply ridiculed it as utterly illogical and argued for Deism or Socinianism.[3] This concerted and heavy attack on the concept of a Triune God ultimately led to what Philip Dixon has called a "fading of the trinitarian imagination."[4]

The Particular Baptists: A Trinitarian Community

Now, throughout this period of the long eighteenth century the Particular Baptists in the British Isles had tenaciously clung to a Trinitarian understanding of the Godhead and so, while other communities, such as the Presbyterians and General Baptists largely ceased to be Trinitarian,[5] the Particular Baptists continued to regard themselves, and that rightly, as a Trinitarian community. Their earliest confessional document, *The First London Confession of Faith* (1644/1646), had declared this about God:

> In [the] … Godhead, there is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit; being every one of them one and the same God; and therefore not divided, but distinguished one from another by their several properties; the Father being from himself, the Son of the Father from everlasting, the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father and the Son.[6]

B. R. White has argued that this confession gave these early Baptists an extremely clear and self-conscious sense of their community's distinct identity and *raison d'être*.[7] And yet, as this specific paragraph also reveals, these Baptists were desirous of declaring their complete solidarity with the mainstream of classical Christianity that was rooted in the fourth-century Trinitarian creedal declarations and that also included the medieval Western Church's commitment to the Filioque. The other major Particular Baptist confession of the seventeenth century, *The Second London Confession of Faith*

(1677/1689), was equally forthright in its Trinitarianism — in the words of Curtis Freeman, its "words … resonate with Nicene orthodoxy"[8] — and firmly linked this core Christian doctrine to spirituality. The "doctrine of the Trinity," it affirmed, "is the foundation of all our communion with God, and comfortable dependence on him."[9]

Throughout the long eighteenth century this community unhesitatingly maintained that this doctrine is, in the words of Benjamin Wallin (1711–1782), the "first and grand principle of revealed truth and the gospel."[10] In 1690, the London Baptist layman Isaac Marlow (1649–1719), for example, published a treatise on the Trinity in which he stated his conviction that of those elements of divine truth that redound most to the glory of God and best further the fellowship of believers, "the blessed doctrine of the holy Trin-unity is the chiefest."[11] Nearly fifty years later, the renowned preacher Joseph Stennett II (1692–1758) similarly affirmed that "the doctrine of the ever blessed Trinity, is of the greatest importance to his [that is, God's] glory."[12]

The Challenge of Socinianism

The major challenge to Particular Baptist Trinitarianism came from Socinianism, which was the leading form of heterodoxy within English Dissent in the last quarter of the eighteenth century.[13] In large part, this was due to the vigorous campaigning of Joseph Priestley (1733–1804), whom Michael R. Watts, in his study of the early history of British Nonconformity, has dubbed the "Leonardo da Vinci of Dissent."[14] By his early twenties, Priestley was proficient in physics, philosophy, and mathematics as well as a variety of modern and ancient Near Eastern languages. During the 1760s and 1770s his reputation as England's foremost experimental scientist was established by his publication of a weighty history of electrical experimentation and his discovery of ten new gases, including oxygen, ammonia, and sulphur dioxide. Alongside this illustrious career as a scientist Priestley was also a prolific and profound theological author. In fact, he regarded his work as a theologian as his true vocation.

After his conversion to the Socinian cause, which probably took place in 1769,[15] Priestley devoted much of his time to theological writing "with no other view," he baldly stated on one occasion, "than to make proselytes."[16]

"An unflagging and often pugnacious controversialist," Priestley sought to establish his position not on nature and human reason, as did the Deists, but on a serious and rational investigation of the Scriptures and history.[17] As a Dissenter he had inherited the Protestant commitment to the Scriptures as a sufficient source of religious truth. "Revelation," as Martin Fitzpatrick has noted, "lay at the core of his religion."[18] This attachment to the Scriptures, though, was yoked to a deep-rooted conviction that the "plainest and most obvious sense of the Scriptures is in favour of those doctrines which are most agreeable to reason."[19] In other words, the Scriptures do indeed contain divine revelation, but their interpretation is to be determined by what is in accord with sound reason.

Priestley did not deny that there were certain affirmations of Scripture which were beyond the grasp of human reason. He admitted, for example, the historicity of many of the miracles of the apostolic era, including the bodily resurrection of Christ.[20] What he refused to countenance, though, were interpretations of Scripture which, to his mind, entailed a logical contradiction. This explains why orthodox Trinitarianism bore the brunt of Priestley's theological polemic.[21] Priestley was convinced that the doctrine of the Trinity not only had no scriptural foundation, but it was also a mathematical impossibility, "since three cannot be one, or one, three."[22] From Priestley's perspective, if there is one divine being, there must perforce be one person and thus one God; if there are three divine persons, then there must be three divine beings and so three gods. Hence Priestley made "a strict Patrolatry … [a] central and distinguishing" feature of his theological system.[23]

The threat that Socinianism posed to Trinitarian orthodoxy among the Particular Baptists is well illustrated by three incidents taken from the life of the leading Baptist apologist of the late eighteenth century, Andrew Fuller (1753–1815). When Fuller came to write the memoirs of his friend Samuel Pearce (1766–1799), the pastor of Cannon Street Particular Baptist Church in Birmingham, he included a letter which Pearce had written to his friend William Steadman (1764–1837) on February 1, 1793. In it Pearce mentioned that he had been "much perplexed about some doctrinal points, both Arminian and Socinian" through the close reading of the writings of Priestley among others. Happily, Fuller noted, his perplexity

was but transient, and "by the overruling grace of God, [it] tended only to establish him more firmly" in Trinitarian convictions.[24]

On the other hand, James Lyons (1768 – 1824), the pastor of the Particular Baptist Church in what is now Kingston Upon Hull, became a Socinian in 1807 through the writings of Richard Wright (1764 – 1836), an ardent propagator of Socinianism. Despite the fact that Fuller sent Lyons a number of pamphlets to help him maintain a firm grasp on Trinitarian doctrine, Lyons became "convinced that there are no such doctrines in the sacred Scriptures as that of the Trinity, [or] the equality of Jesus Christ with his Father" and he subsequently resigned his pastorate.[25]

Edward Sharman's Attack on Fuller's Trinitarianism

A decade or so earlier, Fuller's one-time Baptist colleague Edward Sharman (fl.1780 – 1800) had also been converted to Socinian principles. Sharman was originally a member of the College Street Church in Northampton under the powerful, though eccentric, ministry of John Collett Ryland (1723 – 1792).[26] In 1781 he was dismissed to help found Guilsborough Baptist Church in Northamptonshire and by 1790 he had become the pastor of the Baptist work in the village of Moulton, William Carey's (1761 – 1834) first charge. In the fall of 1792, he was one of the founders of the Baptist Missionary Society. Two years later, though, he was asked various queries about the Trinity by a day-laborer for which he was unable to provide a satisfactory answer. He later claimed that it was these questions that prompted him to search the Scriptures, to question his previous Trinitarian convictions and to come to the view that the Socinian perspective better fit the biblical evidence.

When Sharman began to share his new-found views with some of his fellow Baptists, including John Webster Morris (1763 – 1836), the printer-pastor of Clipstone, Northamptonshire, and Andrew Fuller, he found himself in the midst of what he described as "a dreadful storm." Some called him a heretic as he had "forsaken the only foundation of the saints," while others like Morris considered him "a little deranged."[27] Sharman's response was to publish a series of four tracts on the subject of the Trinity, in one of which he personally took Morris to task for remarks the latter had written to him in a letter.[28] In another of these pieces he expressed the

opinion that his differences with Trinitarians like Fuller was really over a matter "so very trifling," though his subsequent argumentation reveals that this was hardly a tertiary issue for Sharman himself.[29] The final tract, published in 1800, was addressed to Fuller himself and entitled *A Second Caution Against Trinitarianism; or, An Inquiry Whether that System has not some Tendency to lead People into Deism and Atheism. In a Letter Addressed to The Rev. Mr. Fuller, Kettering.*[30]

In this piece Sharman did not hesitate to affirm that Christ was a "finite dependant character" and that only God the Father, being "the only one Almighty God and supreme Governor of all," was worthy of worship. It was, therefore, shameful for Fuller and other Trinitarians to worship Christ, who was but a servant and "inferior messenger," for they were guilty of "dethroning Jehovah from the government of his own world."[31] Far from being a man wise in his understanding of the God of the Scriptures, Fuller was actually ignorant of the Bible, for, Sharman argued, the "mystical plan that Mr. F. had taught me, to reconcile a trinity of persons with the scripture unity of God, I now found to be real polytheism in disguise." In other words, the embrace of Fuller's Trinitarian worship, "instead of deserving the name of promoting Christianity … will lead me into Deism and Atheism!"—hence the title of this final tract. [32] To add insult to injury, Sharman argued that his new perspective on Christianity was the result of adhering to Fuller's principle that "we must learn what is divine truth immediately from the oracles of God" and we have to "let what God has revealed be the only standard to determine what is right."[33]

Responding to Sharman?

Four years earlier, after Sharman had published but one of his four anti-Trinitarian tracts, Fuller had written to William Carey that though "it be a blundering performance, it must be answered."[34] But Fuller never did get around to writing an answer to Sharman, for the simple reason that he was far too busy with other vital ministries. What might he have said and how might he have argued?

First of all, Fuller regarded Socinianism's denial of Christ's deity as being akin to Deism and this could only lead to the total ruination of the virtuous life.[35] As he put it in a sermon he preached in 1801: "The person

and work of Christ have ever been the corner-stone of the Christian fabric: take away his Divinity and atonement, and all will go to ruins."[36] Christ's deity and his atoning work are "the life-blood of Christianity"; deny them and there is only death.[37] Fuller would thus have insisted that without the confession of the deity of Christ, one simply cannot be counted as a Christian, for "the proper Deity of Christ … is a great and fundamental truth in Christianity."[38]

Fuller probably would probably not have emphasized the divinity of the Holy Spirit, though he did believe that the Scriptures "expressly call … the Holy Spirit God" in Acts 5:3–4 and he did not hesitate to assert that "every perfection of Godhead" has been ascribed to the Spirit.[39] While Fuller, like others impacted by the Evangelical revivals of the eighteenth century, had a robust understanding of the Spirit's work and ministry,[40] Priestley, Sharman and the other apostles of Socinianism focused their attention overwhelmingly upon Christ and not the Holy Spirit. And that is where Fuller would have defended the Faith. When Fuller on one occasion referred to the first principles of Christianity, he believed were the focus of the Socinian controversy he listed the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and the atoning death of the Lord Jesus,[41] not the distinct deity of the Spirit. Fuller's defense of the deity of Christ and the propriety of worshipping him is therefore akin to the way that Athanasius argued in the fourth century. The Egyptian Church Father also spent most of his time and energy defending the full and essential divinity of Christ in the face of the Arian onslaught against Christ's person. Only near the end of his life did Athanasius turn his attention to the Spirit.[42] However, Fuller was also aware that the Spirit's overarching new covenant ministry is the glorification of the Lord Jesus — the "Holy Spirit is not the grand object of ministerial exhibition; but Christ, in his person, work and offices" — and this is a key reason why "much less is said in the Sacred Scriptures on the Divinity and personality of the Holy Spirit."[43]

Finally, with regard to statements about the Trinity, Fuller would have argued that the Scriptures affirm the existence of three divine persons — the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.[44] These three are never to be considered three separate beings, but one God. As Fuller put it: "in a mysterious manner, far above our comprehension, there are in the Divine unity three subsistences."[45] How they are one has not been revealed — and

so to believe it steadfastly requires faith and humility.[46] Moreover, this is a truth that must be regarded as being above reason, not against it nor a contradiction. As long as Christian theology does not make the mistake of the Socinians, which is to regard God as unipersonal, it can affirm this truth without fear of being irrational. In this Christians need to "regulate [their] ideas of the Divine Unity by what is taught us in the Scriptures of the Trinity; and not those of the Trinity by what we know, or think we know … of the Unity."[47]

Fuller's convictions upon baptism might also have been used to support his defence of Trinitarianism against Sharman. His main piece on this ordinance was *The Practical Uses of Christian Baptism*, a highly significant tract on the meaning of baptism. Fuller argued that since baptism is to be carried out, according to Matthew 28:19, "in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit," submission to the ordinance entails an avowal of the fact that God is a triune Being. Well acquainted with the history of the early Church at this point, Fuller rightly stated that this baptismal formula was widely used in that era to argue for the doctrine of the Trinity.[48] To relinquish the doctrine of the Trinity is thus tantamount to the virtual renunciation of one's baptism.[49]

Fuller tied baptism to the Trinity again, and also to worship, in another small piece entitled "The Manner in which Divine Truth is Communicated in the Holy Scriptures." He wrote:

> The doctrine of the Trinity is never proposed to us as an object of speculation, but as a truth affecting our dearest interests. John introduces the sacred Three as witnesses to the truth of the gospel of Christ, as objects of instituted worship, into whose name we are baptized; and Paul exhibits them as the source of all spiritual good: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. Amen." [2 Corinthians 13:14]. Again, "The Lord direct your hearts into the love of God, and into the patient waiting for Christ." [2 Thessalonians 3:5].[50]

What is noteworthy about this text is the refusal to see the Trinity as merely a "metaphysical mystery," or as Fuller put it, "an object of speculation."[51] Rather, Fuller emphasized that the doctrine has a bearing on our "dearest interests," namely, the truth as it is in the gospel, worship, and "all spiritual

good." The first item, the truth of the gospel, is supported by an allusion to 1 John 5:7, the famous *Comma Johanneum*, which Fuller evidently regarded as genuine.[52] For the third point, "all spiritual good," Fuller has recourse to 2 Corinthians 13:14 and 2 Thessalonians 3:5. The use of the latter Pauline text is fascinating. Fuller's Trinitarian reading of it ultimately goes back to Basil of Caesarea (c.329 – 379), who employs it in his argument for the Spirit's deity in his classic work, *On the Holy Spirit*.[53] Fuller most likely found this reading of the Pauline verse, however, in John Gill's commentary on 2 Thessalonians 3:5, where Gill follows Basil's interpretation.[54]

It is with regard to the second point, the Trinity as the object of adoration, that Fuller mentions baptism: "the sacred Three" are described "as objects of instituted worship, into whose name we are baptized." Fuller was presumably thinking of Matthew 28:19. The reason why doctrinal confession of the Triunity of God is vital is because it lies at the heart of Christian worship. Fuller clearly saw baptism into the name of the Triune God as not only the initiatory rite of the Church — what made it a "Trinitarian community" — but also the beginning of a life of worshipping the Trinity that would ultimately culminate in the beatific vision of the Trinity.

Such might have been the shape of Andrew Fuller's reply to Edward Sharman, his "once intimate friend."[55]

Coda

Although Fuller definitely knew of the Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed, he does not appear to have mentioned either in his published works.[56] Nevertheless, though Fuller did not mention the Nicene Creed in any of his published writings, this essay has argued that he was completely in agreement with the Trinitarianism of this Creed.

1 The bulk of this essay originally appeared as "'To reconcile a Trinity of persons with the Scripture unity of God': Edward Sharman and his quarrel with Andrew Fuller" in David G. Barker, Michael A. G. Haykin, and Barry H. Howson, ed., *Ecclesia semper reformanda est: the church is always reforming. A festschrift on ecclesiology in honour of Stanley K. Fowler on his seventieth birthday* (Kitchener, ON: Joshua Press, 2016), 235–49. It is reprinted here, by permission, with various changes.

2 Jonathan Edwards, *Humble Attempt in Apocalyptic Writings*, ed. Stephen J. Stein, The Works of Jonathan Edwards, vol. 5 (New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press, 1977), 359.

3 G. L. Bray, "Trinity" in *New Dictionary of Theology*, eds. Sinclair B. Ferguson, David F. Wright, and J. I. Packer (Downers Grove, IL; Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 694. See the helpful overview of this era's Trinitarianism and anti-Trinitarianism by Stephen R. Holmes, *The Holy Trinity: Understanding God's Life* (Milton Keynes, UK: Paternoster, 2012), 165–81.

4 See especially William C. Placher, *The Domestication of Transcendence. How Modern Thinking about God Went Wrong* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 164–78; Philip Dixon, *'Nice and Hot Disputes': The Doctrine of the Trinity in the Seventeenth Century* (London; New York: T&T Clark, 2003). The quote is from Dixon, *Nice and Hot Disputes*, 212. On the rise of Socinianism, see also Sarah Mortimer, *Reason and Religion in the English Revolution. The Challenge of Socinianism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

5 For the loss of Trinitarianism among the General Baptists, see the helpful overview by Curtis W. Freeman, "God in Three Persons: Baptist Unitarianism and the Trinity," *Perspectives in Religious Studies*, 33 (Fall 2006): 324–328.

6 *The First London Confession of Faith* 2 in William L. Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, revised Bill J. Leonard, 2nd rev. ed. (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2011), 144. The spelling has been modernized.

7 See, in particular, the following publications by White: "The Organisation of the Particular Baptists, 1644–1660," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 17 (1966): 209–226; "The Doctrine of the Church in the Particular Baptist Confession of 1644," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, ns 19 (1968): 570–590; "Thomas Patient in Ireland," *Irish Baptist Historical Society Journal* 2 (1969–1970): 36–48, especially 40–41; "The Origins and Convictions of the First Calvinistic Baptists," *Baptist History and Heritage* 25, no.4 (October, 1990): 39–47; and *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century*, rev. ed. (London: The Baptist Historical Society, 1996): 59–94.

8 Freeman, "God in Three Persons," 331.

9 *The Second London Confession of Faith* 2.3 in Lumpkin, *Baptist Confessions of Faith*, 237.

10 *The eternal Existence of the Lord Jesus Christ considered and improved* (London, 1766), iv–v.

11 "To the Reader" in his *A Treatise of the Holy Trinunity [sic]* (London, 1690), [i–ii]. For a brief discussion of this work, see Freeman, "God in Three Persons," 332–333.

12 *The Christian Strife for the Faith of the Gospel* (London, 1738), 78, cited Roger Hayden, "The Contribution of Bernard Foskett" in William H. Brackney and Paul S. Fiddes with John H. Y. Briggs, ed., *Pilgrim Pathways: Essays in Baptist History in Honour of B. R. White* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1999), 197.

13 H. L. Short, "Presbyterians under a New Name" in C. G. Bolam, *et al., The English Presbyterians from Elizabethan Puritanism to Modern Unitarianism* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1968), 229–233.

14 Michael R. Watts, *The Dissenters* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 1:472. For the biographical details of Priestley's career, I am especially indebted to *The Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley*, ed. John T. Boyer (Washington, DC: Barcroft Press, 1964); Robert D. Fiala, "Priestley, Joseph (1733–1804)," *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals* (Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester Press; Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979), 1:396–401; Erwin N. Hiebert, "The Integration of Revealed Religion and Scientific Materialism in the Thought of Joseph Priestley" in Lester Kieft and Bennett R. Willeford, Jr., ed., *Joseph Priestley: Scientist, Theologian, and Metaphysician* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1980), 27–61.

15 Robert E. Schofield, "Priestley, Joseph (1733–1804)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., May 2007 [http://www.oxforddnb.com.libaccess.lib.mcmaster.ca/view/article/22788]).

16 Joseph Priestley, *Defences of Unitarianism, for the Year 1786* (1787) in *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works of Joseph Priestley*, ed. J. T. Rutt (New York, NY: Klaus Reprint Co., 1972), 18:372. Later references to the corpus of Priestley will cite these works as *Works of Joseph Priestley*. In a lecture that Fuller's friend Robert Hall, Jr. (1764–1831) gave "On the Spirit of Socinianism" in 1823, the Baptist preacher took note of the Socinians' "zeal for proselytism" (*The Works of the Rev. Robert Hall*, ed. Olinthus Gregory and Joseph Belcher [New York, NY: Harper & Bros., 1854], 3:24).

17 For Priestley's threefold appeal to reason, scripture, and history, see his *Defences of Unitarianism, for the Year 1786* (*Works of Joseph Priestley*, 18:350); *An History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ* (1786) (*Works of Joseph Priestley*, 6:7). The description of Priestley is that of Martin Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and Truth," *Enlightenment and Dissent* 1 (1982), 25.

18 Martin Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and Truth," 29, n.119. On the commitment of Socinianism in general to Scripture, see Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology. Origins and Problems of Biblical Criticism in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. John Bowden (London: SCM Press; Philadelphia, PA: Trinity Press International, 1990), 32 – 38.

19 Joseph Priestley, *An Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* (1770) (*Works of Joseph Priestley*, 2:385). See also J. G. McEvoy and J. E. McGuire, "God and Nature: Priestley's Way of Rational Dissent," *Historical Studies in the Physical Sciences* 6 (1975): 325 – 326; Fitzpatrick, "Toleration and Truth," 4 – 5.

20 Joseph Priestley, *An History of the Corruptions of Christianity* (1782, New York, NY; London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), II, 440.

21 Cf. Scholder, *Modern Critical Theology*, 40; Geoffrey Gorham, "Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Intellectual Life" in Charles Taliaferro, Victoria S. Harrison, and Stewart Goetz, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Theism* (New York; London: Routledge, 2013), 129 – 130.

22 Joseph Priestley, *Defences of Unitarianism, for the Years 1788 and 1789* (1790) (*Works of Joseph Priestley*, 19:108). See also his *Appeal to the Serious and Candid Professors of Christianity* (*Works of Joseph Priestley*, 2:395); *History of Early Opinions concerning Jesus Christ* (*Works of Joseph Priestley*, 6:33 – 37); *Letters to the Members of the New Jerusalem Church* (Birmingham, 1791), 2.

23 Alexander Gordon, *Addresses Biographical and Historical* (London: The Lindsey Press, 1922), 276.

24 Andrew Fuller, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel Pearce* in *The Complete Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, ed. Joseph Belcher (1845, Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1988), III, 374 and 431. These volumes will be cited as *Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*.

25 H. D. Roberts, *Matthew Henry and His Chapel* 1662-1900 (Liverpool: The Liverpool Booksellers' Co., Ltd., 1901), 204-206, n.1. On the career of Richard Wright, see Gordon, Addresses, 311 – 339.

26 For what follows on the career of Sharman, see John Taylor, *History of College Street Church, Northampton* (Northampton: Taylor & Son, The Dryden Press, 1897), 86; John Rippon, *The Baptist Annual Register* (London, 1793), 1:10; *idem, The Baptist Annual Register* (London, 1797), 2:10; *idem, The Baptist Annual Register* (London, 1800), 3:28; Timothy D. Whelan, transcribed and ed., *Baptist Autographs in the John Rylands Library of Manchester, 1741 – 1845* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2009), 446.

27 Edward Sharman, *A Letter on the Doctrine of the Trinity; addressed to the Baptist Society, at Guilsborough, Northamptonshire* (London: J. Johnson, 1795), 4 – 9. See also Andrew Fuller, Letter to William Carey, May 2, 1796 (cited Whelan, transcribed and ed., *Baptist Autographs*, 446).

28 Edward Sharman, *A Letter on the Doctrine of the Trinity*, 3 – 13.

29 Edward Sharman, *A Second Letter on the Doctrine of the Trinity* (Market Harborough: W. Harrod, 1796), 7 – 9.

30 Edward Sharman, *A Second Caution Against Trinitarianism; or, An Inquiry Whether that System has not some Tendency to lead People into Deism and Atheism. In a Letter Addressed to The Rev. Mr. Fuller, Kettering* (Market Harborough: W. Harrod, 1800).

31 Sharman, *Second Caution Against Trinitarianism*, 7, 9, and 11.

32 Sharman, *Second Caution Against Trinitarianism*, 12, 24, and 27.

33 Sharman, *Second Caution Against Trinitarianism*, 27 and 33.

34 Andrew Fuller, Letter to William Carey, May 2, 1796 (cited Whelan, transcribed and ed., *Baptist Autographs*, 446).

35 Andrew Fuller, *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 220 – 233).

36 Andrew Fuller, *God's Approbation of our Labours Necessary to the Hope of Success* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 190). See also his *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 183); *idem, The Backslider* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 637).

37 Andrew Fuller, *Christian Steadfastness* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 527). See also his *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 183, 191 – 192).

38 Fuller, *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 180); *idem, Justification* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 284); *idem, Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 183, 191–192); *idem, Defence of a Treatise entitled The Gospel of Christ* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 458); *idem*, "Decline of the Dissenting Interest" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 487); *idem*, "The Deity of Christ" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 693–697); *idem, Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 180).

39 Andrew Fuller, "Defence of the Deity of Christ" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 698); *idem*, "Remarks on the Indwelling Scheme" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 700). See also his *Letters on Systematic Divinity* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 711); *idem*, "Mr. Bevan's Defence of the Christian Doctrines of the Society of Friends" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 758).

40 See, for example, his *Causes of Declension in Religion, and Means of Revival* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 319–320, 324) and *The Promise of the Spirit the Grand Encouragement in Promoting the Gospel* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 359–363).

41 Andrew Fuller, *Socinianism Indefensible* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 249).

42 See his *Letters to Serapion*, written in the late 350s. Athanasius died in 373. See further my *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1994).

43 Andrew Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 711).

44 See Andrew Fuller, *Jesus the True Messiah* (1809) (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 219); *idem*, "Passages Apparently Contradictory" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 668); *idem*, "Remarks on the Indwelling Scheme" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 700); *idem*, "The Doctrine of the Trinity" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 707–708). In the last of these passages Fuller cites a catena of Trinitarian texts, including Matthew 28:19; 1 John 5:7; Romans 15:30; Ephesians 2:18; Jude 20–21; 2 Thessalonians 3:5; and 2 Corinthians 13:14.

45 Fuller, "The Doctrine of the Trinity" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 708).

46 Andrew Fuller, *Nature and Importance of an Intimate Knowledge of Divine Truth* (1796) (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 163–164).

47 Fuller, *Letters on Systematic Divinity* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 708); *idem*, "Remarks on the Indwelling Scheme" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 700). Cf. his *Walking by Faith* (1784) (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 124–125): "It is one thing to say that Scripture is contrary to right reason, and another thing to say that it may exhibit truths too great for our reason to grasp."; and his "Trial of Spirits" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 654).

48 Andrew Fuller, *The Practical Uses of Christian Baptism* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 340). The very same point had been made a quarter of a century earlier by John Collett Ryland. Also writing in a circular letter for the Northamptonshire Association, Ryland had observed that "the true doctrine of the Trinity" had been "kept up in the Christian church" by the ordinance of baptism "more than by any other means whatsoever" (*The Beauty of Social Religion; or, The Nature and Glory of a Gospel Church* [Northampton: T. Dicey, 1777], 10, footnote).

49 Fuller, *Christian Baptism* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 340). For other instances of Fuller's Trinitarian exegesis of Matthew 28:19, see his *Calvinistic and Socinian Systems* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, II, 236); and his "On the Sonship of Christ" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 705–706).

50 Andrew Fuller, "The Manner in which Divine Truth is Communicated in the Holy Scriptures" (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 539).

51 For the phrase "metaphysical mystery," I am indebted to Stephen Holmes. See "The Quest for the Trinity: An Interview with Stephen R. Holmes," *Credo Magazine*, 3, no.2 (April 2013), 49.

52 See his extended argument in *Letters on Systematic Divinity* (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, I, 708–709).

53 See Basil of Caesarea, *On the Holy Spirit* 21.52.

54 Here is the relevant section of Gill's comments on this verse: "The phrase of directing the heart to God… is not to be done by a believer himself, nor by the ministers of the Gospel: the apostle could not do it, and therefore he prays "the Lord" to do it; by whom is meant the Spirit of God, since he is distinguished from God the Father, into whose love the heart is to be directed, and from Christ, a patient waiting for whom 'tis also desired the heart may be directed into; and since it is his work to shed abroad the love of God in the heart, and to lead unto it, and make application of it; and which is a proof of his deity, for none has the direction, management, and government of the heart, but God,…and in this passage of Scripture appear all the three Persons [of the Godhead]; for here is the love of the Father, patient waiting for Christ, and the Lord the Spirit." (*An Exposition of the New Testament* [1809, Paris, AR: The Baptist Standard Bearer, Inc., 1989], III, 265). See also John Gill, *The Doctrine of the Trinity, Stated and Vindicated* (London: Aaron Ward, 1731), 198–199.

55 These are Sharman's words for Fuller: see his *Second Caution Against Trinitarianism*, 72.

56 He does mention Athanasius in his "Defence of the Deity of Christ." Fuller had written a piece expounding the deity of Christ, to which a certain Henry Davis had objected. Fuller replied in part: "In writing the piece which occasioned his remarks, I did not once think of 'Athanasius,' nor of any human writer; but simply of stating what appeared to be the mind of God in his Word." (*Works of the Rev. Andrew Fuller*, III, 698).

The "Excellent Value" of Nicaea in Herman Bavinck's Theology: Nicene Christology in Relation to Bavinck's Trinitarian, Catholic, and Orthodox, and Modern Theology

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The confession of the Council of Nicaea, alongside the other "great councils" (Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon), form the "universal foundation of the official Christian churches,"[1] writes Herman Bavinck. At Nicaea, the council clearly "determined the relationship of Christ to the essence of God, to the world, and to humanity,"[2] confessing that Christ is

> begotten by the father as the only-begotten, that is, out of the being of God, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things in heaven and earth were made, and in the Holy Spirit.[3]

Thus, for Bavinck, the Christological and Trinitarian confession of the Council of Nicaea are of "excellent value," leading "the church and theology down the right path."[4]

As interest in Herman Bavinck's theology continues to grow, many point to at least three hallmarks of his Reformed theology that are particularly compelling: its character as "thoroughly trinitarian,"[5] "catholic in scope,"[6] and "orthodox, yet modern."[7] These three hallmarks of Bavinck's theology rightly have been areas of continued study. Upon the celebration of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in 2025, the trinitarian, catholic, and orthodox, yet modern aspects of Bavinck's theology are worth examining once again, in light of his reflections on Nicene Christological and Trinitarian teaching.

In this article, I will explore the way that Bavinck's engagement with Nicene teaching continues to elucidate these three hallmarks of his theology, arguing that Bavinck's theology is in explicit, deep, orthodox continuity with Nicaea *and* attentive to the modern implications of such orthodox theology, particularly in his understanding of the unity and diversity not only of the Godhead, but of the creation which God has made, including humanity, made in God's image. In his engagement with Nicaea, we find a vibrant display of the trinitarian, catholic, and orthodox, yet modern theology of Herman Bavinck.

Bavinck's Theology as Trinitarian, Catholic, and Orthodox, yet Modern

In the first volume of *Reformed Dogmatics,* Bavinck argues that content of theology is, quite simply, he argues "knowledge of God as he has revealed it in Christ through his Word"[8] or "the knowledge of God in his being [the Trinity's ontological character] and in his works [the Trinity's economic character]."[9] For Bavinck, then, knowledge of God is both the foundational principle, organizing principle, and starting point for theology. "Christ is quite certainly the central focus and main content of Holy Scripture," Bavinck argues, but "precisely because he is the midpoint of Scripture, he cannot be its starting point."[10] Theology must begin with God *as triune,* a beginning which also encapsulates the full content of theology.

As such, theology's content can be described in a single word: "God." Bavinck expands on this, arguing that the task and content of theology is:

> always God, from beginning to end — God in his being, God in his creation, God against sin, God in Christ, God breaking down all resistance through the Holy Spirit and guiding the whole of creation back to the objective he decreed for it: the glory of his name.[11]

Bavinck's summary of the task of dogmatics bears the mark of the three central hallmarks of his theology: trinitarian, catholic, and modern *and* orthodox. Theology is about God, and must always begin with and be directed toward the Triune God; theology must attend to God's sovereignty over *all,* attesting to the goodness of God's creation and his ongoing work of cosmic redemption; and, theology must rest upon ancient confessional claims, while attending to modern developments. But, to understand the ways in which Bavinck's engagement the Council of Nicaea further elucidates these hallmarks, we must briefly explore them.

Herman Bavinck: A Trinitarian Theologian

Bavinck argues that "in the confession of the Trinity we hear the heartbeat of the Christian religion," asserting that "every error results from, or upon deeper reflection is traceable to, a departure in the doctrine of the Trinity."[12] It is a doctrine of "incalculable importance for the Christian religion"; upon it, the beliefs of Christianity "stand or fall."[13] For Bavinck, the Trinity is the heart and soul, the beginning and the end, of the Christian confession: "The Christian mind remains unsatisfied until all of existence is referred back to the triune God, and until the confession of God's Trinity functions at the center of our thought and life."[14]

James Eglinton helpfully unpacks this Trinitarian priority in Bavinck by describing him as a theologian of "twofold intent," to first "reprioritize the divine triunity (*contra* Scholten's Remonstrant-like view of the Trinity as a matter of secondary importance."[15] Second, Bavinck desires, "in a triniform worldview," to "seek out the complex, interconnected web of *vestigial trinitatis*."[16] Bavinck begins with God himself, for the glory of God alone, not for what the Trinity can tell us about *ourselves* — though we certainly must understand ourselves in light of the Trinity, as Bavinck's

second step demonstrates — but for how the Trinity "makes God known to us as the truly living God."[17] Eglinton summarizes: for Bavinck, "quite simply, the doctrine of God is no less than the sum total of theology."[18]

In the Trinity, Bavinck argues, "there is unity in diversity, diversity in unity."[19] He confesses God's "absolute unity and simplicity," which is "essential to the divine nature."[20] This absolute unity of the Godhead does not, however, "exclude, but includes diversity" insists Bavinck.[21] God is "absolute unity as well as absolute diversity."[22]

Bavinck first discusses this vision of unity and diversity as it relates to the "immanent relations" of the Triune God. He continues, however, to argue that the "'ontological' Trinity is mirrored in the 'economic Trinity.'"[23] Thus, Bavinck argues, we can distinguish God's works *ad extra* while affirming the historic profession that *opera ad extra trinitatis indivisa sunt*.[24] God's works *ad extra* are all "accomplished by the one God, yet in them each of the three persons fulfills the role that corresponds to the order of his existence in the divine being. The Father works *of* himself *through* the Son *in* the Spirit."[25] Bavinck elaborates:

> All the works of God ad extra have one single Author (principium), namely, God. But they come into being through the cooperation of the three persons, each of whom plays a special role and fulfills a special task, both in the works of creation and in those of redemption and sanctification. All things proceed from the Father, are accomplished by the Son, and are completed in the Holy Spirit.[26]

Thus, Bavinck argues, the "immanent relations" of the three persons "manifest themselves outwardly."[27] As such, he extends his understanding of unity and diversity even further: in God's *opera ad extra,* including his acts of creation and preservation, we ought to expect "traces of God (*vestigia Dei*)"[28] that reflect God's perfect unity and diversity.

For Bavinck, theology begins and ends with the doctrine of the Triune God. His theology, as Gayle Dornbos articles, is "thoroughly trinitarian,"[29] that is, his "whole theology ... [is] an outworking of the ontological, cosmological, and soteriological dimensions of the doctrine of the Trinity."[30]

Herman Bavinck's Reformed Catholicity

Bavinck's trinitarian theology is distinctly Reformed, that is Calvinistic, and catholic. While common terms, Bavinck is clear to delineate exactly what he means by them, for they have multiple definitions, some of which may unintentionally limit the scope and breadth of his intended meaning. For Bavinck, Reformed catholicity denotes a trinitarian vision that proclaims the "joyful tiding" of the gospel to "the entire cosmos, for the whole groaning creation."[31]

In "The Future of Calvinism," Bavinck gives special attention to the language of "Reformed" and "Calvinistic." While we might be tempted to equate the two, Bavinck makes clear these are "by no means equivalent." He understands "Reformed" to express "merely a religious and ecclesiastical distinction" as a "purely theological conception." Calvinism, on the other hand, he argues is "of wider application and denotes a specific type in the political, social, and civil spheres," embracing "that characteristic view of life and the world as a whole" for "church and theology" *and* "social and political life ... science and art."[32] It is the latter that Bavinck self-consciously situates himself within. Rooted in the confession of God's sovereignty, Calvinism, Bavinck argues, has a distinct "world-encompassing tendency," and thus it is "catholic in the best sense of the word."[33]

In his 1888 rectoral address "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," Bavinck gives greater detail and definition to his understanding of catholicity. Catholicity is a "confession of all of Christendom,"[34] professed from the time of the apostles. From the time of the early church, he argues, there have been three "basic meanings" of catholicity.[35] First, the church fathers used the language of catholicity to refer to the church as a "unified whole." The local church is catholic "because it attaches itself to the universal church."[36] Second, the church is catholic as it is "inclusive of all believers from every nation, in all times and places."[37] And third, the church is catholic because it "embraces the whole of human existence," preaching and teaching "all doctrines concerning either invisible and visible things ... provid[ing] a cure for all kinds of sin, either of body or soul." To this third, Bavinck adds a caveat: "the church is *sometimes* referred to as catholic" in this way.[38]

Bavinck regularly invokes this third aspect of catholicity. Christian traditions throughout church history have rightly proclaimed the first two

meanings of catholicity, but only in the Reformation did the church recover the third meaning of catholicity, he argues:[39]

> in the powerful mind of the French Reformer re-creation is … a joyful tiding of the renewal of all creatures. *Here the Gospel* comes *fully into its own, comes to true catholicity*. There is nothing that cannot or ought not to be evangelized. Not only the church but also home, school, society, and state are placed under the dominion of the principle of Christianity.[40]

This Calvinist catholicity, argues Bavinck, is not a *new* doctrine, but as a return "to the New Testament,"[41] recognizing the God-given goodness of the created order, rejecting only sin.[42]

For Bavinck, writes Sutanto and Brock, "Reformed Christianity is the bedrock on which true catholicity and diversity flourishes."[43] For a Calvinist catholicity testifies to the "richness" and "pluriformity" of Christianity.[44] Thus, as Brock and Sutanto continue, catholicity is expressed "not *in spite of diversity* but precisely *in* diversity." Here, we begin to see the full scope of Bavinck's "triniform worldview"[45] for all of creation.

Herman Bavinck: Orthodox and Modern

James Eglinton describes Bavinck as a theologian who strove to articulate the "historic Christian faith within his modern milieu."[46] In *Modern, yet Orthodox,* Cory Brock further positions Bavinck's theology as modern *and* orthodox. Brock states it this way:

> As a modern theologian, Bavinck outlined the very structure of his dogmatics in order to let the ancient speak to the modern and the modern to the ancient; to speak from a tradition (*gereformeerd*), under the authority of Scripture guided by the confessions — a requirement of his Reformed catholicity and the recognition of his position as a dependent finite creature.[47]

As such, Bavinck was firmly orthodox *and* self-consciously modern; he considered himself a child "of [his] time," taking "with both feet ... our position in this age."[48] Thus, argues Bavinck in his 1912 rectoral address *Modernism and Orthodoxy,* "no one who empathizes with his own age can be against everything modern in every respect."[49]

Brock argues that there are three central points within *Modernism and Orthodoxy* that are central to understanding Bavinck's own conception of being modern *and* orthodox. First, Brock identifies Bavinck's "simple definition of orthodoxy in this address: 'holding high the Christian confession.'" Second, Brock argues that *Modernism and Orthodoxy* highlight that for Bavinck, the two terms "did not exist ... in a mere relation of contradiction. Modern theology is, in part, a genealogical derivation of orthodoxy theology and orthodoxy theology cannot pretend that it stands untouched by the modern context and its ideas." Third, Brock argues, is Bavinck's conviction that "orthodoxy theology must not suppose itself to be an end in itself, lest it become a dead orthodoxy."[50] There is a "demand," Bavinck argues, to "continually review the doctrine and life of one's own person and household, and, in addition, our whole environs according to these scriptural and historical principles."[51] Faith, then, must be understood as modern *and* orthodox, continually reforming in light of God's unchanging word.

Brock argues that Bavinck's engagement with Schleiermacher is the "paradigmatic case" of Bavinck's modernity, while remaining orthodox, that is, "under the conditions of his dogmatic commitments."[52] Attention to Bavinck's appropriation of Schleiermacher, Brock argues, illuminates Bavinck's "preference for the older generations" and his commitment to search for the "kernel of truth wherever it was to be found."[53] As Bavinck explains in *Modernism and Orthodoxy,*[54] this posture is on account of his foundational dogmatic assertions of God's sovereignty: "because we believe that it is He who also in this century upholds all things and reigns [over all things] by his omnipotent and omnipresent power, we thankfully and hopefully accept the world that He allows us to know ... We are children of this age and thankfully receive every good gift that the Father of lights gives us in this century."[55] Thus, with Schleiermacher, Brock argues, Bavinck defines religion as "the feeling of absolute dependence with regard to the subject."[56] But this "only offers part of the picture," for he also defines religion as "the fact of being in relation with God objectively."[57] In this way, "Bavinck's definition of religion is simultaneously modern and orthodox," in continuity with the profession of the confessions and seriously engaging contemporary insights. There is, argues Brock, a "newness" in Bavinck's theology that goes beyond repristination,[58] while "holding high the confessions."[59]

Bavinck's rootedness within the Reformed tradition, his commitment to the catholicity of the faith, and his understanding that all theology is an "outworking" of the doctrine of the Trinity, drives him toward his posture as orthodox *and* modern, that is, gratefully situated within the time in which God has placed him. The "work of dogmatic theology," he writes in the Foreword to the first volume of *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek,* "should not simply describe what was true and valid but what abides as true and valid. It is rooted in the past but labors for the future."[60] As a thoroughly trinitarian, confessionally catholic, and modern *and* orthodox theologian, we can then consider the ways in which each of these hallmarks of Bavinck's theology are manifest in his engagement with the Council of Nicaea, particularly its confession that Christ is "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father."

Bavinck on Nicaea

While Bavinck's most extensive engagement with Nicaea is found in the second volume of *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation,* the centrality of Nicaea in his theology is demonstrable throughout his works. For Bavinck, the confession of Nicaea, alongside the confession of Constantinople, Ephesus, and Chalcedon, forms "the universal foundation of the official Christian churches."[61] Throughout his career, as Bavinck introduces the Christian faith, Nicaea plays a foundational role in his description of the church's history and theology. Nicaea is the confession of "all Christians," regarding the two natures of Christ, argues Bavinck in *Het Christendom,*[62] and of Christ as "being of one substance with the Father."[63] In each of his introductory works, for those theologically educated and new initiates, Nicaea plays an important role in Bavinck's description of early church history and the person of Christ. While it is, "of course ... not infallible," Nicaea is "of excellent value, for it cuts of the errors of left and right and leads the church and theology down the right road."[64] While not infallible, Bavinck understands Nicaea's teaching to be a faithful and foundational understanding of Scripture's teaching regarding the Son.

Bavinck continues to excavate the foundational teachings of Nicaea in his *Reformed Dogmatics* in a much more extended nature than *Het Christendom*, *Magnalia Dei*, or *Handeleiding bij het onderwijs in den Christelijken Godsdienst*.

In his *Reformed Dogmatics,* he articulates the basic Triune confession of Nicaea, Nicene teachings on the Father and the Son, and the difference between Nicene and modern conceptions of personhood. In each, Bavinck articulates a robustly orthodox, Nicene theology, affirming the centrality of its confession.

Basic Triune Confession

Bavinck is emphatic that at Nicaea, the church articulates both a clear Christology, countering Arian subordination, and a robust trinitarian confession.[65] "At Nicaea," he writes, the church

> enunciated the true and full deity of the Son. This confession was thoroughly religious in character. It maintained the soteriological principle of Christianity. From this moment onward, the significance of the doctrine of the Trinity changed. Nicaea proclaimed the existence of distinctions in God and taught that the Father and the Son (and the Spirit) together were God ... From this point on the trinitarian dogma has an independent value and theological significance of its own.[66]

Bavinck argues that Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and Augustine then "elaborate and complete the doctrine of the Trinity [on the basis of the Nicene confession]" to articulate that the "Trinity, therefore, is eternal. In God there are no nonessential features; God does not *become anything;* he is what he is eternally. As it [the Trinity] always was, so it is and remains; and in it the Father, the Son, and the Spirit."[67] The Son is distinct from the Father, "generated from within his being," thus not a creature, and is fully God (as is the Spirit), "same in essence (ὁμοουσιοι) and one substance (ὑποστασις)."[68] Here, Bavinck stands in firm and clear agreement with the theologians Khaled Anatolios describes as the "Trinitarian theologians of Unity of Being," as opposed to simply a unity of *will*: Athanasius, Gregory of Nyssa, and Augustine.[69]

With the church through the ages, Bavinck confesses that Scripture is "rigorously monotheistic," and "ascribe[s] a divine nature and divine perfections also to the Son and the Spirit and puts them on part with the Father."[70] Thus, the Father, Son, and Spirit are three "distinct subjects in

the one divine essence."[71] The distinctness of the persons, however, must be carefully and clearly understood as arising

> *totally* from the so-called 'personal properties' (1) paternity ("unbegottenness," active generation, and active spiration); (2) filiation or sonship, passive generation, active spiration; (3) procession or passive spiration.[72]

The attributes of the persons of the Trinity "add nothing substantially new to the being"; that is, the distinctions between the persons, Bavinck argues, are not *substantial,* but *relational.*[73] The three persons, distinguished by their personal properties, are "related to each other in an absolute manner; their personal distinctness as subjects completely coincides with their immanent interpersonal relationships."[74] As such, God is Triune, one in nature, three in persons. Again, Bavinck's firm and clear footing is in the logic and language of Nicaea, distinguishing the persons only—"totally"[75]—according to their personal properties, while simultaneously testifying to the oneness of the divine nature.[76]

Bavinck emphatically affirms that the "immanent relations" of the three persons "manifest themselves outwardly."[77] As we will see, Bavinck engages modern theologians on the Trinity, but in his understanding of the unity of nature and diversity of persons within the Godhead—and thus, the way in which he understands the relations of the persons—Bavinck appeals consistently, and nearly exclusively, to early theologians: Augustine, Athanasius, Basil, Irenaeus, and Gregory of Nazianzus. This results in Bavinck retaining a Nicene emphasis on the personal properties that are not simply economic, but immanent, unlike some of his contemporaries.[78] As Scott Swain carefully details, B. B. Warfield argues that the "the order of operation among the persons "in the redemptive process" does not reflect a deeper reality within God's triune life."[79] Warfield has, argues Swain, a posture of "'principled non-affirmation' of the doctrines of the eternal generation of the Son and the eternal procession of the Spirit."[80] For Warfield, the "'modes of operation' describe the work of the persons of the Trinity in "the redemptive process and, more broadly, in the entire dealing of God with the world."[81] But it is not clear, argues Warfield, that the "principle of subordination rules also in 'modes of subsistence' ... the necessary relation of the Persons of the Trinity to one another."[82] Warfield's concern here lies with

the "question of subordination," and affirming the Son's oneness with God in status, but in his affirmation of the Son's equality with the Father, he seems to also reject any type of ontological order in relationship, or subsistence.[83] Such a concern, Warfield argues, finds some rooting in the Nicaea. While Nicaea sought to "carefully guard ... against the subordinationism inherent in the Logos-Christology," it is in the Athanasian Creed, Warfield contends, that the "principle of equalization of the three Persons, which was already the dominant motive of the Nicene Creed — the homoousia — is so strongly emphasized as practically to push out of sight, if not quite out of existence, these remnant suggestions of derivation and subordination."[84] Bavinck does not share these potential concerns with Nicaea; eternal, immanent relations do not equate to a subordination of status within the Godhead. Rather, they give language to the distinctions between the persons, who are fully God.[85]

Thus, the "glory and confession of the Trinity consists," argues Bavinck, "above all in the fact that unity, however absolute, does not exclude but includes diversity."[86] In the unity of essence and diversity of persons of the ontological Trinity, Christianity has its "foundation and first principle."[87] For, "those who deny the Trinity reduce God to a lifeless principle or end up with the doctrine of the eternal existence of the world."[88] God is not the God of Scripture if he is not triune. In this, Bavinck consistently upholds the logic of Nicaea and its authors.

The Father and the Son

To begin to comprehend the unity and diversity of the ontological Trinity, Bavinck continues to appeal to the logic and language of Nicaea, expanding his comments on the personal properties of the persons of the Trinity: Fatherhood and Sonship, the Father as "first principle and foundation head" and the eternal generation of the Son.[89] With Nicaea, Bavinck attests that the Son is "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father."[90] In his explanation of the distinctions between the persons, Bavinck's logic and language remains explicitly Nicene.

Bavinck is clear to locate these distinctions within the immanent Trinity; generation and spiration "occurs *within*" the divine being.[91] Thus, the immanent or ontological trinity cannot be collapsed into the economic trinity, thus mitigating any risk that the "outward or external works of God (*opera*

Dei ad extra) are conceived too much as the works of the three Persons (*opera Dei personalia*) and not enough as essential works of the one God (*opera Dei essentialia*), i.e., the common works of the divine Person."[92] In this, Bavinck clarifies the way in which God is archetype and humanity is ectype: nature unfolds in both, but what "in the case of human beings is separate and juxtaposed, extended in space and over time, is eternally and simply present in God."[93] Here, he affirms the logic of Nicaea: the oneness of God and the immanent, relational, and eternal distinctions of the three persons. Thus, he upholds the Nicene distinction between God *ad intra* and God *ad extra,* recognizing the theological risk if the two were to be collapsed.[94]

Bavinck continues to rely on the logic of Nicaea to describe the Father, who can be distinguished by his personal property of "fatherhood or his 'nonbegottenness.'"[95] Only the Father is unbegotten, the Son, using the language of Nicaea, is "begotten." Thus, Bavinck firmly grounds the distinctiveness of the Father in the Father's relationship to the Son and Spirit, though, as with the creed, focusing primarily on the relationship between Father and Son. The Father generates the Son from eternity, thus he is rightly called Father, for he is "solely, purely, and totally Father … by nature and Father eternally."[96] Thus, the Father is never not Father, for he eternally generates the Son. For Bavinck this is an essential insight into the nature of God; because God is Triune, the Father, by his "generative nature"[97] eternally generates the Son. Thus, God is not, and cannot be, a "lifeless principle."[98] Such a claim is a danger of non-Trinitarian theology, for a non-Triune God does not, by nature, eternally generate.

The unbegottenness and generative nature of the Father speaks, argues Bavinck, first and foremost to the immanent relations *within* the Trinity: the Father generates the Son in eternity. This ontological claim, though, has implications not just for God *ad intra,* but the God's *opera ad extra.* Bavinck explains:

> The dogma of the Trinity, by contrast, tells us that God *can* reveal himself in an absolute sense to the Son and the Spirit, and hence, in a relative sense also to the world. For, as Augustine teaches us, the self-communication that takes place within the divine being is archetypal for God's work in creation. Scripture repeatedly points to the close connection between the Son and Spirit

> on the one hand, and the creation on the other. The names Father, Son (Word, Wisdom), and Spirit most certainly denote immanent relationships, but they are also mirrored in the interpersonal relations present in the works of God *ad extra.* All things come from the Father; the "ideas" of all existent things are present in the Son; the first principles of all life are in the Spirit. Generation and procession in the divine being are the immanent acts of God, which make possible the outward works of creation and revelation. Finally, this also explains why all the works of God *ad extra* are only adequately known when their trinitarian existence is recognized.[99]

God must be a God who can communicate *ad intra* if he is to communicate *ad extra*. And not only must God be Triune to communicate both *ad intra* and *ad extra,* but these two are deeply connected; the "immanent relations of the three persons in the divine being also manifest themselves outwardly (*ad extra*) in their revelations and works ... the 'ontological' Trinity is mirrored in the 'economic' Trinity," writes Bavinck.[100] In this, Bavinck begins to extend the logic of Nicaea, which encapsulates, for him the personal property and distinctiveness of the Father, and the Father's relationship to the Son, to the works of God in creation.[101] The ontological language and logic of Nicaea has distinct implications for the economic work of the Trinity.

As he discusses the distinctiveness of the Son, Bavinck uses not only the *logic* of Nicaea, but the language itself. He employs the explicit language of Nicaea to describe the generation of the Son, the personal property or "special qualification" of the second person of the Trinity.[102] Bavinck highlights three aspects of this generation: it is spiritual, it ensures the oneness of the essence or nature of the Father and the Son, and it is eternal. [103] Of the first, Bavinck argues that *spiritual* generation is simply without "division" or "separation." Second, "divine generation implies that the Father begets the Son out of the being of the Father, 'God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God; begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father,' as the Nicene symbol has it."[104] The Son is generated of the Father *in eternity*. And finally, Bavinck elaborates on the eternal nature of generation: generation is "not something that was completed and finished at some point in eternity, but an eternal unchanging act of God, at once always complete and eternally ongoing."[105]

The Son is, Bavinck reiterates, "'God of God' and 'Light of Light' [Nicene Creed], having the same attributes as the Father."[106] Because the distinctions of the persons are *relational* distinctions, not distinctions of *substance,* one must both rightly differentiate the Father and Son as persons and clearly affirm the oneness of their nature. To argue that there is a difference in *substance* between the Father and Son, that is, to reject Nicene language and logic, is not only to reject the nature of the Son, but the Father. If one rejects the eternal generation of the Son, argues Bavinck, it is "not only a failure to do justice to the deity of the Son, but also that of the Father," for the "the Father is not and never was ungenerative; he begets everlastingly"[107] For Bavinck, the distinctions between the persons employ both the logic and language of Nicaea. To do otherwise is to reject the Scriptural witness of who God is and how he acts.

Nicene and Modern Views of Personhood

Bavinck's discussions of the *distinctions* between the persons is accompanied by his treatment of the of the very *concept* of and language for personhood and personality in God. In this, Bavinck not only explores the early church history terminology challenges around the language of "person," but contemporary challenges and conceptions with the term. Augustine argued that "we speak of persons 'not to express what that is but only not to be silent,'" similarly, Bavinck claims that "person" simply "means that the three persons in the divine being are not 'modes' but have a distinct existence of their own";[108] The "unity of the divine being opens itself up in a threefold existence."[109] But modern thinking, Bavinck argues, neither understands personhood in this way, nor does it understand — as in the case of *Concerning the Two Natures and One person of Christ* — personhood as "self-existence and rationality."[110] Instead, modern thinking lent itself to a very different understanding, challenging not only an understanding of *human* persons, but divine persons.

Bavinck identifies four primary challenges from modern conceptions of personality. First, "personality can only be the mode of existence of finite beings," thus, is not language appropriate or possible to use with respect to God.[111] Second, the idea of modern psychology that "even human personality in no way implies independent existence," one's "'I-ness' ... is not a substance but merely the nominalistic sum of psychical phenomena."

Thus, it may not even be a proper and accurate to speak of personality for humans, for "what is called personality is but the passing mode of existence of the individual being, called a human."[112] Third, building on these ideas, "personality" is then the "highest stage in the development of a human being," not an ontological given.[113] And fourth, the modern conception of personality as a *goal* not a *given,* "naturally led to hero worship and deification of those individuals who had reached this apex of development and attained personhood."[114]

Bavinck strongly rejects these modern conceptions of personality for human persons: "even in the case of humans this concept of personality fails to cut ice." But even more, the modern conception of personality cannot speak to the divine.[115] Taking seriously the modern focus on the subjectivity of the human person, while not failing to also uphold the objectivity of God's creation,[116] Bavinck argues that:

> Personality in humans arises only because they are subjects who confront themselves as object and unite the two (subject and object) in an act of self-consciousness. Hence, three movements (constituents) constitute the essence of human personality.[117]

Human personality thus is a unity of subject and object within an act of self-consciousness. This is not so in God, for God is "not subject to space or time, to extension or division, these three are not moments but 'hypostases,' modes of existence of one and the same being."[118]

Thus, even in Bavinck's acceptance of some of the modern emphases of personhood, i.e., subjectivity and development, it is a partial acceptance and only in regard to humanity, given his clear affirmation of the ontological distinction between human and divine persons.

Alongside this ontological distinction between human persons and divine persons, Bavinck raises another distinction: in both human and divine personhood, there is a type of unfolding, but this unfolding is *singular* in God and *dual* in humanity. Human nature, Bavinck argues, cannot be fully "embodied in a single individual," but is rather organically seen in "humanity as a whole."[119] Divine nature, on the other hand, "similarly develops its fullness in three persons, but in God these three persons are not three individuals alongside each other and separated from each other but a

threefold self-differentiation within the divine being."[120] The "unfolding of [God's] being into personality coincides with that of his being unfolding into three persons," eternally; humanity's nature unfolds into personality in the individual and in the whole of humanity, who "in turn together constitute a unity or personality."[121] Thus, unfolding is immanent within God, in eternity. With humanity this is not so.[122]

Bavinck's understanding of "person" remains distinctly Nicene, even as he engages modern thought:

> the distinction between being (essence) and person and between the persons among themselves played itself out in their reciprocal relations in the fact of their being Father, Son, and Spirit, in the following properties: paternity (ἀγεννησια, unbegottenness), sonship (γεννησις, begottenness), and sanctification (ἐκπορευσις, procession).[123]

With Augustine, he argues that the "distinction between being and person and between the persons among themselves cannot lie in any substance but only in their mutual relations."[124]

Conclusion: Bavinck's Catholic, Trinitarian, and Orthodox, yet Modern Nicene Theology

As we have seen, for Bavinck, the Trinity is the "core of the Christian faith."[125] For him, there are at least three key reasons for its centrality: first, it "makes God known to us as the truly living God," revealing to us the truth of God as the "fullness of being";[126] second, without the Trinity, we could not uphold the doctrine of creation, for in God's Triunity, we see that "God *can* reveal himself," absolutely in the generation of the Son and procession of the Spirit, and relatively in creation;[127] and finally, for the "Christian religion," for our "entire Christian belief system, all of special revelation, stands or falls with the confession of God's Trinity."[128] Our salvation stands or falls on this confession.[129] In this, we see the centrality of the Trinity for Bavinck's theology, and, as we have shown, Bavinck's Trinitarian doctrine is thoroughly Nicene, using both its language and logic.

The relationship between Bavinck's Trinitarian theology and Nicaea is both straightforward and explicit: his trinitarian doctrine is clear footing is in the

logic and language of Nicaea. However, in his engagement with Nicaea, we not only find his basic Trinitarian confession, but his catholicity and posture as both modern *and* orthodox. Not only does Bavinck engage modern definitions of "person" as he articulates a biblical view of divine persons, or employ organic language, he is deeply attentive to the modern implications of Nicene theology, particularly in his understanding of the unity and diversity not only of the Godhead, but of the creation which God has made, including humanity, made in God's image.

When one thinks of attention to creation and society in light of the Trinity today, we may be inclined to envision such a turn brings with it a disregard or rejection of orthodox, Trinitarian thought, as in the case of Rahner's perceived collapse of the economic and immanent trinity[130] or various forms of social trinitarianism. This is, however, not the case in Bavincks' theology. As Brock and Sutanto argue, Bavinck is in "continuity with the classical Christian tradition" even as he attends to the implications of God's triunity in creation. "Bavinck did not see it necessary to modify classical Trinitarianism in order to derive social implications from the doctrine."[131] While he is in continuity with the classical Christian tradition, and self-consciously following Augustine in his affirmation of "traces [*vestigia*] of God" within creation,[132] Bavinck differs from some within the Reformed tradition on this, notably Calvin. While Richard Muller has noted that the language of "vestiges" was "noted by the [Reformed] orthodox with varying degrees of receptivity,"[133] Calvin himself "tended to deemphasize"[134] the *vestigia* tradition, arguing that he had "shr[u]nk from all rashness here; lest if anything should be inopportunely expressed" in the case of such language.[135] Unlike Calvin, Bavinck embraced language and concepts that attended to creation and society in light of the Trinity. He uses the logic and language of Nicaea and Nicaea's architects to affirm the oneness of God and the immanent, relational, and eternal distinctions of the three persons, teasing out the critical distinction between the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. From this, following Augustine, Bavinck extends the logic of Nicaea to show the distinct implications that the immanent Trinity has for God's work *ad extra*.

James Eglinton summarizes Bavinck's approach to the Creator and creation this way: "although God is unlike anything else, all else is nonetheless like him."[136] Thus, Bavinck can — at the same time — insist on

the categorical otherness of God, and the "traces of God (*vestigia Dei*)"[137] in creation that reflect God's perfect unity and diversity. Eglinton roots his understanding of Bavinck's "organic worldview" in these claims:

> First, the created order is marked by simultaneous unity and diversity. That is essential if God is Triune. As the universe itself is a general revelation of God, it must reflect his identity as three-in-one. Reality therefore becomes somewhat triniform: life is a unity of different parts ... Second, unity precedes diversity ... Third, the organism's shared life is orchestrated by a common idea ... Finally, ... the organism has a drive towards its goal. ... The Trinity is glorified as the organism maintains simultaneous unity and diversity."[138]

This trinform view of creation, which bears the marks of its Triune creator, attends to the "traces of God (*vestigial Dei*) in the creation and in the image of God.[139]

We have already seen glimpses of Bavinck's development of Nicene logic and distinctions for human personality, which cannot be fully "embodied in a single individual," but is rather organically seen in "humanity as a whole."[140] In his discussion of the image of God, Bavinck brings together his understanding of a triniform unity and diversity and personhood. "All creatures," he writes

> are embodiments of divine thoughts, and all of them display the footsteps or vestiges of God. But all these vestiges, distributed side by side in the spiritual as well as the material world, are recapitulated in man and so organically connected and highly enhanced that they clearly constitute the image and likeness of God.[141]

Thus, within humanity, we get a glimpse of God's image:

> Not the man alone, nor the man and woman together, but only the whole of humanity is the fully developed image of God, his children, his offspring. The image of God is much too rich for it to be fully realized in a single human being, however richly gifted that human being may be. It can only be somewhat unfolded in its depth and riches in a humanity counting billions of members. Just as the traces of God (*vestigia Dei*) are spread over many, many works, in

> both space and time, so also the image of God can only be displayed in all its dimensions and characteristic features in a humanity whose members exist both successively one after the other and contemporaneously side by side. But just as the cosmos is a unity and receives its head and master in humankind; and just as the traces of God (*vestigia Dei*) scattered throughout the entire world are bundled and raised up into the image of God of humankind; so also that humanity in turn is to be conceived as an organism that, precisely as such, is finally the only fully developed image of God.[142]

Bavinck again discusses the unity and diversity of humanity in his *Reformed Ethics:* God created humanity with harmonic differences that make for "richness of life." There is, he writes "variety in unity," not just in creation and its natural laws, but in humanity. To make his point, Bavinck uses the example of the apostles, who all have different — and complementary! — styles and giftings in their teaching.[143] As with the apostles, so too all of humanity was created with a God-given diversity of giftedness and talent. Thus, we see imprints of God's unity and diversity in the creation — particularly the humanity — he has made.

In a sin-marred world, however, unity and diversity do not come merely as God-given gifts, but a troubling problem.[144] Sin, Bavinck argued to the Christian Social Congress in 1891, "eliminated the unity of [social] diversity, turned differences into oppositions, and placed creatures in a relationship of enmity against God and to each other."[145] Here, we find Bavinck expanding his appeal to unity and diversity, not only in humanity, but to natural laws *and* social and political laws and norms. This claim highlights the breadth of his catholic, triune vision. God, as God, brings good news to all of creation: from humanity as God's image, to humanity's task in the world, to the natural and social norms God has given. Bavinck consistently emphasizes the way in which this touches every part of creation, including, as in *Contemporary Morality,* the rules of fashion which ought to have "rich variety," but in his day and age was made all too uniform.[146] In the creation's God-given unity and diversity, we see the centrality of trinitarian doctrine for Bavinck.

Bavinck's Trinitarian doctrine is thoroughly Nicene, using both its language and logic. Extending the logic of Nicaea,[147] Bavinck argues that Trinitarian doctrine, though first and foremost about God and for his glory, is

also necessary for, and foundational to, the doctrine of creation. In the eternal relations of the Godhead, we see God's self-communication, upon which his revelation in creation rests. Bavinck's engagement with Nicaea, both its language and logic, demonstrates the trinitarian, catholic, and orthodox, yet modern theology of Herman Bavinck. Nicaea is, for him, of "excellent value."

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1 Herman Bavinck, *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion,* trans. and ed. Gregory Parker Jr. and Cameron Clausing (Peabody, MA: Henrickson Academic, 2022), 115.

2 Bavinck, *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*, 114.

3 Herman Bavinck, *The Wonderful Works of God: Instruction in the Christian Religion according to the Reformed Confessions,* trans. Henry Zylstra (Glenside, PA: Westminster Seminary Press, 2019), 303.

4 Bavinck, *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*, 115.

5 Gayle Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology: The Ontological, Cosmological, and Soteriological Dimensions of the Doctrine of the Trinity," PhD diss. (Toronto School of Theology, 2019), 219.

6 Gayle Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Doctrine of God is Like No Other," *Credo Magazine* 9.1 (March 2019), https://credomag.com/article/herman-bavincks-doctrine-of-god-like-no-other/

7 Cory C. Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern: Herman Bavinck's Use of Friedrich Schleiermacher* (Bellingham: Lexham Press, 2020).

8 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1: Prolegomena,* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 110.

9 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 111.

10 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 110.

11 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1: Prolegomena*, 112

12 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation,* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004), 288-289.

13 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 333.

14 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation,* 330.

15 James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Herman Bavinck's Organic Motif* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2012), 81.

16 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 81.

17 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 330.

18 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 95.

19 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 331.

20 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 300; He continues: "whatever distinctions may exist in the divine being, they may not and cannot diminish the unity of the divine nature. For in God that unity is not deficient and limited, but perfect and absolute."

21 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 300.

22 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 331.

23 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 318.

24 This profession is, as we will later see, deeply Nicene. Lewis Ayres notes the priority and unity among pro-Nicene theologians of simplicity, inseparable operations, and appropriation (Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 278-282, 296-300).

25 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 319.

26 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 319.

27 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 318.

28 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2: God and Creation*, 577.

29 Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 30.

30 Doornbos, "Herman Bavinck's Trinitarian Theology," 219-220.

31 Herman Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 27 (1992), 224.

32 Herman Bavinck, "The Future of Calvinism," *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review,* no. 17 (1894), 3.
33 Bavinck, "The Future of Calvinism," 6.
34 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 220.
35 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 220-221.
36 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 221.
37 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 221.
38 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 221.
39 Beginning in the second and third century, the church, Bavinck argued, substituted "catholicity of the Christian principle that purifies and sanctifies everything" for a "dualism that separates the supernatural from the natural." Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 229.
40 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 238, emphasis added.
41 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 226, 235.
42 Catholicity, Bavinck argues, returns to the "original qualitative distinction between the church and the world," that had been turned, over time, into a "quantitative one." Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 229.
43 Cory Brock and Nathanial Gray Sutanto: *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction* (Bellingham: Lexham Academic, 2023), 56.
44 Bavinck, "The Catholicity of Christianity and the Church," 250.
45 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 81.
46 James Eglinton, *Bavinck: A Critical Biography* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), xix
47 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 31-32.
48 Herman Bavinck, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," trans. Bruce R. Pass, *Bavinck Review* 7 (2016): 77.
49 Bavinck, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," 79.
50 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 9.
51 Bavinck, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," 82.
52 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 21. In his attention to Schleiermacher, particularly Schleiermacher's concept of the absolute dependence and immediate self-consciousness, Bavinck remains an opponent "of modern theology in general according to its adoption of the subjective consciousness as a source-foundation for theological construction." However, opposition does not exhaust Bavinck's engagement with Schleiermacher. Instead, Brock teases out the way Bavinck is not only *opposed,* but *indebted* to Schleiermacher: "in obedience to [Bavinck's] own suggestion regarding the requirement that one must comprehend and engage modern philosophy … Bavinck appropriated much of the philosophical grammar that consciousness theologies so promoted." Without adopting Schleiermacher's foundational and methodological claims about the *ground* of religious belief, Bavinck was "maintained a significant dependence on Schleiermacher" in his attention to feeling as a unique way of "faith-knowledge." (Brock, *Orthodox Yet Modern,* 21-22).
53 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 60.
54 See also, for example, "The Imitation of Christ in the Modern World," in John Bolt, *A Theological Analysis of Herman Bavinck's Two Essays on the* Imitatio Christi (Edwin Mellen, 2013), 432 where Bavinck writes: "There is simply far too much in our present-day culture that we gladly and thankfully accept and which we daily use and enjoy. The discoveries of science, the new vistas opened up by the historical sciences, the wondrous things brought forth by technology, are of such a nature that they cannot but be regarded as good and perfect gifts coming down from the Father of lights."
55 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 76-77.
56 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 238.
57 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 238.
58 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 53.
59 Brock, *Orthodox yet Modern,* 9.
60 He continues: "For that reason, this work of dogmatic theology is eager to carry the imprint of its own time. It would be an unending task to loosen one's ties to the present; it would also not be pleasing to God who speaks to us as seriously and loudly as to previous generation" (Herman Bavinck, "Foreword to the First Edition (Volume 1) of the *Gereformeerde Dogmatiek,"* trans. John Bolt, *Calvin Theological Journal* 45 (2010): 10).
61 Herman Bavinck, *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*, trans. and ed. Gregory Parker Jr. and Cameron Clausing (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2022), 115.
62 Herman Bavinck, *What is Christianity?*, trans. and ed. Gregory Parker Jr (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2022), 21.

63 Bavinck, *Wonderful Works of God*, 303. See also: Herman Bavinck, "Algemeene Inleiding," in H. Bavinck, H. H. Kuyper, H. Bouwman, J. H. Landwehr en J. C. Rullmann, *De kerkhervorming: Gedenkschrift bij het vierde eeuwfeest* (Middelburg: F. P. d'Huy, 1917), 3–33.

64 Bavinck, *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*, 115.

65 Bavinck fleshes out the Christological implications of Nicaea and Chalcedon in *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ,* ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), see pages 256-319. For more on this see: J. Ryan Davidson, "Nicaea and Chalcedon After Modern Christologies: Herman Bavinck as Exemplar in Engaging Christological Developments," *Bulletin of Ecclesial Theology* 6.1 (2019): 59-68.

66 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 285, emphasis original.

67 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 286.

68 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 286.

69 Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 79.

70 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 304-5.

71 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 305.

72 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 305, emphasis added.

73 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 305. Ayres discusses this Nicene distinctive at length; pro-Nicene theology, he articulates, notes the *real* distinctions between the persons, and the *mystery* of these distinctions: "Father is not Son, Son is not Father, and Spirit is neither Father nor Son," these, he argues, "are some of the clearest [distinctions] we can make precisely in that they deliver only a logic of relationship." (Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 295).

74 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 306.

75 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2,* 305.

76 See, for example, Matthew Barrett, "Introduction," in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God,* ed. Matthew Barrett (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2024), xvii for these basics of the creed.

77 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 318.

78 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 306.

79 Scott R. Swain, "B. B. Warfield and the Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," *Themelios* 43.1 (2018): 13.

80 Swain, "B. B. Warfield and the Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," 15.

81 B. B. Warfield, "Trinity," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr, vol. 5 of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr (Chicago: Howard-Severance, 1915), 3020.

82 Warfield, "Trinity," 3021.

83 Warfield argues that: "It has been found necessary, nevertheless, from time to time, vigorously to reassert the principle of equalization, over against a tendency unduly to emphasize the elements of subordinationism which still hold a place thus in the traditional language in which the church states its doctrine of the Trinity." Warfield, "Trinity," 3022.

84 Warfield, "Trinity," 3022.

85 Hodge makes a similar distinction, allowing him to retain Nicene language and emphases. See: Swain, "B. B. Warfield and the Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity," 12-13. Interestingly, one of the few contemporary theologians Bavinck does quote in his section on the distinctions among the three persons is Scholten, who also upholds the eternal generation of the Son. On this point, Bavinck and Scholten agree: "God never ceases to reveal himself in the Word" (J. H. Scholten, *De Leer der Hervormde Kerk in Hare Grondbeginsele II* (Leiden, Academische Boekhandle, 1861), 207); "his speaking is eternal" (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 310)

86 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 300.

87 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 296.

88 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 286.

89 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 286.

90 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 309.

91 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 306, emphasis original.

92 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 1*, 109-110.

93 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 306.

94 Barrett, "Introduction," xxiii; cf. Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy*, 7, 384-429.

95 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 306; in this, Bavinck also appeals to the writings of Nicaea's architects, such as Athanasius.

96 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 307.

97 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 309.

98 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 286; see Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy,* 207 for a discussion of pro-Nicene theologians on this point.

99 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 333

100 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 318. He continues: "Corresponding to these distinctions, we also find "economic" distinctions in the works ad extra All of these works are accomplished by the one God, yet in them each of the three persons fulfills the role that corresponds to the order of his existence in the divine being. The Father works of himself through the Son in the Spirit. Scripture marks these distinctions very clearly in the so-called "differentiating prepositions" ἐκ (out of), διᾰ (through), and ἐν (in) (1 Cor. 8:6; John 1:3, 14). Romans 11:36, often advanced in support of these distinctions, is not divisible in trinitarian terms; and Colossians 1:16 is only seemingly at odds with this use of the prepositions"

101 See, for example, Christopher Hall, who writes that "the creed is referring to the relational distinctions expressed in a clear order" (Christopher A. Hall, "The Nicene Creed: Foundation of Orthodoxy," in *On Classical Trinitarianism: Retrieving the Nicene Doctrine of the Triune God,* ed. Matthew Barrett (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2024), 28).

102 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 308.

103 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 309-310.

104 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 309.

105 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 310.

106 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 533.

107 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 310.

108 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 302, quoting Augustine, *The Trinity* V, 9, VI 10.

109 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 302

110 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 301

111 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 302.

112 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 302.

113 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 302.

114 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 302.

115 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

116 For more on this, see Herman Bavinck, *Christian Worldview,* trans. and ed. Nathaniel Gray Sutanto, James Eglinton, and Cory C. Brock (Wheaton: Crossway, 2019), 31-56.

117 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

118 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

119 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

120 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

121 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

122 In these claims, we see many of Bavinck's orthodox and modern emphases emerge: not only his discussion of subjectivity, but the organic language that so characterizes his thought. For more, see James Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism: Towards a New Reading of Bavinck's Organic Motif.*

123 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

124 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 304.

125 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 333.

126 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 331.

127 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 333.

128 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 333.

129 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 334.

130 Rahner argued that the *"'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity."* (Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (Crossroad, 1997), 22; emphasis original).

131 Brock and Sutanto: *Neo-Calvinism: A Theological Introduction,* 191.

132 Bavinck self-consciously follows Augustine who, as Bavinck describes, "looked for images, analogies, and vestiges of the Trinity and so brought out the connections between the doctrine of God and that of the cosmos as a whole" (Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 287)

133 Richard Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics: The Rise and Development of Reformed Orthodoxy, Volume Four: The Triunity of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 157.

134 Muller, *Post Reformation Reformed Dogmatics, Volume 4*, 158; Muller points out that several of Calvin's contemporaries "offered broader discussion on the subject."

135 John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion,* ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press), 1.13.18.

136 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 112.

137 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 577.

138 Eglinton, *Trinity and Organism*, 67-69

139 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 588.

140 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 303.

141 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 561.

142 Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, vol. 2*, 577.

143 Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, vol. 1: Created, Fallen, and Converted Humanity,* ed. John Bolt, with Jessica Joustra, Nelson D. Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, and Dirk Van Keulen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019 420, 422.

144 Herman Bavinck, "On Inequality," in *Essays on Religion, Science, and Society,* ed. John Bolt, trans. Harry Boonstra and Gerrit Sheeres (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 145.

145 Herman Bavinck, "General Biblical Principles and the Relevance of Concrete Mosaic Law for the Social Question Today (1891), trans. John Bolt, *Journal of Markets and Morality* 13.2 (Fall 2010), 445.

146 Herman Bavinck, "Contemporary Morality," in Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Ethics, vol. 3: Christian Life in Society,* ed. John Bolt with Jessica Joustra, Nelson D. Kloosterman, Antoine Theron, and Dirk Van Keulen (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2025), 331.

147 And doing so, as we have seen, in continuity with pro-Nicene theologians, especially Augustine.

Was B. B. Warfield Orthodox? Nicaea, Warfield, and the Doctrine of the Trinity

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Few, if any, would deny that the strength of Benjamin Warfield's theological work is its firm exegetical grounding. His voluminous writings from beginning to end demonstrate that he was first and foremost an exegetical theologian. His works demonstrate that he was deeply informed theologically also, and this in regard to the whole history of Christian theological writing, ancient to modern. The depth and breadth of his learning was legendary in his own day. But it would not be difficult at all to show that it was above all his exegetical prowess that set him uniquely above most other theologians.

His articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity is a case in point. His display of the basic essentials of the doctrine in the biblical writings is characterized by remarkable insight, and for it his lengthy 1915 essay, "The Biblical Doctrine of the Trinity"[1] an entry in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, continues to receive scholarly attention.

Our generation has witnessed a resurgence of interest in Trinitarian studies, a happy development for sure. This revived interest has brought a new focus

on the development of the doctrine in the early church, particularly its "official" statements in the fourth century — a further happy development. And it is in this context that Warfield's famous essay has been rediscovered.

And yet Warfield's formulation of the doctrine has recently come into question also. Was his exposition of the Trinity entirely orthodox? Specifically, was he a Nicene theologian?

This is the question that I am asked to address in this article. It would certainly be worth our time to survey Warfield's broader contribution to the doctrine. His "God Our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ"[2] is a uniquely valuable study, a rigorous exegetical and theological analysis of this familiar Pauline phrase that has not received anywhere near the attention in trinitarian studies that it deserves in Trinitarian studies. The earlier portions of his famous essay on the Trinity are rich and rewarding also, for any reader. His survey of the revelation of the doctrine in both Old and New Testaments, his characterizing it as a specifically gospel revelation that was known in fact in the incarnation of Christ and the giving of the Spirit, as well as in word, his exegetical-theological analysis of passages such as Matthew 28:29 and 2 Corinthians 13:14, and his insistence that trinitarian theism is the "only stable" theism and the only theism that "satisfies the mind" and heart — all this and much more gives his work its continued value.

But our focus here is narrower. Just how comfortable Warfield was with Nicaea is a question that deserves consideration. Indeed, it's a question that he himself raised. Both for the importance of the issue itself, and because of Warfield's continuing influence, the question deserves clarification.

Beginning with the Essentials

To answer our question, let us begin with basic essentials. Warfield writes, "When we have said these three things, then — that there is but one God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each a distinct person — we have enunciated the doctrine of the Trinity in its completeness."[3] Few would disagree that these propositions sketch out the essential rudiments of the doctrine of the Trinity. But that these propositions suffice in "enunciating the doctrine in its completeness" many will find questionable, if not problematic.

Central to Nicene orthodoxy is not only God's three-in-oneness but the relations these three persons sustain to one another. Just how are these three to be understood as one and yet distinct from each other? And how do we articulate our answer without implying tri-theism?

Historic orthodoxy found answer to these questions in the eternal relations of the three persons. In brief, the Father begets the Son, the Son is begotten, and the Spirit proceeds from both the Father and the Son. Paternity, filiation, and spiration. The importance of this aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity lies in its distinguishing of the three persons while at the same time guarding the oneness of God. The Son is "begotten, not made" and therefore shares the very being or essence of the Father undivided. He is, as the Nicene creed affirms, "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God." In this way the Son is distinct from the Father in his relation to him and yet one with him in substance (homoousios). The Father and the Son are not two distinct beings but two persons (hypostasis) of the one being of God. So also the Spirit. Proceeding from both the Father and the Son he is of the same substance with them yet a distinct instance or person of the divine being. There is a "fromness" that characterizes both the Son and the Spirit but not the Father, and yet all three persons are eternal; hence, eternal generation and eternal procession. In this way both the oneness of God and the threeness of persons are recognized. These doctrines have been considered essential to a right understanding of both the unity of God and the distinction of persons. No modalism, no mere prolations (as per the earlier Logos christology), and no tri-theism. One being of God shared equally among the three distinct persons.

Christian theologians both ancient and modern have found this doctrine necessitated by multiple exegetical considerations. For our purposes here a sampling will suffice. Perhaps most obvious is the very language of Father and Son. That the Son is of the Father and that the Father is not of the Son is entailed in the very meaning of the words. Even more explicit is the terminology of "begotten" (monogenēs; e.g., John 1:18). Generation accounts both for Son's substance with the Father and his personal distinctness. And yet God is eternal, without beginning. And because the Son shares the same being he is eternal and without beginning also. If the Son were generated by the Father in time or as a mere act of the Father's will, his personal distinction would be preserved, but he

would necessarily differ in being, having a beginning. Thus, this begetting/begotten relationship is eternal — the doctrine of eternal generation.

This notion of "fromness" is entailed in further NT designations of Christ. He is the "Word" (John 1:1) and "Image" (Col 1:15) of the Father, "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb 1:3). All these reflect a certain ordering (taxis) of the first two persons. The "fromness" is always in the same direction. The Father is never from the Son, never is he the Son's image, and never is he the revelation of the Son. The direction is constant, always in the other direction. The Son is from the Father. The Father "gives" (John 3:16) and "sends" (John 5:24) the Son. Accordingly, the Son does what the Father does (John 5:19-20), speaks what the Father has given him to speak (John 8:28), and always does what is pleasing to him (John 8:29). "By himself" God created the world and all things in it (Gen 1; Isa 44:24; 45:12), and yet he did it "through" the Son (Heb 1:2-3). The implication of multiple persons in the one God is unavoidable. And so on. The order is always the same, never the reverse. And so also with the Spirit. He is sent from the Father and the Son (John 14:26; 15:26). The three are equal, co-eternal, sharing equally in all that it is to be God, but there is an evident ordering in the relationship.

Perhaps most telling is Jesus' otherwise puzzling statement in John 5:26: "as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself." This "life in himself-ness" is eternality, but it is more than that. It is self-existence, aseity. Jesus affirms that both the Father and the Son possess it. And yet he says that the Son has self-existence because the Father "gave" it to him. Eternal self-existence given. Self-existence we can (almost) understand. Existence that is given we can understand also. But self-existence that is given is a concept that is beyond us. But there it is: "the Father … has granted the Son also to have life in himself." This seems to say precisely what eternal generation is intended to affirm, identity of being and ordering of persons. And this, in turn, lies at the heart of Nicene Trinitarian theology, accounting for both the unity of the Godhead and the distinction of the three persons.

This is just a brief sketch of the historic "Nicene" Christian understanding of the Trinitarian relations, but it is sufficient to frame our consideration of Warfield's teaching in this regard. And it adequately throws his statement into question. "That there is but one God, that the Father and the Son and

the Spirit is each God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each a distinct person"—is this, in fact, an enunciation of the doctrine of the Trinity in its "completeness."[4]

Warfield and the Pro-Nicene Tradition

Warfield of course is not unaware of the teachings of historic Christian orthodoxy, but in his treatments of the doctrine of the Trinity he makes scarcely any mention of, say, the Cappadocians. He examines Tertullian at great length, and Calvin also. And he briefly highlights the teaching and important place of Augustine. But he makes barely a mention of Basil, his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa, or Gregory of Nazianzus. In fact, when he addresses the Nicene formulations it is usually by way of questioning it and in reference to the "speculations" of the Nicene Fathers. He considers himself "Nicene" in a basic sense (affirming the full deity of the Son, the three persons of the Trinity, etc.), but he is suspicious of the language of eternal generation, "God of God, Light of Light," and so on. He seems to consider these details unessential, questionable, and perhaps a vestige of the subordinationist tendences in the earlier theologians.

Warfield's hesitation on this score stems from his commitment to Calvin's landmark affirmation of the Son as *autotheos* and Calvin's own reservations regarding Nicaea. Before I get there, I'll back up.

These questions come to the fore in Warfield primarily in his 1915 essay on the doctrine of the Trinity but also in his lengthy 1909 examination of Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity[5] and somewhat in his 1905-1906 extended examination of Tertullian's formulation.[6] He recognized the need to account for the distinctness of persons and credited Tertullian with his attempts on this score in breaking away from the then prevailing Logos speculations.[7] He reflects on Tertullian's struggle to formulate what would later be stated clearly in the doctrine of eternal generation:

> Accordingly he tells us, on the one hand, that the Son "was always in the Father" because the "Father was always Father": but he at once turns to argue, on the other hand, that the Father must in some sense precede the Son, because it is "necessary that He who knows no beginning must precede Him that has a beginning"; and to insist over and over again that there would be two Gods, if

> there were two who had not been begotten, or two who were without beginning, or two who were self-existent. The doctrine of "eternal generation" is here struggling in the womb of thought: we do not think it quite comes to the birth.[8]

Warfield observes in Tertullian four strands of thought coming to the fore: (1) the Son's preexistence, (2) his consubstantiality, (3) his eternality, and (4) his subordination to the Father. Warfield recognizes in this subordinationist tendency that Tertullian was yet overburdened with "too great a leaven of the Logos speculations." But he also affirms from this observation that "we may fairly call Tertullian the father of Nicene theology."[9] So Warfield recognizes the critical role of the doctrine of eternal generation in accounting for both the shared equality of deity and the distinction of persons.[10] Even so, Warfield has questions.

Warfield nowhere examines Augustine's doctrine of the Trinity at length, but he refers to him as the one "through whom … the doctrine of the Trinity received its completed statement."[11] It is in John Calvin's "profound sense of the consubstantiality of the Persons," Warfield says, the doctrine received its most fully developed statement.[12] Specifically, for Warfield, Calvin's great contribution to the doctrine of the Trinity was his championing of the Son (and the Spirit) as *autotheos*, and Warfield carried the banner with vigor. The Son's self-existence is a necessary postulate of his deity, an entailment of his consubstantiality (*homoousios*) with the Father. But if the Son is *autotheotēs*, how can he be *from* the Father? How is it consistent with any notion of the historic understanding of the *taxis*? Hence, Warfield understands Nicene orthodoxy as employing the language of "refined subordinationism,"[13] and he refers to the creed's expression *theos ek theou* ("God of God") as a "subtle subordinational inheritance."[14] In another place he comments that the creed's expression, "God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God," is "at least verbally contradictory" to the notion of Christ's full deity. Any notion of derivation, however defined, strikes Warfield as implicitly subordinationistic. But in Calvin's emphasis on the equalization of the three persons he finds this subordinating tendency finally corrected. And so he expresses surprise at the continued use of what he considers a subordinating terminology and questions whether it is consistent with an affirmation of the Son's eternality.

> We are astonished at the persistence of so large an infusion of the Nicene phraseology in the expositions of Augustine, after that phraseology had really be antiquated by his fundamental principle of equalization in his construction of the Trinitarian relations: we are more astonished at the effort which Calvin made to adduce Nicene support for his own conceptions: and we are more astonished still at the tenacity with which his followers cling to all the old speculations.[15]

Warfield's most pointed remarks in this regard appear in his 1915 essay on the Trinity. He begins with the helpful observation that God's saving work is consistently conveyed as a work of the Triune God.

> The phenomena of Paul's Epistles are repeated in the other writings of the New Testament. In these other writings also it is everywhere assumed that the redemptive activities of God rest on a threefold source in God the Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit; and these three Persons repeatedly come forward together in the expressions of Christian hope or the aspirations of Christian devotion …. This is the uniform and pervasive testimony of the New Testament, and it is the more impressive that it is given with such unstudied naturalness and simplicity, with no effort to distinguish between what have come to be called the ontological and the economical aspects of the Trinitarian distinctions, and indeed without apparent consciousness of the existence of such a distinction of aspects. Whether God is thought of in Himself or in His operations, the underlying conception runs unaffectedly into trinal forms.[16]

He further observes that "the Trinitarian terminology of Paul and the other writers of the New Testament is not precisely identical with that of Our Lord as recorded for us in His discourses," particularly in John's Gospel. That is, they refer to Christ not (often) as the "Son" but as "Lord." They speak as worshipers, acknowledging Christ's lordship and deity. "Lord" is Paul's "trinitarian name" for Christ.[17] From this observation Warfield raises the question "whether it would have been possible for Paul to have done this, especially with the constancy with which he has done it, if, in his conception of it, the very essence of the Trinity were enshrined in the terms "Father" and "Son." He finds it remarkable, "if the very essence of the

Trinity were thought of by him as resident in the terms 'Father,' 'Son,' that in his numerous allusions to the Trinity in the Godhead, he never betrays any sense of this." And so he concludes, "The question naturally suggests itself whether the order Father, Son, Spirit was especially significant" to the New Testament writers.[18]

In the next paragraph this question that Warfield raises becomes a "fact" that has "bearing upon the testimony of the New Testament to the interrelations of the Persons of the Trinity." It gives pointed affirmation of "undiminished Deity" of each of the three persons, but it throws our traditional understanding of their relations into question.[19] So for Warfield the regular Pauline references to "God, Lord, and Spirit," not always in that order, casts doubt on whether Jesus' and John's terminology of "Father, Son, and Spirit" is essentially definitive.

Warfield argues further that a right understanding of the terminology itself casts further doubt on that understanding. Both "Son" and "Spirit" *may* be understood as implying "subordination and derivation of being," he says, "but it is quite certain that this was not the denotation of either term in the Semitic consciousness, which underlies the phraseology of Scripture; and it may even be thought doubtful whether it was included even in their remoter suggestions." Rather, he insists, "what underlies the conception of sonship in Scriptural speech is just 'likeness'; whatever the father is that the son is also."[20] Sonship connotes equality, he asserts, not subordination, "and if there is any implication of derivation in it, it would appear to be very distant." So also, the designation "only begotten" connotes uniqueness, not derivation. Similarly, he argues that the expressions "Spirit of God" "certainly does not convey" the notion "either of derivation or of subordination, but is just the executive name of God — the designation of God from the point of view of His activity — and imports accordingly identity with God."[21]

Warfield offers two NT passages in support. In John 5:17-18 Jesus said that God was his own Father, which the Jews rightly understood as a claim of equality with God. And in 1 Corinthians 2:10-11Paul speaks of the Spirit as uniquely able to know the thoughts of God. Here the Spirit appears as the substrate of the Divine self-consciousness, the principle of God's knowledge of Himself: He is, in a word, just God Himself in the innermost essence of His Being. As the spirit of man is the seat of human life, the very life of man itself, so the Spirit of God is His very life-element. How can

He be supposed, then, to be subordinate to God, or to derive His Being from God? And so Warfield surmises, "If, however, the subordination of the Son and Spirit to the Father in modes of subsistence and their derivation from the Father are not implicates of their designation as Son and Spirit, it will be hard to find in the New Testament compelling evidence of their subordination and derivation."[22]

Warfield's assertion that the terms "Son" and "Spirit" imply no sense of derivation will strike most as surprising, and he offers only these two passages in support. I suspect that most would agree that this is not the clearest display of Warfield's legendary exegetical powers. That "Son" and "Spirit" entail no sense of derivation remains far from demonstrated. And that John 5:17-18 necessitates that the language of Father and Son implies *only* the idea of equality, or that 1 Corinthians 2:10-11 entails *only* the idea of identity certainly remains open to question. Warfield clearly equates any notion of derivation as implicit subordinationism, and he wants nothing to do with either. But nowhere does he entertain the question whether *some notion* of derivation (as highlighted above) may coexist with a full affirmation of equality.

The only notion of "subordination" that Warfield allows is in reference to the "modes of operations" or "the functions ascribed to the several Persons of the Trinity in the redemptive process, and, more broadly, in the entire dealing of God with the world."[23] Here Warfield sketches out the usual evidence with regard to God's external works; we need not review theme here. But he insists that none of this reflects any sense of subordination in the "modes of subsistence." He recognizes that it may seem natural to assume that God's external works (*ad extra*) reflect God as he is in himself (*ad intra*). But he insists that it may all be understood just as easily in light of the *pactum*.

> We are bound to bear in mind that these relations of subordination in modes of operation may just as well be due to a convention, an agreement, between the Persons of the Trinity — a "Covenant" as it is technically called — by virtue of which a distinct function in the work of redemption is voluntarily assumed by each. It is eminently desirable, therefore, at the least, that some definite evidence of subordination in modes of subsistence should be discoverable before it is assumed.[24]

Surprisingly, Warfield nowhere entertains the possibility that the so-called "economic" Trinity is itself predicated on and an outworking of the so-called "ontological," whether the ordering of the persons in God's creative and redemptive acts is a reflection of God as he is in himself, or that the *taxis* as traditionally understood lies at the root of and explains the sending of the Son and the Spirit. Nor does he consider that the Father's "giving" and "sending" of the Son precedes the Son's actual incarnation. It is further surprising that while Warfield questions the traditional understanding of the *taxis*, he nowhere offers an alternative means of accounting for the distinguishing of persons that does not compromise the oneness of the divine being. His affirmation of the unity, full deity, and distinction of all three persons is strong, but he offers no accounting for it, no way to hold it all together. The Nicene doctrine both affirms the essentials and accounts for it in terms of the personal properties of the *taxis*, a necessary move to avoid confusions such as tri-theism, and preserving both the consubstantiality of the Son and Spirit while at the same time affirming their personal distinction. Warfield challenges this understanding, and he is zealous to protect the truth that Jesus is "the God over all that Paul called him."[25] But he offers no alternative accounting for the essentials.

Conclusion: Returning to Our Question

So to our question: was Warfield orthodox as defined by Nicaea? If the doctrine of eternal generation is essential to Nicene orthodoxy, then the question is at least an open one. We are left at least in doubt. He nowhere denies the doctrine outright, and as observed above, he recognizes its value in preserving the aseity of the Son as well as his distinct identity. But he finds no exegetical support for it anywhere, denies its implication in any of the traditional expositions, and considers any notion of derivation implicit subordinationism. He affirms that Calvin "destroyed" any "direct Scriptural proof" of any "conception of communication" by "refusing to rest a doctrinal determination on 'distorted texts.'"[26] And he rehearses with seeming approval Calvin's rejection of the ancient creeds as bindingly authoritative — Calvin did not want the Reformed churches to be held under any such tyranny but under Scripture alone.[27]

Yet he said of Calvin that the Nicene construction "held its ground" with him "in its substantial core,"[28] and Warfield seems to have considered himself "Nicene" in similar terms. This "substantial core," it seems, consists in his propositions cited above, "that there is but one God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each God, that the Father and the Son and the Spirit is each a distinct person." This, for Warfield is "the doctrine of the Trinity in its completeness."[29] Whatever we may make of this assessment, it does not appear to be the full-orbed doctrine of Nicaea, preserved still in our Christmas carol —

> God of God, Light of Light,
> Lo, He abhors not the virgin's womb;
> Very God, begotten not created;
> O come, let us adore Him;
> O come, let us adore Him;
> O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord!

1 Warfield, Works 2, 133-172.
2 W2, 213-231.
3 W2, 147.
4 W2, 147
5 W5, 189-284.
6 W4, 3-109.
7 W4, 24-25.
8 W4, 97.
9 W4, 99-100.
10 W4, 105-107.
11 W4, 116.
12 For Warfield's examination of Calvin's doctrine of the Trinity see my "Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield on the Doctrine of the Trinity" (SBJT 21:2[2017]), 99-102.
13 W5, 230.
14 W4, 116.
15 W5, 279.
16 W2, 160-161.
17 W2, 161
18 W2, 161-2.
19 W2, 162-3.
20 W2, 163.
21 W2, 164.
22 W2, 164-165.
23 W2, 165.
24 W2, 166.
25 W4, 22
26 W5, 276-277.
27 W5, 206-207.
28 W5, 279.
29 Warfield, Works 2:147.

Martyn Lloyd-Jones and the Doctrine of the Trinity

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It has been 1700 years since the writing of the Nicene Creed, which, among other things, set forth what the church believed the scriptures taught about the trinitarian nature of God. In this article, my focus is on the teaching of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, an extraordinary Welsh preacher and Christian leader (1899-1981), on the biblical doctrine of the Trinity. Although Lloyd-Jones affirms the doctrine of the Trinity as articulated in church creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, his approach to teaching on this subject differs from that of many theologians, apologists, and preachers; for this reason, it warrants reconsideration.

Lloyd-Jones' ministry and his desire to communicate critical biblical truths in a way that his listeners could grasp, regardless of their background, did not happen by accident. Having started out in medicine before turning to Christian ministry at the age of 27, he took a deeply pastoral approach to theology. He knew that he was not preaching and writing for the academic theological or philosophical world, but as a Christian pastor and evangelist seeking to win the lost and edify the church of Christ.[1] His ministry spanned 40 years, first at the Calvinist Methodist Mission Church in Aberavon, South Wales, and then at Westminster Chapel in London, England. Some criticized his move from medicine to ministry, but Lloyd-Jones said, "I gave up nothing. I received everything. I count it the highest honour God can confer on any man to call him to be a herald of the gospel."[2] This sense of the privilege and nature of the Christian ministry shaped his years of service.

His preaching was a great blessing and continues to edify the church through his published works and the ministry of the Martyn Lloyd-Jones Trust.[3]

This mindset and conviction are particularly evident in Lloyd-Jones' three-volume work, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, which is a written record of a series of Friday night lectures that he delivered on biblical doctrine between 1952 and 1955.[4] In the opening chapter, he describes his purpose and method: to study what the Bible teaches about itself, God, man, Christ, salvation, the church, and eschatology.[5] That is hardly surprising. But what is surprising (to many) is his statement that he did is "not going to give a series of lectures on theology."[6] For Lloyd-Jones, lecturing on biblical doctrine is not the same as lecturing on theology. The difference lies in the focus and subject matter. Lecturing on biblical doctrine means that we confine ourselves to what the Bible says, and to what the Bible alone says. According to him, theology encompasses a wider field by examining history, philosophy, and apologetics.[7] In his mind, "the doctrines of the Bible are not a subject to be studied; rather we should desire to know them in order that, having known them, we may not be 'puffed up' with knowledge, and excited about our information, but may draw nearer to God in worship, praise, and adoration, because we have seen, in a fuller way that we have ever seen before, the glory of our wonderous God."[8]

The Doctrine of the Trinity and Biblical Revelation

Given this compendium of doctrinal lectures, I naturally looked to them when examining his doctrinal understanding of the Trinity. However, when reading the index, I was immediately struck by the fact that only half a chapter is dedicated to the doctrine.[9] Initially, I was astonished, given the doctrine's significance in Christian theology and the emphasis Lloyd-Jones placed on it in his preaching.[10] However, upon further reflection, I believe he did it this way because he wanted to avoid unnecessary and what he would view as unhelpful philosophical discussion and speculation on this subject. Instead, he wanted to expound on the doctrine as it is presented in the Bible.

For Lloyd-Jones, the doctrine of the blessed Holy Trinity is "holy ground." He agrees with those who view it as "the greatest, the most vital and the most important aspect of the exalted doctrine of God."[11] Not only so, but it is also inescapable; you cannot read the Bible without "coming face

to face with this doctrine of the Trinity."[12] And yet, for all that, it is one of the most, if not the most, mysterious and challenging doctrines in the Bible. Thus, the presence of the doctrine, combined with its inescapable and incomprehensible nature, means that we are entirely dependent on biblical revelation. We must grapple with what the Bible says, but we must stop where it stops. And so, his exposition of the Trinity focuses on its progressive revelation in the Old and New Testaments, culminating in the fullness of God's revelation in Jesus Christ. Scripture is the primary and final authority for all Christian doctrine, and this is never more evident than in the case of the Trinity.

Not surprisingly, Lloyd-Jones highlights the bedrock nature of this biblical truth: God is one (Deut 6:4; Mark 12:29). "One" means two things: that there is only one God, not many, and that this one God is unified in himself. This is a non-negotiable truth, and everything else that is revealed about the nature of God does not alter this fundamental fact. This is ground zero. God is one. This is where we must start.

But although the Bible teaches that God is one, it also clearly affirms that the Father is God (Eph 4:6; Gal 1:1), the Son is God (John 20:28; Col 2:9), and the Spirit is God (2 Cor 3:17-18). However, there are not three gods; instead, there is one God who exists in three persons (Matt 3:16-17; 28:19; John 15:26).

Consequently, Lloyd-Jones notes, we are confronted with one of the greatest, if not the greatest, mysteries of the Christian faith. A truth that distinguishes biblical Christianity from all other religions, including monotheistic ones like Judaism and Islam. It has been revealed to us by God himself. No human being would have conceived of God in this way.

But not only is it the most distinctive of the Christian faith, Lloyd-Jones believes it is an essential doctrine that Christians do not hear enough about. The main reason for this lack of attention is readily apparent.[13] It is a difficult doctrine. There is no way around this. Attempts have been made to make the doctrine more accessible, such as illustrating it by referring to the sun and the rays emanating from it, or to the seed, the soil and the flower — unity and yet division, the three in one and the one in three.[14] But this and other illustrations like it do not begin to explain the unfathomable mystery of who God is.

But no matter how complex and mysterious the doctrine is, Lloyd-Jones believes that we neglect it at our peril. That is because it deals with who God is, and there can be no one greater than that. So often, Christians encounter difficulties in their lives because they take their eyes off God and start to worry about everything that is going on around them.

Lloyd-Jones believes that a high view of God, in which he is exalted in our minds and hearts and is therefore seen to be glorious, fills us with amazement and astonishment. This, in turn, strengthens our faith, kindles our love, and keeps us from pursuing lesser things that can never satisfy. There are lots of gods in the world, but there is only one Triune God. This is the most distinctive doctrine of the Christian faith. It is a mystery that we will never fully understand, yet it is our eternal joy and delight to contemplate the wonder of who God is as the triune God. In the end, our wrestling with the doctrine must result in wonder, awe, and worship before such a God who has condescended to reveal himself to us. And true to this controlling principle, he proceeds to unpack what the Bible teaches about this profound mystery by adhering to what is written.

The Biblical Presentation of the Triune God

Lloyd-Jones observes that there is no explicit statement of the doctrine in the Bible; in fact, as we all know the word "Trinity" is not found in the Bible.[15] However, the absence of the word does not mean that the truth being expressed by the church through the word "Trinity" is not found in the scriptures. As we have already noted, the Bible tells us that there is one God, and yet at the same time, the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God. Even so, there are not three gods, as in tritheism; there is only one God, as in monotheism, but this one God exists in what Christians call three "persons."

The problem with the word "persons" in this instance is that we are using it analogically to describe something true of God, but not of human beings, whom we also describe as persons. By human persons, we mean individuals, but when we use "persons" to talk about God, we are using it in a different sense. And yet we use "persons" rather than another word because we cannot think of a higher category. In doing so, we are attempting to describe something about God that is beyond human understanding

and language. Despite the inadequacy of human language, Lloyd-Jones believes that this doctrine is taught in the Bible from the very beginning and then with ever-increasing clarity as we move through the biblical text and follow the unfolding story of redemptive history, which culminates in Jesus Christ.

The OT emphasizes that there is one and only one true God (Deut 6:4). This is how God revealed himself to Israel. It is especially significant because the ancient world was characterized by a polytheistic view of reality, filled with gods and goddesses. In contrast to the gods worshipped by the nations, such as Baal, Asherah, Jupiter, Mars, and Mercury, Israel was instructed to believe and to proclaim the oneness and unity of the one true God.[16] Both things are essential. There was not only one God, but there is a unity to this God, as became evident when the Word and the Spirit, mentioned in the OT, were expounded more clearly and explicitly as "persons" in the NT without nullifying the essential truth that God is one.

Biblical Support for the Doctrine of the Trinity

To help his readers and listeners understand the doctrine of the Trinity, Lloyd-Jones draws on a wide variety of biblical passages and expressions, beginning with the profound theological introduction of John's Gospel about the relationship between God the Father and God the Son. In John 1:1, the Word is said to exist from the beginning and to be with God and to be God. At first glance, this may seem to contradict monotheism, but it does not. The Word is God, just as the Father is God. Yet there are not two Gods, but only one. Theologically, this way of speaking expresses the unity and diversity within God, or the "Godhead." The Father is God and all that God is, and Jesus is God and all that God is. As Jesus himself testifies, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30).

The apostle Paul says something similar in Romans 9:5, where he, after referring to the human ancestry of Jesus the Messiah, proclaims him to be "God over all, forever praised." In Colossians 2:9, Paul writes that, "in Christ all the fullness of the Deity lives in bodily form." And in Titus 2:13, he describes waiting for Christ's return as looking in anticipation for "the blessed hope—the appearing of the glory of our great God and Saviour, Jesus Christ." Thus, according to the apostle, Jesus Christ is our great God and Saviour, without in any way descending into polytheism.

Next, Lloyd-Jones discusses divine attributes ascribed to Jesus, which confirm the divine nature of Christ. He is a man, but more than a man at the same time. Eternity (John 8:58: "Very truly I tell you, Jesus answered, "before Abraham was born, I am."), holiness (John 8:46 "Can any of you prove me guilty of sin?"), life (John 5:26 "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself;" cf.17:2), immutability ("Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever." Heb 13:8), omnipotence (Matt 28:18 "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."), omnipresence (Matt 28:19 "And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."), and omniscience (John 2:24-25 "But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person").

The book of Hebrews begins its remarkable presentation of Jesus and his saving work with words that leave no doubt as to the convictions of the writer. He writes, "In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (Heb 1:1-3).

The apostle Paul agrees when he writes that Jesus, as the "Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together" (Col 1:15-17, cf. John 1:3). Jesus is also said to have the divine right to judge, because in the end "the Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son, that they may honor the Son just as they honor the Father" (John 5:22-23).

From Jesus, the divine Son of God, Lloyd-Jones turns his attention to the Holy Spirit. He explains how, in the NT, the Holy Spirit is referred to as God, alongside the Father and the Son. One example of this is found in Acts 5:34, in the early days of the church, when Ananias, along with his wife Sapphira, decided to lie to the apostles about a sum of money they had received for a real estate transaction. The apostle Peter equates lying

to the Holy Spirit with lying to God. Peter says to Ananias, "How is it that Satan has so filled your heart that you have lied to the Holy Spirit and have kept back for yourself some of the money you received for the land … You have not lied just to human beings but to God." This is consistent with the teaching of Jesus in Matthew 12:31, where he warns that "Every kind of sin and slander can be forgiven, but blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven." Sins against the Father and the Son will be forgiven, but not against the Holy Spirit, because of the unique role he plays in the outworking of salvation and the final and ultimate testimony of the triune God.

Then Lloyd-Jones draws attention to the baptismal formula at the end of Matthew's gospel, in which Jesus tells his disciples to "go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name (singular) of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit (Matt 28:19)." Three persons, including the Holy Spirit, and yet one name and one God. Similarly, Paul's benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 asks that the church in Corinth might know the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Again, one God in three persons, the Holy Spirit, being God along with the Father and the Son. We find a similar truth being taught in John 14:16, where the Holy Spirit is referred to as "another comforter," who will be sent by the Father and the Son to the apostles after Jesus' departure. And so, we have the full deity of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, clearly set forth in the New Testament. All three persons are declared to be God without their being three gods as in tritheism.

At this point, Lloyd-Jones is careful to rule out another error known as "modalism." This concept posits that the Father, Son, and Spirit represent different manifestations of the one God. So that God makes himself known as Father, Son and Holy Spirit, depending on where we are located in redemptive history, as well as the situation or the person involved. Just as I am a husband, father, and professor, even though I am still one person, so God sometimes manifests himself as the Father, at other times as the Son, and at still other times as the Holy Spirit.[17]

Still another variant of modalism is the idea that God appeared primarily as the Father in the OT, as the Son in the Gospels, and as the Holy Spirit in the Acts of the Apostles and beyond. But all forms of modalism are incompatible with the teaching of Scripture. For example, "persons" within the Trinity address one another, or they are distinguished from one another

in significant ways. In Luke 1:26-35, the birth of Jesus is foretold. God sends the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. The virgin's name was Mary, and Gabriel tells her that the Lord is with her. She is told not to be afraid because she has found favour with God, and she will conceive and give birth to a son, and she is to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign forever. Then, when Mary asks how this is possible, she is told that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and the power of the Most High will overshadow her so that the holy one born to her will be called the Son of God. And so, in one passage, we have God Most High, the Son of God, and the Holy Spirit. These are not three ways of addressing God, nor are they three different manifestations of God, but rather the three persons of the triune God.

Next, Lloyd-Jones goes to Matthew's account of the baptism of Jesus (Matt 3:13-17), which provides further evidence for the Trinity in the description of what transpires. We are told that as soon as Jesus was baptized and came up out of the water, the heavens were opened, and the Spirit of God descended on him like a dove and alighted upon him. A voice from heaven said, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." The passage would be nonsensical if the Spirit of God, the Son of God, and God the Father speaking from heaven were all the same person. This would amount to nothing more than God speaking to himself. Once again, we see the three persons interacting with each other, as the Son is set apart for ministry and filled with the Holy Spirit, in fulfillment of OT prophetic expectations (cf. Isa 11:2; 42:1; 61:1). Modalism, which has been a problem down through the years in one form or other does not take scripture seriously.

In John 14-16, we are told about the new covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit, which begins after Jesus' death, resurrection, ascent to the Father's right hand, and the pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost. In 15:26, Jesus tells his disciples that when the Advocate comes, that is the Holy Spirit, Jesus himself will send him — the same Advocate who is the Spirit of Truth who goes out from the Father, and who testifies about Jesus, the Son. Here, the Son and the Father send the Holy Spirit to the believing community. They are not one person acting in three different roles,

but three persons working in perfect harmony with one another within the mystery of God.

Two passages already mentioned in connection with the triune nature of God are also relevant here. The baptismal formula in Matthew 28:19 speaks of baptisms being performed in the name, singular, of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. It is one name, yet three names, consistent with the revealed nature of God. Similarly, Paul's apostolic benediction in 2 Corinthians 13:14 asks for the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit to be with all God's people. This is not a request that they might know God's grace, love, and fellowship, but that they would specially experience these blessings as they flow from the persons of the triune Godhead.

In our examination of Lloyd-Jones' articulation of the doctrine of the Trinity, we have primarily observed what is said of the divine persons in the NT. This is not surprising, given the progressive nature of God's self-disclosure, which begins in the OT and culminates in the NT, where the life and ministry of Jesus and the new covenant work of the Spirit are recorded. But it does not mean that the Son and the Spirit are absent from the OT. On the contrary, there are numerous references to both. Still, the OT presentation should be read with an awareness of the ever-present threat of polytheism.

Furthermore, due to the progressive nature of biblical revelation and salvation history, a fully developed doctrine of the Trinity could not have been made known before the incarnation of the Son and the Pentecostal descent of the Holy Spirit, what the church rightly identifies as the divine missions of the Son and the Spirit. Only then were God's people adequately prepared to grapple with this profound mystery, and even then, church history chronicles the struggles of Christians as they attempted to proclaim the fullness of God's self-revelation. Nonetheless, as we look back at the OT from the perspective of the NT, there is much important information.

Lloyd-Jones, like many before and after him, references *Elohim* (a plural noun), along with the plural reference of "us" in Genesis 1:26. In that verse, which describes the creation of humans, God speaks of himself in the plural when he says, "Let *us* make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along

the ground." This also occurs in Genesis 3:22, where the Lord God says, "The man has now become like one of *us*, knowing good and evil." And in Genesis 11:7, "Come, let *us* go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other." God referring to himself in the plural is also found in Isaiah 6:8, where the Lord asks Isaiah, "Whom shall I send? And who will go for *us*?" All of these are suggestive of the Trinity, especially when read in light of the NT's contents.

Lloyd-Jones also believes that he finds evidence for the Trinity in the angel of the covenant (Lord, Yahweh), and he views all references to him as pre-incarnate Son. He only references the appearances of the angel of the Lord to Gideon (Judg 6:11) and the parents of Samson (Judg 13:15-22).[18] But this is the Lord Jesus Christ in a preincarnate form.[19]

The Spirit of God is said to "hover over the waters" at the beginning of creation (Gen 1:2). The Spirit enabled the prophets to speak the word of God (2 Sam 23:2). And the Spirit empowered men like Bezalel to do the necessary work in the tabernacle (Exod 31:1-5).

And so, even in the OT, there is ample evidence that, although there was only one God, these distinctions set the God of Israel apart from the idols worshipped by the surrounding nations. This one, God revealed Himself in angelic form and through the mysterious work of the Spirit. There is a unity and plurality within the Holy One of Israel.

The Relations of the Three Persons to One Another

Lloyd-Jones describes the relations between the three persons of the Trinity as co-equal and co-eternal. This means that each person is both fully God and all that God is. Furthermore, it means that there is no subordination of any of the persons to the others in terms of their divinity. The Father is all that God is. The Son is all that God is. And the Spirit is all that God is. The Son and the Spirit are not subordinate to or less than the Father. This is very important. The introduction of any subordination between the persons means that the subordinate member(s) are less than the one they are subordinate to, and this is unacceptable. God has no parts. All of his attributes are essential to him. He is eternal, uncreated, and perfect in every way. He is from himself (*a se*) and therefore is self-existent and self-sufficient — one mind, one will, one self-consciousness, one absolute personality.

So, how are the three persons related to one another? Lloyd-Jones does not speak of their personal relations within the Godhead as many do today. He does not speak of the Father as unbegotten, nor the Son as eternally begotten, nor the Spirit as eternally spirated from the Father and Son. Nor does he speak of "perichoresis" and wrestle with how the three persons relate not just to the divine essence, but how they are related to one another within the divine essence. The idea that each of the three persons does not subsist separately within the one undivided essence of God, but the Father inhabits the Son and the Holy Spirit, and the Son and the Holy Spirit inhabit each other.[20] To put it another way, the three persons dwell in each other, person inhabits person, and all three coexist at the same time and in the same space. What can be described as a co-indwelling involving fellowship, communion, communication, love and embrace.[21] Though this theological language is very useful when it comes to expressing what the scriptures teach about the profundity of God's nature.

Instead, Lloyd-Jones distinguishes the divine persons by the external works they undertake — works of creation, providence, revelation, and, especially, redemption. In these works, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit act inseparably as God, but they also act according to their relations with one another. The Father works through the Son by the Holy Spirit, the Son works from the Father and by the Holy Spirit, and the Holy Spirit works from the Father and the Son. This is also known as the "economic Trinity."[22]

To save his people from their sins, the scriptures teach that there is a division of labor among the three persons, which Lloyd-Jones speaks about as "a kind of subjugation of the three persons."[23] And so the Father creates, elects, and plans salvation. The Son is sent by the Father to work out salvation, to bring it about according to the Father's plan. The Holy Spirit is sent by the Father and the Son to apply salvation to those chosen before the foundation of the world and redeemed by the saving work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

For Lloyd-Jones, this is a staggering thought! He writes:

> That these three blessed Persons in the blessed Holy Trinity for my salvation have thus divided up the work. The Son has put himself at the disposal of the Father, and the Spirit has put himself at the disposal of the Father and the Son. The Spirit does not speak of Himself, but testifies to the Son. The Son did not speak of Himself but received His words and His works from

> the Father, though He was equal and eternal—the economic Trinity. So that while, in a sense, we can say that it was the Father who sent the Son, and the Son who came and did the work, and the Spirit applied it, we must at the same time say this: God was in it all. 'God was in Christ' reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them' (2 Cor 5:19).[24]

Again, this is not something we can fully grasp with our minds. We are dealing with the being of the infinite, eternal, self-sufficient, holy, wise, all-powerful, loving, and faithful God. There are no analogies that will work. While we are creatures made in his image, he is and always will be glorious beyond compare and mysterious in the most wonderful sense of the word.

We need to acknowledge that God is God and that, compared to him, we are as nothing. And yet this God has made us for himself and done everything necessary to bring us back to himself, to the praise of his glory and grace. God is beyond our understanding, and there is something gloriously refreshing about acknowledging that. We need to stand in awe and worship him for who he is and for all that he has done for lost and fallen human beings. We need to receive the truth of God's word with joy and hope. God is in control. He will accomplish his purposes. No one is like our God, the Lord. We need to repent and turn to him, and love and serve him with reverence all our days.

The Trinity and the Confessions

In his examination of the doctrine of the Trinity, Lloyd-Jones emphasizes its existence and importance, and our total dependence on biblical revelation for what we know about it, while drawing our attention to the teaching of the Christian church as exemplified in the Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) and the Athanasian Creed (5th Century), in that order. He quotes Westminster's statement about the three persons of the Trinity and the Athanasian statement about full divinity and equality of each member of the Trinity.

I want to conclude by quoting these statements and add one more, the Nicene Creed. Although Lloyd-Jones does not mention the Nicene Creed in his chapter on the Trinity, he refers to it when he spells out his purpose and method in the book's opening chapter: "The rise of heresy

within the church led the early Church to draw up what we commonly call the creeds, for example, the Apostles' Creed, the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed."[25] These creedal statements beautifully capture the teaching of scripture and, consequently, Lloyd-Jones' faithful biblical exposition of the triune God.

As he reminded his original listeners and now readers at the beginning of this book, "The secret things belong to the Lord or God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever, that we may follow all the words of this law" (Deut 29:29).

The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646)

> There are three Persons within the Godhead — the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one God, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

The Athanasian Creed (Fifth Century AD)

> The Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Ghost is God; and yet there are not three Gods but one God. The Father is Lord, the Son is Lord, the Holy Ghost is Lord, and yet there are not three Lords but one Lord. For as we are compelled by Christian truth to acknowledge each person by Himself to be God and Lord, so we are forbidden by the same truth to say that there are three Gods or three Lords.

The Nicene Creed (325)

> 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, 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.

As we reflect on these witnesses from the past, let us marvel at their united testimony and heed the appropriate pastoral exhortation of Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones:

> Well, I told you when I began that we were approaching the greatest mystery in the Bible and the Christian faith — the most exalted and the most sublime truth. May I beg of you, do not try to understand all of this with your minds. It is for us humbly and as little children to receive the truth as it is revealed; to stand in worship, in adoration and amazement. It is beyond us, but it is true. And it is all true in a special way for us and for our salvation.[26]

1 Lloyd-Jones served as the Chief Clinical Assistant to Sir Thomas Horder, the King's Physician for King George V, from 1923 to 1924.

2 Quoted on the book jacket: Iain Murray, *D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones: The First 40 Years 1899-1939* (Carlisle: Banner of Truth, 1982).

3 See www.mljtrust.org. Greg Jones, the President of the MLJ Trust, confirmed via email on January 11, 2023 that there have been 16.7 million downloads or plays since the trust started in 2013. In 2022 alone, there were close to 3 million downloads or plays. These sermons are available for free.

4 See: Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003). Three volumes, one book.

5 Vol. 1, 3.

6 Vol 1., 4

7 Vol. 1, 4-5.

8 Vol. 1, 10.

9 Vol. 1, 79-91.

10 All one has to do is listen to his sermons on Romans or Ephesians, for example, and this will be obvious.

11 Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible,* vol. 1, 83.

12 Vol 1, 83.

13 Although he also mentions laziness on the part of Christians. He writes," I fear it is another example of the laziness that has come upon us – the desire for comfort, and the tendency to rest upon experiences, and to avoid anything that demands intellectual effort. But if we have neglected the doctrine of the Trinity, shame on us! It is, in a sense, the most exalted and the most glorious of all doctrines; the most amazing and astonishing thing that God has been pleased to reveal to us concerning Himself" Vol. 1, 84.

14 Vol. 1, 84.

15 Tertullian, 2nd Century, Carthage, Roman Province of Africa.

16 Deut 6:4-7 "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commands that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up."

17 Lloyd-Jones puts it this way, "And they try to use human analogies to help us to understand, they say, for example, that the same man can be a husband and a father and a preacher — one person in three relationships" (*Great Doctrines of the Bible*, vol. 1, 88).

18 See other references to the angel of the Lord or God in the OT. For example, Gen 16, 32; Exod 3:2; 23:20-21; 33:2; Num 20:16; 22; 1 Chron 21:15 Judg 2:1-4; Mal 3:1. Lloyd-Jones does not reference these in his treatment of the Trinity but does express the belief that all OT references to the Angel of the Covenant refer to the Lord Jesus Christ. It was not his incarnation; it was a theophany, an appearance of the Son as the Angel of the covenant (Vol. 1, 89).

19 "Then you remember that in one of the earlier lectures we referred to the Angel of the Covenant, to whom so many references are made in the Old Testament, and we were driven to the only possible conclusion – that the Angel of the Covenant is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ Himself … It was not His incarnation; it was a theophany, an appearance of the Son as the Angel of the Covenant" (Vol. 1, 89).

20 See Stephen J. Wellum, *Systematic Theology: From Canon to Concept*, vol. 1 (Brentwood: B&H Academic, 2024), 697-701, for a concise summary of the conceptual development of the doctrine of the Trinity that took place between Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381).

21 Not person to essence but person to person within the Godhead. Cf. Lane G. Tipton, "Cornelius Van Til's Trinitarian Theology," Reformed Forum Podcast, Season One, Episode Three, *Perichoresis*, October 19, 2022.

22 Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible*, vol.1, 90.

23 Vol. 1, 90.

24 Vol. 1, 90-91.

25 Vol. 1, 8.

26 Vol. 1, 91.

Book Reviews

Rethinking the Filioque with the Greek Fathers. By Giulio Maspero. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2023, 336 pp., $49.99.

Giulio Maspero is a professor of theology at the Pontifical University. His work has specialized in two areas: Gregory of Nyssa and rethinking the traditional doctrines surrounding the Trinity. Thus, his most important works prior to this one are *The Trinity and Man*, *Rethinking the Trinity*, and serving as the coeditor of *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*. In this work, he brings that expertise and spirit to bear on the question of the Spirit's procession and how it was perceived in the early church to argue that we should return to a premedieval version of the *filioque*.

Maspero begins his work with the thought of Origen since his works have a profound effect on the writers who came after him. Although there are questions of subordinationism in the writings of Origen, Maspero shows that Origen places the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit on the Creator side of the Creator-creature distinction. He does this through a combination of two models: the *linear* and the *triangular* (43). However, Origen lacked the metaphysical tool of *Physis*-theology. To examine this development, Maspero transitions from Origen to his reception by thinkers such as Eusebius and Athanasius (45). It is Athanasius in particular who marks a clear shift from the *Logos*-theology of early thinkers to the *Physis*-theology that would come to dominate Christian thought (53). While this turning point is remembered positively by orthodox Christians, it was not without controversy. The interactions with the Pneumatomachians both highlighted these growing pains and gave the church the opportunity to clarify its thoughts on the relationship between the divine persons. Maspero sees this interaction reaching its zenith in the work of Gregory of Nyssa. It is Nyssen's emphasis on glory and *Schesis*-theology that allows for a truly "active but not causal" role of the Son in the procession of the Spirit (140). This role allows the Greek fathers to place the Spirit between the Father and the Son who acts as the bond between the Father and Son (173).

With the view of the Greek fathers laid out, Maspero turns to the Syriac tradition to show that many of the developments of Latin theology with

regard to the *filioque* are present there as well. This is particularly important as Syriac, like Latin and unlike Greek, has a single word for procession (177). Yet, this is not the only surprising similarity that Maspero will pull out between traditions. While some have claimed Augustine's *filioque* comes from his psychological analysis, Maspero shows that these analogies are also present in the Greek fathers. This leads him finally to Augustine. Rather than painting Augustine in a negative light, Maspero points to the Latin West's metaphysical constraints, particularly with regard to language, highlighting where problems elicit the same response in Augustine and the Syriac tradition. Thus, the problem for Augustine was a lack of developed metaphysical tools to answer the problems common to the Christian tradition (265).

As a work of historical theology, this book boasts several strengths. First, Maspero does an excellent job of situating thinkers in their historical context. Particularly impressive, he does this without sacrificing the details of each thinker's thought. This allows Maspero to paint the controversies of the time as a conflict between metaphysical systems while highlighting how each thinker contributes to this conflict. Secondly, Maspero is deeply connected to the primary sources. The choice to include the original language texts in the footnotes is fantastic for scholars. Finally, his inclusion of the Syriac tradition significantly strengthens his grammatical argument. The combination of these elements creates a particularly strong work.

With that said, this work has one major weakness: the relationship between the relational approach that Maspero advocated for and what he terms the "medieval *Filioque*" (277). It seems that he has made a chronological fallacy in his approach to rejecting the "medieval" version of the doctrine. While I agree with the author that we should return to an "active but not causal" explanation of the Son's role in the Spirit's procession, Maspero does not explain how that differs from the thought of a true medieval such as Thomas Aquinas. The fact that a view was held at an earlier point is not enough to necessitate preferring it to the later view. To truly round out this work, Maspero should have included a chapter showing the differences between the two, preferably by responding to a medieval thinker. Until this happens his appeal to "Drop the medieval *Filioque* and let's keep that of the (Greek) fathers" will struggle to gain appeal (277).

Overall, this work provides immense value to any student of patristic pneumatology, ecumenical dialogue, or even the controversies of the third and fourth centuries. Not only does Maspero offer deep insight into the controversies that drove the church to clarify its doctrine of the Trinity, but he also is continuously engaging with the primary sources. This allows the scholar or student to see where Maspero is drawing his ideas and to track down any future research opportunities that may arise from this work. Thus, this is an excellent resource for both students and professional scholars.

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The Beginning of the Gospel: A Theology of Mark. By Peter Orr. Wheaton: Crossway, 2023, 192 pp., $22.99 paper.

In more recent times, Mark's Gospel has enjoyed both pastoral interest and scholarly debate. The enigmatic nature of Jesus's ministry, the blindness of disciples, and Mark's abrupt conclusion have made it ripe for debate and pastoral reflection in the life of contemporary listeners. How should aspiring scholars and local pastors attempt to make sense of Mark's Gospel theologically? In *The Beginning of the Gospel: A Theology of Mark*, Peter Orr (lecturer in New Testament at Moore Theological College in Sydney, Australia) has provided an excellent foray into a theology of Mark's Gospel, one that benefits both student and pastor.

Part of the Crossway New Testament Theology series, *The Beginning of the Gospel* is an attempt to capture some of the main themes in Mark's Gospel. An insightful introduction is supplemented by ten chapters and a conclusion which cover Jesus's divine identity, the relationship between the Gospel and the Old Testament, the kingdom, salvation, discipleship, Jesus's relationship to the law, and of course, his death and resurrection.

A novel aspect of *The Beginning of the Gospel* is the presentation of Mark's Gospel in conversation with Paul, "Mark's theological partner" (20). Orr argues that Mark's Gospel offers a "detailed backstory" to the message of Jesus, the same message that comprised Paul's verbal proclamation. This symmetry between Mark and Paul is seen in how both use the word *gospel* (21). Both tend to use the term without any modifiers and typically utilize

it in what Orr refers to as "episodic narrative" (21). What Paul has built his ministry on is now put into written form in the Gospel of Mark.

Additionally, Paul and Mark share considerable theological emphases: the enigmatic nature of the cross, attitude to the law, and mission to Israel and the nations, as well as the relationship between Jesus and Rome. (21) Both also share a focus on the "apocalyptic event" (22) that is the "gospel" (Mark 1:1, 11, Rom 1:1–4) (23). As such, *The Beginning of the Gospel* carefully traces the unfolding of Mark's Gospel, understanding that its message shares considerable theological synthesis with Paul's own message (24). This means, fundamentally, that Mark's Gospel was written for Christians. Reading Mark's Gospel is thus itself an invitation to read in conversation with Paul, and the rest of the New Testament (25–27).

Written for pastors and aspiring scholars, Orr's *The Beginning of the Gospel* sticks close to the text and follows the narrative structure of Mark's Gospel. Orr does not propose any radical rereading of Mark but instead offers a wholesome, faithful, and accessible introduction to Mark's theology. *The Beginning of the Gospel* does not shy away from scholarship but distills contemporary and historical debates, leaving readers informed but not overwhelmed. In a short amount of space, Orr is able to tackle complex ideas like the "Son of Man" (34–36), the nature of the kingdom (71–87), and Jesus's relationship to ritual impurity (124–27) and to draw out their theological significance.

Pastors and students wishing to understand Mark's major theological themes would want to start here with Orr's *The Beginning of the Gospel*. It is a perfect introductory volume. Given the Gospel's episodic structure, its allusive intertextuality, and the inherent ambiguity of narrative, it can be easy to provide a lopsided "theology" that fails to adequately account for the narrative elements of the text while favoring the teaching of Jesus, for example. When compared to other NT texts that are more propositional in nature (such as Paul's letters), attempting to construct a "theology" from a Gospel can prove challenging. However, with both skill and clarity, Orr's work offers pastors and students a valuable contribution on Mark's portrait of Jesus.

By way of critique, Orr's aim to read Mark in light of Paul is somewhat of a novelty, providing a breath of fresh air to the discussion of Mark's Gospel throughout. While this certainly has historical precedent (2

Tim 4:11) and, as Orr demonstrates, textual support (20–27), I was left wondering if perhaps Orr overstated the idea. In keeping with *regula fidei,* we as readers rely on the entire witness of the Spirit in the canon. However, in evangelical — and especially Reformed — circles, where a strong history and emphasis of Pauline theology abound, I cannot help but think that we in our present moment need not a Pauline reading of Mark but its *opposite*. We need the Gospels to enlighten our reading of Paul and the rest of the New Testament. Here are two brief reasons to consider: First, that Paul must be read as a "control" for Mark assumes, in part, that we must first interpret Paul (25). Secondly, does this approach sufficiently allow for Mark to truly speak on his own terms? *The Beginning of the Gospel* itself evidences a reading Mark on his own terms, sensitive to narrative dynamics and a close reading of the text. Of course, both Paul and Mark speak of the same "good news" in light of Jesus, but the former is writing to address specific situations in his letters, and thus, to import theological ideas from Paul back into Mark may prove unhelpful to the task of theology.

The Beginning of the Gospel serves as a thorough and well-rounded theology of Mark. Readers are introduced to Mark's main themes, recent scholarly discussions, and most importantly, the person and work of Jesus as the apocalyptic event of God's deliverance for Israel and the nations. In reading Mark's Gospel we, like the first hearers, are invited to participate in Jesus's own mission (121).

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Engaging the New Testament: A Short Introduction for Students and Ministers. By Miguel G. Echevarría. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2024, ix + 240 pp., $24.99 paper

Based on his observation of the predominantly uncritical approach over the history of New Testament introductions, Miguel G. Echevarría argues in this monograph that "too often ... introductions focus on critical matters, with only cursory discussions of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament" (2). The result is that the material that students and laypersons focus on is often disconnected from the priorities of those who serve in the church.

Instead, as an alternative method, he contends that the New Testament books should be interpreted as *canonical*, with "each contributing their individual voice to the collective message of Scripture" (3).

Chapter 1 introduces his thesis on the necessity of a canonical reading of the New Testament along with a brief overview of the distinctive structure and content of this monograph. Chapter 2 provides the canonical context for reading the New Testament. A focus on the structured order of the New Testament books allows the reader to grasp how the purposeful sequence supports the development of the covenantal storyline extending from the Old Testament to its fulfillment in the New Testament. Chapter 3 discusses the hermeneutical foundation to interpreting the New Testament authors' uses of the Old Testament. Chapter 4 commences the canonical analysis by assessing the contribution of the Gospels and Acts, considering their placement in the canonical order. Chapter 5 addresses the undisputed and disputed Pauline epistles with equal significance, irrespective of authorship debates, because the key factor in the canonical reading approach is the Christian community's recognition of a book's authoritative status. This principle is consistently applied to all contested books discussed in chapter 6, which focuses on the Catholic (or General) epistles. These epistles, positioned after the Pauline letters in the canonical sequence, provide crucial perspectives on eschatology, holy living, and warnings about false teachers, particularly in anticipation of Christ's second coming. Chapter 7 explores the book of Revelation, a fitting conclusion to the New Testament and the entire canon of Scripture. Its canonical position allows readers to weave together the various threads of the scriptural narrative. Appendix 1 covers critical information about the relationship between the Gospels. Appendix 2 deals with the text of the New Testament and textual criticism.

Echevarría primarily contends that a canonical reading of the New Testament involves reading its books on the premise that the themes and structures within the canon are intentionally designed to guide the reader in understanding the overarching story of salvation history and its progress. However, it may be more accurate to view this monograph as one that highlights a particular reading method among the many discussed in various introductions, whose emphasis on canonical reading promotes a more practical approach to engaging with the New Testament. Yet, in practice, many believers are already accustomed to a form of canonical reading that

does not heavily rely on historical context. Consequently, recognizing that various commentaries offer background information and an overview of theological debates may provide a more comprehensive perspective, an approach that remains closely aligned with practical church realities.

Nevertheless, this book makes a significant contribution by focusing on the canonical function of the New Testament books, an area often overlooked in many New Testament introductions. As Echevarría argues, the canonical reading approach provides a fresh perspective on biblical interpretation. He presents a framework that allows for the rational analysis of manuscript traditions while recognizing the authority of modern texts, regarding such issues as the customary titles associated with the Pauline corpus, for example (120). Moreover, the canon itself, as it has been handed down to us, can offer new insights. For instance, the genealogy of Christ at the beginning of Matthew is emphasized as crucial to the New Testament's overall structure, serving as a thematic introduction to the entire text. Echevarría also explores the connections between the purposes of various letters and how these purposes contribute to the composition of the canon (129). For instance, by adopting a canonical perspective, Echevarría concludes that references to the recipients in most letters can be understood as addressing all Christians (88). Furthermore, the author underscores the significance of quotations and allusions to Joel, Ezekiel, and Isaiah in John and Romans as evidence of canonical consistency (92–95).

The strength of the canonical perspective lies in its ability to contextualize the differences or continuous themes across letters or books within a single cohesive framework. For example, while there is little mention of the incarnation of Jesus in Romans, this theme is introduced in 1 Corinthians (100). However, one potential issue is that when connections between New Testament books are suggested indirectly through intertextuality (for example, the intertextuality between James 2:11 and Matthew 5:48) a clear definition of intertextuality from the canonical perspective may be required (158). Similarly, it seems that a broader range of interpretations could be possible if these connections were viewed as reflections of genre characteristics rather than strictly through the lens of covenant-fulfillment (191).

Overall, Echevarría's work is significant in that it simplifies complex controversies and focuses on the overarching canonical flow, ensuring

that the discussion remains grounded in the fundamental premise of canonical reading.

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Concise Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief. By John Frame. Phillipsburg: P&R, 2023, 560 pp., $39.99.

John Frame is one of the most influential theologians in our day. He has been prolific in writing and theological education in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. At the time of this book's publication, Frame is Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology and Philosophy at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, Florida. The book is a revised and enhanced edition of Frame's previous book *Salvation Belongs to the Lord*. Why do we need an enhanced edition of a previous book? Frame explains it is "an introductory survey to Systematic Theology and will not cover each topic in great detail" (4), but he does seek to touch briefly on the whole of Systematic Theology in his twenty-four chapters. This is a foundational book written with the purpose of motivating the reader to embrace and move forward in the study of Systematic Theology.

Frame divides the book into ten parts, each dealing with a crucial element of Christian theology. The book has in total twenty-four chapters, following a classical approach to the structure of Systematic Theology. Part 1 deals with Theology Proper. In this section, Frame addresses the person and the works of God in chapters 1 and 2, finishing with the doctrine of the Trinity in chapter 3. The second part of the book is about the doctrine of the Word of God and comprises chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4 is about the doctrine of revelation. In chapter 5, Frame focuses on the written Word of God. In the third part, he introduces Systematic Theology in the sixth chapter. Because this is an introductory book, and readers may not know much about theology, he introduces them to the theological world. In the fourth part, Frame deals with the doctrine of man in chapters 7 and 8. The seventh chapter handles the creation of human beings and the implications of bearing the image and likeness of God. Chapter 8 unpacks the reality of sin and evil and how humanity fell from the perfection of creation. In the fifth part, Frame

deals with God's covenants. The purpose here is to demonstrate how God deals with humanity. God reveals himself progressively, and he does this through different covenants. In the sixth part, Frame focuses on the doctrine of Christ. Chapter 10 is about the person of Christ. Frame's argument is that Christ is the eternal Son of God having both a human and a divine nature. Based on the Chalcedonian definition, Frame builds his Christology. In Chapter 11, he addresses the works of Jesus, focusing on Christ as prophet, priest, king, creator, sustainer, and redeemer. From chapter 12 to chapter 17, Frame covers the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, addressing topics such as the person of the Holy Spirit and his role in election, calling, and regeneration, faith and repentance, justification and adoption, sanctification and assurance, and perseverance and glorification. Chapters 18 to 21 cover the doctrine of the church. Here Frame focuses on its nature and tasks, the means of grace, and the sacraments. Chapters 22 and 23 deal with eschatology. Frame surveys the doctrine of heaven and hell and the events of the last days. Finally, chapter 24 gives a practical application of how Christians must live out their lives on the basis of this theological understanding.

Frame has provided a great resource in a proper time. Theological education and doctrinal conversations are alienated from the church more than ever. The contemporary tendency is to delegate theological debates to seminaries and academia. However, theology is life. Churches cannot praise nor serve God if they do not have the proper knowledge of God. It is theology that provides such knowledge. Therefore, churches need more theological conversations in their pews. Frame has provided such a resource in this book.

Theology tends to be dense in the language used in academia. However, Frame has done a great job in his attempt to explain complex theological terminology and put it in words easily accessible to those who may not have a deep theological background. Furthermore, Frame provides an audio lecture link for every chapter in the beginning of the book. In so doing, he makes theology even more accessible to the people in the pew. Frame provides an easy-to-remember method for readers that may be new in theological formulations, using a method of "triperspectivalism" throughout, as Sinclair Ferguson labels it in the book's forward (xx). This consists of using the number 3 to help the reader to remember theological formulations difficult for beginners to assimilate.

Frame does a good job in the structure of the book, beginning with theology proper and then moving to the doctrine of the Word of God. This approach to Systematic Theology is in accordance with most such books in Reformed circles. The order demonstrates that it is God who is the source of theology and the Scripture that is the only way to know such a source of theology. Those who do not have a solid theological background will be in the right and orthodox track following the order Frame uses.

Regarding baptism, Frame is openminded concerning its method. Evaluating Romans 6, he argues "that immersion, sprinkling, and pouring are all legitimate means of baptism and that none should be excluded" (346). Furthermore, Frame argues the word βαπτίζω does not always mean immersion (345), quoting Luke 11:38 where it is used for the washing of people before dinner, which is not necessarily immersion but rather enough water to wash oneself (345). The phrase "going down to the waters" is not an indication of immersion either. It could be interpreted as simply coming into the stream of waters but not immersing in them (346). Perhaps the text *par excellence* that provides a warrant for immersion as the method of baptism is Romans 6. Frame argues that from "the nonimmersionist view, Paul's argument in 6:2–6 would turn on our crucifixion with Christ, not his burial, and that is not particularly relevant to immersion." However, the text seems to imply otherwise. Paul uses Christ's death, burial, and resurrection as an analogy to Christian life. Paul uses baptism as the method that actualizes both realities in believers. When believers are baptized, they are united with Jesus in his crucifixion, as Frame rightly argues. Baptism is not used only in our union with Christ in death but in his burial (6:4). Immersion provides the perfect illustration of both realities. Frame argues for a paedobaptist position on the basis that the Bible never discusses the issue explicitly (346). He provides arguments favoring infant baptism based on New Testament household baptisms. However, although it is not always the case, the pattern in the New Testament seems to be the baptism of believers and not necessarily infants.

Frame's book is a great resource. It will be beneficial for pastors who want to elevate the theological knowledge of their church members. New believers who may be thinking on how to understand theology may find this book helpful also. As may teenagers and youth groups, especially in our day, when theology is not the coolest topic for next-generation ministry. The

promise of serving a starting point for a theological curriculum is one of the greatest benefits this book may provide.

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Religious Experience and the Knowledge of God: The Evidential Force of Divine Encounters. By Harold A. Netland. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022, 262 pp., $29.99 paper.

Harold Netland's book addresses key issues in the current debate regarding the epistemology of religious experience. It argues that specific experiences provide positive data for religious truth claims (12). A professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, Netland's unique credibility in writing such a work is present in the Introduction. He opens by recalling an encounter his wife had while the couple were missionaries in Japan in which another woman, originally from the United States, began explaining her conversion to Buddhism and the benefits that it brought her life. What is interesting, they observed, is that with a few simple changes, it could very easily have been a Christian testimony. Netland then uses this story as a springboard into the broader discussion of religious experience and why such experiences provide support for Christianity.

Netland adopts a critical-trust approach to religious experience, by which he means that what appears to be an experience of God can be taken as such if there are no compelling reasons to think otherwise (13). The acceptance of a religious experience depends partially on the broader epistemic context in which the experience takes place. This is true both for the person having the experience and those hearing reports of such an experience.

The book is composed of seven chapters. In the first chapter, Netland establishes what he means by religious experience by exploring the concepts of religion and experience. Chapter 2 examines various kinds of religious experiences while emphasizing the role interpretation plays in the experience. In chapter 3, Netland introduces, defines, and defends the critical-trust approach to religious experience. Chapter 4 examines some historical influences of the discussion, focusing on the writings of Jonathan Edwards and John Wesley regarding experiences of God. This is followed in chapter

5 by the examination of thinkers such as Alvin Plantinga and William Lane Craig on the influence of the Holy Spirit in religious experience, providing a basis for Christians to claim their belief as properly basic. Chapter 6 examines the idea of mysticism and the influence of previous centuries on contemporary understanding with special attention given to William James and Rudolf Otto. The final chapter concludes the argument by addressing the many disagreements over the critical-trust approach Netland has employed throughout the work, concluding that some form of natural theology must be employed if the critical-trust approach is to be accurately applied.

Some readers may object to the idea of personal experience as valid evidence for objective truth, particularly those from more Reformed traditions. However, these readers will find that Netland provides detailed historical, philosophical, and sociological support for his analysis. Even so, some readers may argue that the book still lacks sufficient biblical support. This is a fair criticism because if one claims that subjective religious experiences support the truth of Christianity, the epistemological standard of Scripture could only add to that support. Regardless of one's position on this point, the conclusion is thoroughly biblical, and Netland achieves his goal of showing the value of religious experience for validating Christian truth claims.

Other readers may object to his critical-trust approach and other assumptions Netland carries into the book. Admirers of Plantinga should feel at home as much of Netland's argument finds consistency with his line of thought, and Plantinga is explicitly used for support. However, Netland also considers the views of William Lane Craig, showing a blend of Reformed epistemology and an evidentialist apologetic method in an area where these two men find harmony. Most likely, those familiar with the arguments of Plantinga or Craig will not be swayed in either direction by this portion of the book (chapter 5). Additional support from Scripture would have been helpful in this regard.

Returning to one of the main qualifiers of the critical-trust approach, Netland's caveat regarding the interpretation of the experience should not be overlooked, as it is one of the most important points of the argument (chapter 2). Addressing the interpretation of the experience allows for an objective standard to re-enter the discussion: what is the correct way to interpret such experiences? Once again, additional biblical support would

aid this discussion, as the Christian worldview has a distinct epistemology, an assumption Netland presumably must hold to even write this book.

The questions of contemporary culture have become increasingly more existential, centered on topics such as meaning, purpose, and identity. Whereas traditional debates in Christian apologetics involved the use of historical or scientific evidence as support for Christian claims, modern apologetics has seen a shift towards more existential discussion and the human experience. As such, Netland's discussion of religious experience should warrant the attention of Christian philosophers, theologians, and apologists who are taking seriously the questions and concerns of a secular culture becoming increasingly disenchanted by the assumptions of its worldview.

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Resolve: The Church that Endures Onward. By Luke H. Davis. Scotland: Christian Focus, 2024, 172pp., $12.99 paper.

In a challenging time for the church, Luke H. Davis presents *Resolve: The Church that Endures Onward*, the latest book from his series *Risen Hope*, encouraging readers to live a faithful life with hope set on God. The book offers short biographies of memorable Christians from 1880 to the present. Davis, a professor of church history at Westminster Christian Academy in St. Louis (a private Christian school for grades seven to twelve), appears to target pre-teens and teenagers, as some concepts might be complex for younger children but not thorough enough for an adult audience.

The purpose of this book is to encourage Christians to resolve to endure difficulties while living in this world. Davis writes, "If there was one thing that marked the disciples' experience after Jesus' death and resurrection, it was that they had to endure many troubles and trials" (9). Based on John 15:18–20a, Davis reminds readers of the Lord's words, warning his disciples that the world would hate them because the Lord chose them. He emphasizes that "followers of Jesus should be willing and ready to endure trials and hardships" and that "the Church endures forward. But

by God's grace it does endure" (10). Davis presents the lives of many faithful Christians who resolved to remain faithful to the Lord in difficult times.

At the end of the book, Davis shares his reflection on the future of the church. He expresses concern about the decline of Christianity worldwide, illustrating this trend with poll results from the Pew Research Center (168). In 2020, 64% of Americans identified as Christians while 30% identified as nonreligious. Researchers estimate that by 2070, there will be an equal number of Christians and nonreligious people. While acknowledging that the Holy Spirit can reverse this trend, Davis notes that this is what the future looks like "for now" (168). He points out that although the gospel is growing in some regions, this growth is often accompanied by persecution, such as in the Middle East and Communist countries. Davis emphasizes that "the Church that serves her Lord will be an enduring Church, and believers will have to go through trials, and persecution" (169). However, recalling Revelation 7, he reminds readers that the ultimate hope of all Christians is to meet the Lord on the glorious day of his second coming, where the Lord will guide his people as a shepherd, and God will wipe away all tears from their eyes. Davis concludes that "although we may go through great hardship, we have a Savior who rescues His people out of adversity" (170). He ends with words of encouragement to endure, having confidence in God who guides the story of the world to its conclusion.

Each person's story begins with a brief but significant event in his or her life, highlighting a great difficulty and how the individual endured by holding firmly to the Lord. A brief biography follows at the end of each chapter. Davis shows his expertise in the area of church history by carefully choosing one event that illustrates well the life of the person he is presenting. The book is easy to read for youth groups, but adults may also enjoy the vivid stories Davis presents. It may inspire adults to explore the lives of the people described further. Davis also includes four "Fact Files" chapters, which differ from the biographical narratives. In these chapters, he shares thoughts on particular topics, such as preaching and apologetics. He gives examples of people related to each topic and briefly presents their contribution.

Because the book targets youth groups, some adults may not be initially attracted to it. Adults might prefer a book with fewer biographies but more thorough descriptions of each life. Additionally, Davis does not always clearly indicate whether the dialogues in the stories are real conversations

or fictional recreations. For some stories, like that of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Davis adds a note clarifying that it is a "reimagining" of a particular event (61). However, for stories without such clarification, it is unclear whether the conversations are real or fictional. Moreover, while Davis includes a bibliography of his research, he provides few citation references, mainly in his "Fact Files" chapters. This issue might not be relevant for preteens but could frustrate some adults who would like to distinguish between fictional and factual elements.

Overall, the book achieves its goal. It has great potential to encourage many young Christians to reflect on the difficulties that come with following Christ, as well as on the assurance and great hope in our Lord who cares for his church. Although some adults might not be fully satisfied after finishing the book, it will hopefully spark their curiosity to continue exploring and learning from the lives of the people Davis describes.

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