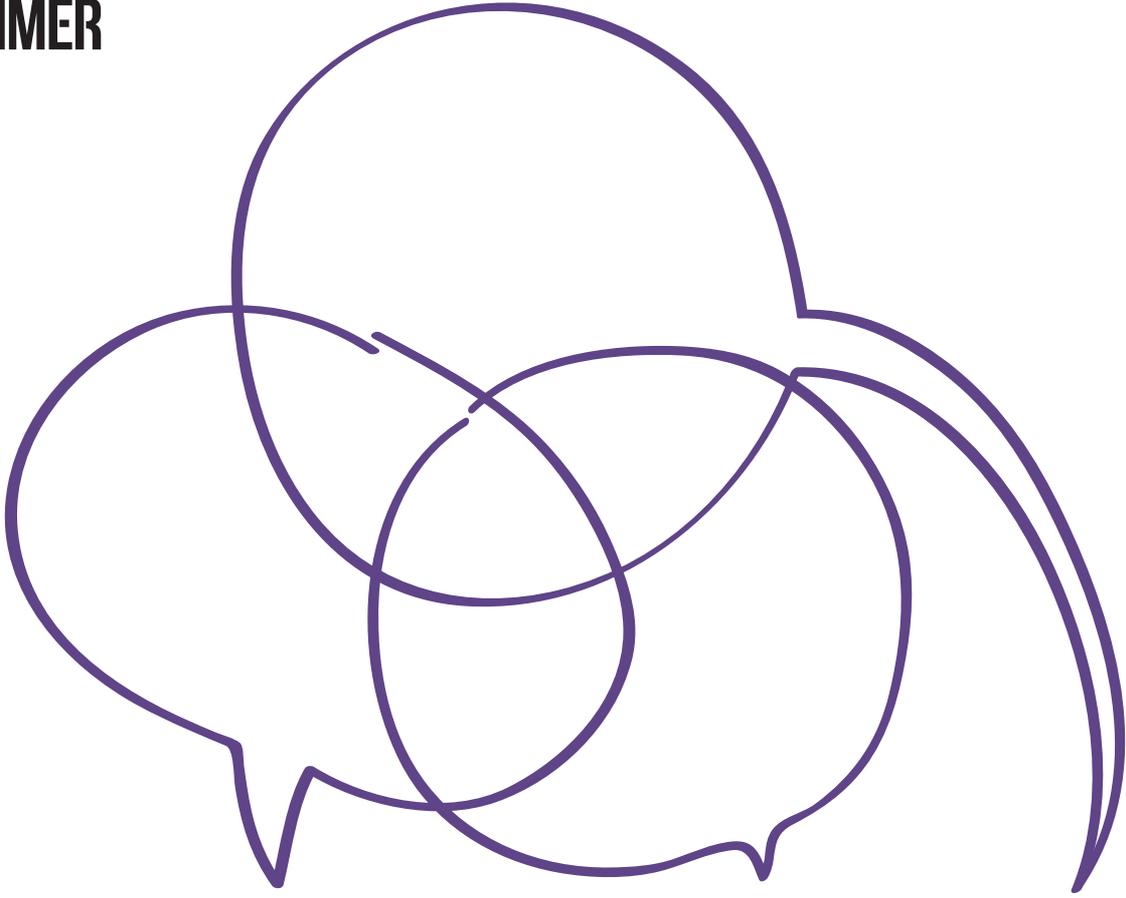
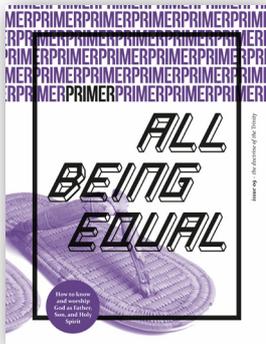


PRIMER



# Coming to Terms

The Trinity in the Early Centuries of the Church



This article is taken from issue 09 of *Primer*, entitled *All Being Equal*. The issue explores the doctrine of the Trinity with help from Chris Ansberry, John James, Matt Merker, Fred Sanders, Mark Smith, Carl Trueman, and something old from Basil the Great.

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**The doctrine of the Trinity is one in which all Christians profess to believe and yet which few of us actually understand. In part, that is inevitable. The doctrine is incomprehensible in the strict sense that nobody can understand God as he understands himself (i.e. infinitely). But it is possible to grasp what the church's doctrinal formulation of the Trinity seeks to safeguard concerning how we speak and think of God's revelation of himself.**

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For this reason, the doctrine of the Trinity is best approached through the lens of church history. In examining how the doctrine came to be expressed using the language and concepts which the church eventually codified in its authoritative creeds, we can see the concerns which drove those formulations. Most important of all, we can see why alternative formulations were found to be so distinctly inadequate to express the Bible's teaching about who God is.

There is also an aspect of modern evangelical Christian life which obstructs a proper understanding of the Trinity. It is the tendency, perhaps exemplified in Martin Luther's focus on God *for us*, which stresses the content of worship as being that which God has done on behalf of his people. So, for example, we sing of God's amazing grace that "saved a wretch like me" or remind ourselves that before the throne of God above we have a "great high priest whose name is love / who ever lives and pleads for me." Both capture something true and important about the Bible's teaching: God is our God and a God who saves us. But focusing our praise and our teaching on God as he saves, while obviously of great importance, can lead us to neglect praise as contemplation of who God is in himself: the self-sufficient, glorious one who would be glorious even if he had never created this world and saved a people for himself. It is this contemplative aspect of theology, neglected by much of the evangelical tradition, which is underpinned by a robust Trinitarianism and therefore where Trinitarianism becomes practically (i.e. devotionally and liturgically) important.

## The Basic Biblical Dynamic

The basic biblical dynamic of Trinitarian theology can be found in two particular strands of New Testament teaching. First, there is the claim

(which forms the earliest cry of Christian praise) that Jesus is Lord. Second, there is the baptismal formula which ties together Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in the rite of Christian initiation (Matt 28:19) and thus establishes these three names as essential to the life of the church and her members.

It is important to note the significance of these two aspects of biblical teaching for the later doctrine of the Trinity because they establish at the outset that discussions of the identity of Jesus Christ are intimately connected to the most practical of Christian activities: initiation into the church, and the liturgical praise of the church. While Trinitarian discussion will develop in ways that adopt rarified philosophical language (e.g. terms such as *hypostasis* and *substance*) and concepts (e.g. *simplicity* and *inseparable operations*) the underlying concern of Trinitarian debate could not be more practical: initiation and praise. That in itself should be enough to silence those who would dismiss the Trinitarian debates of the ancient church and their resolution in the fourth and fifth centuries as so much irrelevant intellectual abstraction.

Don't worry - we'll come back to these.

Second, these biblical dynamics focus the issue of the identity of God on the relationship (and thus the respective identities) of the Father and the Son. Historians of the Trinity have often opted for one of two approaches to the subject: they see debates about the incarnation, the identity of the historical Christ, as leading to the formulation of the Trinity; or they see debates about God as Creator framing the discussion and leading to conclusions about the identity of Jesus. It seems that we should not have to choose between these two approaches: the early church was preoccupied both with questions about the identity and significance of the historical Jesus for the identity of the eternal God; and with questions about how God relates to his creation as a means of determining who Jesus was. Both ultimately place the relationship between the Father and the Son, between the Father and the Word at the centre of the question of the identity of God.

Or *Logos*, from the Greek for "word" used in John 1.

The issue of the unity of God – surely one of the most obvious truths which the Old Testament books taught – is deeply challenged by claims that Jesus is Lord and by the baptismal formula. And that makes exploring the identity of Christ in light of the unity of the Creator God to be of paramount theological significance.

## The Second Century

The second century witnessed numerous attempts to articulate the relationship between the Father and the Son. In the background were a number of broader doctrinal concerns. Marcion, a native of Pontus who

lived in the middle of the century, sought to preserve the unity and indeed purity of God by positing that God was not the Creator but that another, lesser god was the one who created the material universe. Marcion's Christ was connected to the true God and did not possess a material body – matter being something which was corruptible and thus corrupting and therefore not something with which the true God could have direct contact.

In this Marcion appears to have been typical of a number of teachers in the first century who rejected the idea that Christ had a physical body. These are often referred to as *docetics* (from the Greek word meaning 'to seem'). This teaching is found in the Nag Hammadi Papyri, a collection of documents discovered in Egypt just after the Second World War and reflecting the teaching of what scholars now call *Gnosticism*, a word used to categorise forms of early Christianity which lay claim to secret knowledge and which denied Jesus' physicality.

Reactions to Docetism inevitably tended to emphasise the historical, physical reality of Christ's flesh, as we find in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, an early second-century father. But this only intensified the deeper question of the relationship between the historical Jesus and God and therefore between the Son and the Father. How could worship be given to Jesus, a man, without that constituting idolatry and/or disrupting the biblical teaching on God's unity? Several theologians in the second century offered avenues of explanation.

Justin Martyr (fl. A.D. 160) addressed the matter in a number of his writings where he articulated what is now called 'Logos Christology' which focuses on the divine nature of Christ and therefore has to address how this divine nature is related to that of the Father. To do this, he utilised a number of analogies, most famously that of a torch being lit from a fire: both original fire and torch have the same content – fire – but the lighting of the torch does not diminish the original fire in any way.

'fl.' stands for the Latin word *floruit*, meaning "he/she flourished", and introduces a date during which a person was known to be active.

This approach has a number of things to commend it. First, it is a way of imagining the Father-Son relation which does not reduce the Father in any way, such as, say, the idea of the Son as a branch cut from a tree might do. Second, it emphasises the unity – what we might later call the substantial unity – between the two: in the analogy, Father and Son share fire-ness. Where it falls down, however, is in the way that it allows for the Father to exist independent of and logically prior to the Son. Fire does not carry with it the necessity of lighting a torch. There is a potential logical and even chronological priority of the Father to the Son which would in effect make the Son inferior to the Father.

The second figure is Irenaeus of Lyon (fl. A.D. 180). Irenaeus, reacting to Gnostic and docetic abstractions of Jesus from history, focused very much on the history laid out in the Bible narrative. His thought is very rich and very influential and at its hermeneutical heart lay the notion of

*recapitulation*: the Bible story was a unity because historical events in the Old Testament found their counterparts in the New; and the tragedy of the fall found its answer in the work of Christ. Most obviously, as sin entered the world through an historical figure, Adam, so salvation came by an historical figure, Christ. And for this to work, God himself sent his Son to become incarnate and bring creation back into relationship with God. Thus, the Father sent the Son and, with the ascension of the Son at Pentecost, the Spirit continued the work of redemption. Irenaeus is not asking quite the same question as Justin. He is more concerned, we might say, with the *economy of salvation* rather than the *ontology* of the Father and the Son, but he does point to the need to connect ontology and economy in discussion of the Father-Son relationship and offer an historical framework for what will later be Trinitarianism.

It is helpful to distinguish between God's nature in himself and his actions in history. Often this is done with the language of the *economic* Trinity (what we see God doing in time and space) and the *ontological* or the *immanent* Trinity (who God is in eternity).

The third figure is Tertullian (approx. A.D. 150 – 240), a North African layman and the first significant theologian to write in Latin. His contribution came in response to a shadowy figure, Praxeas, who (according to Tertullian) taught that the Father died on the cross. This teaching is a form of what later scholars call *modalism* – a term used to describe a cluster of theologies that see the relationship between the Father and Son as being one of mode of being. Put in very simplistic terms, the Father creates all things and then in some way turns into the Son who is incarnate. This family of heresies has the positive advantage that it gives primary place to the unity of God but falls down because it would seem to require change in God which (among other egregious consequences) jeopardises the notion that the Son can be a revelation of who God is.

By the standards of later Trinitarianism, Tertullian's response is not a particularly adequate one, in that he seems to make God something rather material, akin to a cosmic cloud of some kind. But he does offer a significant development in terms of theological language when he describes God as being one substance but three persons or *personae*. This does not mean quite what person means today in common English usage, but refers to the masks which actors would wear on stage when playing different parts. What is important, however, is that Tertullian here anticipates a vocabulary for maintaining both the unity of the *Godhead* while also allowing for an account of its multiplicity.

Godhead is often used to refer to the Triune God: "the Godhead" and is capitalised. Or sometimes it refers to the divine nature of God, so we could speak about the godhead of the Son (i.e his divine nature).

# The Third Century

Debates in the third century continued to address similar concerns to those found in Tertullian: how was the human Jesus to be understood as special or unique and as the son of God. For example, a theologian called Sabellius presented an argument similar to that of Praxeas, whereby God's unity is maintained by seeing the Son as a mode of God's activity. While this teaching was rejected by the church, it is noteworthy that Sabellius appears to have used the term *homoousios* to describe how the Father and Son are identical with regard to their godhead. That term was codified in the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325 and would later become a vital part of Trinitarian orthodoxy.

A second figure of importance was Paul of Samosata (bishop of Antioch from A.D. 260 until he was deposed in 268). Paul taught that Jesus was unique because he was specially infused with the divine Logos. The similarity with modalism is significant: the unity of God was preserved but at the cost of affirming that the Father and Son were two eternal *subsistences* in the Godhead.

The single most important theologian of the second century was Origen of Alexandria (A.D. 185-254). Origen was important for developments in biblical interpretation, for defending the faith against pagan criticism and, most important for the doctrine of God, for developing the notion of eternal generation as the way of describing the relationship between the Father and the Son.

Origen's insight was in some senses very simple but also very far-reaching. Two basic ideas lie behind it. First, there is the biblical language of Father and Son. Second, there is the biblical idea that the Son is the image of the Father. The latter point brings out the revelatory aspect of the work of the Son or the Logos: he is a perfect revelation of the Father and therefore must

*Homoousios* is a Greek term meaning "of the same substance"

From the beginning of the 325 creed:

*We believe in one God,  
the Father almighty,  
maker of all things visible and invisible;  
And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God,  
begotten from the Father, only-begotten,  
that is, from the substance of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten not made,  
of one substance (homoousios) with the Father,  
through whom all things came into being, things  
in heaven and things on earth.*

*Subsistence* refers to a particular being or an individual instance of a particular substance or essence. It is a more accurate translation of the Greek Trinitarian term, *hypostasis* than the more common *person*.

stand in intimate relationship to him. If he does not do so, then he cannot be such a perfect revelation of the Father. And this hinges upon the former relationship, of Father and Son.

For Origen, the biblical language here demanded that the relationship be understood as analogous to that of earthly fathers and sons. Two aspects of this are of particular note. First, to be a father automatically assumes the existence of a child whom one has fathered or generated. Second, given that God is eternal, when the language of fatherhood and sonship is applied to the Godhead, all notions that pertain to time (temporal priority of father over son) must be eliminated. Prior to the birth of my own son, I was not a father; when my son was born, then the language of fatherhood could be legitimately applied to me. But that kind of temporal sequence does not apply to God. The relationship of Father and Son, consistent with God's nature, must be an eternal one. Hence, the importance of the notion of eternal generation: the Father eternally 'begets' – stands in that productive paternal relationship of fatherhood to – the Son.

This represents a distinctly more sophisticated position than either the analogies provided by Justin Martyr or the kind of simplistic emphasis on divine unity we find in Sabellius and (post-Origen) in Paul of Samosata. What Origen is doing is developing a divine ontology – an understanding of who God is in himself in eternity – in order to provide an eternal context for the economy – the actions of God in history. The questions of why Christians baptise in the name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and why they praise Jesus as Lord, can only ultimately be resolved by setting Jesus's identity within the eternal life of God himself. And Origen is key to pointing towards a resolution of that.

There is, however, a small but significant ambiguity in Origen's works. The question of whether the Son necessarily exists or does so simply because God has eternally willed his existence and yet might have chosen not so to do, is left open. That will become very important in the fourth century.

## The Fourth Century

The story of the fourth century debates about the Trinity is usually told from the perspective of Athanasius, the great bishop of Alexandria and major protagonist in the controversies of his era. For him, the story was quite simple: Arius, a Libyan presbyter, and his later followers were implacably opposed to orthodoxy and the fourth century is thus a story of a straightforward fight between two sides, the Arians and the orthodox. But this narrative, with its central notion of a heroic Athanasius being at times

the lone voice of orthodoxy (often summed up in the phrase *Athanasius contra mundum* – Athanasius against the world) has in recent decades been exposed as far too simplistic. The fourth century was not a straightforward battle between two clearly defined parties; rather it was characterised by a series of theological conflicts and a variety of fluid and shifting theological parties which culminated in the creed formulated at a council in Constantinople in 381, now used by Christians around the world in their worship services and known as the Nicene Creed.

If the narrative of the debates is too complicated to recount in a short article, the basic questions which those debates addressed are not. At heart, the problem of the fourth century is that question of whether the relationship between the Father and Son is a necessary one, or whether the Son can be regarded as somehow dependent upon the will of God, as being (to put it in very crude terms) truly God or merely the first and greatest of all the creatures of God. Athanasius ascribed to Arius a rather crude way of expressing this point: “There was a time when the Son was not” – a statement which clearly made the Father logically and indeed chronologically prior to the Son. If such a statement was allowed to stand, how could they be said to be equal. Further, closely related to this question of the Son’s status relative to the Father are two other questions. How can Jesus be considered God if God is unchangeable? And how does Jesus save – or, better, what kind of salvation does Jesus accomplish?

The key to all of these questions was developing a conceptual vocabulary that could be used to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son in such a way that the equality (and unity) of the two was maintained at the same time as the diversity, or distinction between them, could also be expressed. The first council of Nicaea in 325 made some advance in this area. Called to put down the controversy between Alexander, then the bishop of Alexandria, and Arius, the council approved a creedal statement that gave expression both to the notion of eternal generation and utilised the language of homoousios.

Nicaea 325 did not solve the problem, however, but merely set the terms for another half century of debate. The term homoousios – used in the creed of 325 – did

From the beginning of the Nicene Creed:

*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 begotten Son of God,  
begotten from the Father before all ages,  
light from light, true God from true God,  
begotten not made,  
of one substance (homoousios) with the Father,  
through whom all things came into existence*

Notice that, compared to the A.D. 325 version, on page 11 above, this creed is explicit that the Son had no beginning. He was begotten “before all ages.”

not emerge as truly significant until mid-century when it became central to attempts to safeguard the equality of Father and Son in terms of their divinity.

It was Athanasius who consistently argued that, if the Son was not as fully God as the Father, and was not one with him, then he could not bring human beings into communion with God. We might recast this by saying that, if the Son was merely like God or was a kind of second-class god, then the incarnation neither truly revealed God nor restored the fellowship between human beings and God. It was in this context that *homoousios* become a central term, emphasising the unity of substance of Father and Son. An alternative term, *homoiousios*, was proposed by some in the 350s. But, as just noted, *similar* substance means *different* substance and the problems of revelation and salvation remain.

*Homoiousios* is a Greek term meaning “of *similar* substance.” Notice that it is only one letter different to *homoousios* (“of the *same* substance”)! One little Greek letter – the iota – makes a massive difference.

This, however, raised other questions: if Father and Son are one substance, what is to prevent them from being like two humans who both possess human substance but are two distinct beings? And does God the Father not change when part of his substance is ‘made’ into the Son? The language of one substance is not sufficient in itself to safeguard the unity of God and could indeed be used to argue for three gods.

In this context, three further theologians, Gregory of Nyssa, his brother, Basil of Caesarea, and their friend, Gregory of Nazianzus, known collectively as the Cappadocian Fathers, took up the task of refining a second term, *hypostasis* (often translated as ‘person’). In 325, the Council of Nicaea had condemned any who claimed that there were three hypostases in God, because at that point in time, hypostasis meant the same as substance. In the 360s and beyond, however, the Cappadocians refined this term to mean something equivalent to subsistence or particular instantiation, while avoiding connotations of substance. It is a fairly refined point: the Father and Son (and eventually in the 370s, the Holy Spirit) came to be described as one substance, three hypostases, with each hypostasis consisting of the whole of the divine substance.

That may sound confusing but what it does is safeguard the biblical teaching and the mystery of the Godhead. The Nicene Creed, as revised and stated at Constantinople in 381, effectively set boundaries to what we can and cannot say about God: we cannot speak about him in any way that denies Father, Son, and Spirit are fully God because that shatters both any notion that the Son reveals the Father or that the Son saves; we cannot speak about him in any way that divides Father, Son, and Holy Spirit up in such a way that each represents a part of the divine substance because that cannot give an adequate account of the Bible’s teaching on God’s unity; and we cannot collapse the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit into three temporal modes of the one God because that cannot do justice to the teaching in John’s Gospel on the eternal relationship between Father and Son.

# Conclusion

Orthodox Trinitarianism is likely to be frustrating when the Christian first encounters it because there is a sense in which it points to how little we can say about the inner being of God. If the Son is eternal, as the Father is, then he must be eternally generated. But that is not to say a whole lot. And if Father and Son are both equally God then they must both be the same substance but not in such a way that their relationship jeopardises divine unity. The Son as Son cannot be less than the Father. He cannot, for example, be subordinate to him, for that would make him less God.

In short, creedal Trinitarianism oftentimes guards us from error by pointing to things we *cannot* say about or ascribe to God. The Trinity is a mystery and as Trinitarianism cuts away inappropriate ways of thinking about God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, it reminds us of how finite we are and should drive us to our knees in worshipful – and perhaps silent – contemplation.

## Questions for further thought and discussion

One way of creating a safe space for a doctrine of the Trinity is to think about three areas that are off-limits:



1. Look back over the article and try to work out who has strayed outside the safe space and in which direction.
2. Famously, the Trinity has been illustrated in unhelpful ways. How do the following fall down in relation to the diagram?

*“Just as water can exist as ice, water, and steam, so God exists in three ways.”*

*“The Trinity is like an egg because you have three things (the yolk, the white, and the shell) in one.”*

*“The Trinity is like one family with three members, like a father and a mother and a son.”*

# PRIMER

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