

The Trinity

Nowhere else [than the doctrine of the Trinity] is the error more dangerous, the search more laborious, and the results more rewarding

If you deny [the doctrine of the Trinity] you will lose your salvation, but if you try to understand it you will lose your mind

—Augustine

I. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRINITY, BRIEF (SEE VII FOR MORE DETAIL)

- A) There are few *direct* references to a Trinitarian structure (see also Rom 8:9, Eph 2:18, 4:4-6, 1 Cor 12:4-6):
 - 1) Mt 28:19-19 *Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit...*
 - 2) 2 Cor 13:14 *May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.*
- B) The biblical witness to the Trinity arises from the dual statements that God is One (Deut 6:4),
- C) and that each of the Father, Son and HS are divine:
 - 1) *The Father is God*: Mt 6:8; 7:21; e.g. Gal 1:1, “Paul, an apostle--sent not from men nor by man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead”
 - 2) *The Son is God*: John 1:1-18; Col 2:9; Tit 2:13; Heb 1:8-10; e.g. Rom 9:5, “Theirs are the patriarchs, and from them is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!”
 - 3) *The Spirit is God*: Mark 3:29; John 15:26; 1 Cor 6:19; e.g. 2 Cor 3:17, “Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. 18 And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect[1] the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”

II. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE OF THE TRINITY: *The bridge from the biblical/apostolic witness to the orthodox doctrine of the trinity*

A) Irenaeus¹ (~135-202)

- 1) Was under pressure to respond to Gnostics, esp. Marcion. Marcion was eager to leave behind the OT and the Jewish roots of Christianity. He did this by asserting that the judgmental creator God of the OT was separate from the loving redeemer God of the NT.
- 2) Irenaeus claimed in response that one God was responsible for all parts of the history of salvation—referred to as the *economy of salvation* (G. *oikonomia*).
- 3) ☞ *Fun fact*: The Mandaean communities in southern Iraq and southwestern Iran (~50,000) are today the sole surviving remnants of Gnosticism.

B) Tertullian² (end of the 2nd c., born ~160)

- 1) Developed a full doctrine of the T. in response to Praxeas, the first strong proponent of modalism, who believed that there were not three distinct persons, just three aspects or roles.
- 2) Tertullian referred to this as *patripassianism*, or “the suffering (and dying) of the Father”, since Praxeas’ belief (later revived by Sabellius) meant that the Father was born of Mary and was later crucified.

¹ Bishop of Lyons who published the most famous and influential refutation of Gnostic thought. His life spanned the end of the sub-apostolic period. Coming from Asia Minor, Irenaeus heard the teaching of Polycarp of Smyrna, who he says was one of John’s disciples.

² The first of the “Latin Fathers”, a lawyer and theologian in Carthage, N. Africa, in the end of the 2nd c. He is famous for denouncing Gnostic dualism, such as that of Marcion, who saw a duality between the judgmental creator god of the OT and the loving, redeemer god of the NT.

- 3) Argued that the *substance* is what unites the three aspects of the economy of salvation, and the *person* is what distinguishes them:
 - (a) “All [three—Father, Son and Holy Ghost] are of One, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still to be guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three Persons—the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power” (from *Against Praxeas*).
 - 4) Important Latin terminology was introduced by Tertullian, who in his writings coined 509 new nouns alone:
 - (a) *Trinitas* (L), or Trinity.
 - (b) *Persona*, L. for the Gr. *hypostasis*: usually translated “person” (and sometimes “hypostatization”). In the L. it means literally “a mask”, suggesting reference to the role someone is playing.
 - (c) *Substantia* (L)—what the three persons have in common.
 - 5) Tertullian also referred to the “state of the economy”, referring to the “economy of salvation”.
- C) The Council of Nicea (325)
- 1) The development of the doctrine of the T. is closely tied to the evolution of Christology.
 - 2) The *Arian heresy*³ held that the unbridgeable gulf between creator and creation meant that God could not truly have communicated his essence to Jesus, and that Jesus, while special in God’s eyes, must nevertheless have been created, not eternal.
 - 3) ☞ *Fun fact*: This heresy is alive and well in the Jehovah’s Witnesses.
 - 4) The First Ecumenical Council of Nicea was called in 325 by Constantine primarily to resolve this debate. It concluded, based on a proposal from Constantine, that Jesus is of the “same substance” (*homoousios*) rather than a “similar substance” (*homoiousios*) as the Father.
 - 5) The Nicene creed (325): This creed was patterned after the Apostle’s creed, with wording added to contradict Arianism. The version we have today is not the original, but a revamped version from the Council of Constantinople (381). It is shorter and simpler than the other major trinitarian creed, the Athanasian creed written sometime between the 4th and 8th centuries probably by someone under the influence of Athanasius, the bishop of Alexandria.

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

*We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, **eternally begotten of the Father**, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, **begotten, not made, of one Being (homoousios) with the Father**. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.*

*We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, **who proceeds from the Father [and the Son]**⁴. With the Father and the Son he is worshiped and glorified. He has spoken through the Prophets.*

³ Due to Arius, c. 250-336, presbyter of an urban parish in Alexandria.

⁴ This phrase, the *filioque*, wasn’t in the original creed of 381, but was added in the West sometime between then and 850. This idea goes back at least as far as Augustine’s *On the Trinity*.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. 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. Amen.

- 6) 📖 *Fun fact:* When the Council of Nicea began bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia (friend of Arius) stood and read the Arian statement of belief. This so incensed the hearers that many held their hands over their ears calling for the blasphemy to stop, and rioting broke out.
- 7) 📖 *Fun fact:* The Council of Nicea also settled the issue of whether eunuchs could be bishops: yes, if *they* didn't castrate themselves.
- 8) At the end of the Council Constantine ordered all bishops present or no to sign the Nicene creed. Some balked since the wording, while ruling out Arianism, seemed to leave the door open to Sabellianism.
- 9) It took another ~50 years, til the council of Constantine in 381, for the Arian heresy to be fully rejected. During that time, Athanasius was a tireless guardian against Arianism, resisting even to the point of being exiles for a few years to the backwaters of Germany when he refused to obey emperor Constantius (son of Constantine) and replace *homousios* with *homoiousios* (which would have opened the door to weak forms of Arianism).
- 10) 📖 *Fun fact:* Athanasius was referred to as the “saint of stubbornness” and the “black dwarf”.
- 11) Other incarnational heresies include:
 - (a) *Adoptionism*: Christology in which Jesus is seen as being appointed Messiah at his resurrection (or at his baptism). In other words, Jesus was born human but became God's Son at a particular point in his life. This theory fails to reflect scriptural texts that point to Jesus' eternal relationship with the Father (e.g., Jn 17:5), and can be traced back to Paul of Samosata who was condemned at Antioch in 268 for this heresy.
 - (b) *Apollinarianism/Monophysitism*: The belief that Jesus was not both God and man, but of one nature (monos-physis—“one nature”).
 - (i) It was supported by Apollinarius (a 4th-c. disciple of Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria), who wrote, “There are not two natures (in Christ), one to be worshipped and one not to be worshipped. There is one nature (*mia physis*) in the Word of God incarnate”—i.e., Jesus had a divine soul in a human body (“God in a bod”, as Olson, 1989 puts it).
 - (ii) A powerful motive in Apollinarius was to exempt Christ from the possibility of sinning.
 - (iii) 📖 *Fun fact:* This heresy, a topic of debate in the late 5th and early 6th centuries, remains the official interpretation of Christology in the Syrian Jacobite (Syria, Iraq, India), Coptic (Egypt, Ethiopia, Eritrea, Sudan and Israel—about 50 million; *Coptic* means *Egyptian*) and Ethiopian churches.
 - (c) *Nestorianism*, that Christ was two persons in the form of one.
 - (d) *Eutychianism*, that Christ was a mixture of the two natures, as two colored liquids might mix to give a third (then Christ is neither fully human nor divine).
- 12) The *incoherence objection* to Christ's incarnational duality—this is a *logical* response to the objection that the incarnation entails a contradiction (from T. D. Senor)
 - (a) Objection: How can Jesus be omnipotent and still possess as a human only finite power?
 - (b) Or: As God, Jesus must be uncreated; but as a human, Jesus must have been created.
 - (c) Refutation:
 - (i) “Being created” is a common property of humans (a *natural-kind* concept), not an essential property of humans (a *cluster* concept).
 - (ii) So while most humans are created, Jesus isn't.
 - (d) Pitfalls to this refutation:

- (i) Jesus was “in every way like us.” We must affirm that Jesus was omniscient, but also that he had the mind of a human; otherwise we fall into the heresy of Apollinarius, that Jesus was a divine soul in a human body.
- (ii) Jesus “knew not the day or the hour.” Jesus is described as *not* knowing everything, even though omniscience requires that he did!
- (e) Avoiding the pitfalls of this solution:
 - (i) *Kenoticism*
 - *Kenosis*, or “self-emptying”, follows from Phil 2:5-11.
 - So Jesus emptied himself of divine attributes when he became human.
 - The danger of this response is that orthodoxy requires that he was fully God and fully man, even during his earthly ministry.
 - (ii) The *two-minds* view: Jesus has a human mind and a divine mind, and refrained while on earth from using the latter.
- 13) By the end of the 4th c. the relationship between the Father and Son was settled, that they are of “one being”, and that Jesus is divine.

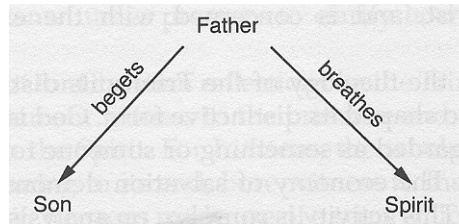
D) The Holy Spirit: (late 4th c. and the Council of Constantinople, 381)

- 1) The *Cappadocian Fathers* defended the divinity of the Spirit, establishing the divinity and co-equality of all three persons.
 - (a) Writing between the Council of Nicaea (325) and the Council of Constantinople (381), these church fathers and friends of Athanasius included Basil “the great” of Caesarea his younger brother Gregory of Nyssa and his friend Gregory of Nazianzus.
 - (b) Their understanding of the Trinity puts relatively more emphasis on the threeness of God than is characteristic of Latin theologians such as Augustine and inspired a twentieth-century view known as *social trinitarianism* (see for instance Plantinga, 1989).
 - (c) Their approach: a defense of the divine unity, coupled with a recognition that the one Godhead exists in three different “modes of being”—one substance (*ousia*) in three persons (*hypostases*).
 - (d) They refuted the *Eunomians* (followers of Eunomius, who taught that the Son is subordinate because he is begotten, whereas the Father isn’t) by pointing out that
 - (i) salvation requires Jesus to be both human and divine: “What has not been assumed cannot be healed” (Greg of Nazianus).⁵
 - (ii) And anyway, “begetting” for God might not be like ours; it might instead be like the “steady-state” begetting of rays of light by the sun, which has neither beginning nor end.
 - (e) They also refuted the *pneumatomachians*, who subordinated the Spirit to the Father as a created being, by arguing that only a fully divine Spirit can sanctify believers.
 - (f) Anthony Meredith gives what he calls a “crude paraphrase” of the doctrine of the T. from the point of view of the Cappadocians as, ‘In Christ there are two “whats” and one “who”; in God there are three “whos” and one “what”.’
 - (g) The Cappadocians incorporated some aspects of neoplatonic philosophy into their view of the T., seeing the three persons as different instances of the same divine Platonic *form*:

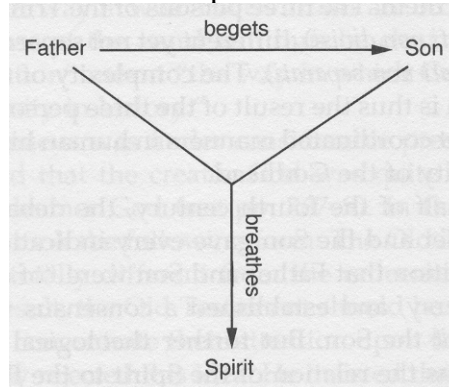
Peter, James and John are called three humans, even though they share a single common humanity... So how do we compromise our belief, by saying on the one hand that the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit have a single godhead, while on the other hand denying that we are talking about three gods? (Gregory of Nyssa).

⁵ Irenaeus earlier used the same argument against the Gnostics, saying that Jesus must have been fully human to save.

- (h) Problems: this formulism hints at tritheism, and tends to ignore the economic T. in favor of the immanent.
- (i) ☞ *Fun fact*: “Any use of three identical human figures, although accepted by the Eastern Church in memory of Abraham’s three angelic visitors (Gen 18:1-8), was prohibited in the West [during the middle ages] because of its suggestions of tritheism” (Rowlatt, 2001).
- (j) ☞ *Fun fact*: The questions about the Trinity were of such popular interest in Constantinople around the time of the Council in 381 that Gregory of Nyssa complained, “if you ask for change, someone philosophizes to you on the Begotten and the Unbegotten. If you ask for the price of bread, you are told, ‘The Father is Greater, the Son inferior.’ If you ask ‘is the bath ready’ someone answers ‘The Son was created from nothing’” (Olson, 1999).
- 2) In Eastern theology the distinctness of the persons (“hypostases”) is emphasized and the unity follows because the Son and Spirit are derived from the Father:



- (a) The Greek patristic writers insisted that there was only one “monarchical” source of being in the T. and were eager to safeguard the Father’s unique position as ingenerate (not begotten).
- (b) An illustration of their view: The Father breathes out in the process of speaking the Word.
- (c) They asserted that to have the Spirit proceed from the Son is to have two sources of divinity. “For this reason the Greek church regarded the western idea of ‘double procession’ of the Spirit with something approaching stark disbelief” (McGrath, 1997).
- 3) The Western view (esp. as articulated by Augustine ⁶) starts with the unity of the T. especially in redemption and revelation, and sees their relationship in terms of their mutual fellowship:



- (a) This view follows such passages as John 20:22, where the risen Christ breathes upon the disciples and says “receive the Holy Spirit”, as well as passages which refer to the Spirit of Christ.
- 4) The *filioque*
- (a) Whether the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son or just the Father is known as the *filioque controversy*. *Filioque* is L. for the phrase “and the Son”, which was added to the Nicene creed.
- (b) The addition of the filioque clause without the consensus of the Eastern churches (along with dispute over whether the bishop of Rome should be considered greater than all others) ignited a great

⁶ Augustine (354-430), Bishop of Hippo (N. Africa) formulated the Western doctrines of predestination and original sin in his writings against the Pelagians, and is also known for his integration of Platonic philosophy with theology.

controversy and became a major factor in the subsequent split between the Eastern and Western churches in 1054 (and remains an issue between east and west today).

- (c) Modern protestant theologians suggest that the appropriateness of the *filioque* depends on context; it's appropriate in economy of salvation, but not in the immanent T.

E) The Eastern approach seems to suggest that the members of the T. are three separate agents doing potentially very different things. This possibility was excluded by two later developments:

- 1) *Perichoresis* (Gr.), or *circumincessio* (L.), meaning *mutual interpenetration*:
 - (a) This is the idea that the individuality of the persons is maintained while each shares in the life of the other two (e.g. Jesus' saying that he and the Father are one).
 - (b) This is sometimes described as a "community of being."
- 2) *Appropriation*: The doctrine that the works of the T. are a unity, and that every person is involved in every outward action of the Godhead. This refutes *modalism*; see below.

III. TWO IMPORTANT HERESIES TO AVOID

A) Modalism—A group of heresies associated with Noetus and Praxeas (late 2nd c.) and Sabellius (3rd c.).

- 1) Each person is considered a different *mode* of God's self revelation and in the economy of salvation:
 - (a) Father: The creator and law giver
 - (b) Son: The savior and Messiah
 - (c) Spirit: The sanctifier and giver of eternal life
- 2) In modalism, the only difference between the persons in their appearance and chronological location.
- 3) Modalism occurs when one tries too hard to emphasize the unity of the persons.
- 4) Modalism contradicts the trinitarian view that all members are involved at all levels, as seen e.g. in Gen 1:1-3, which involves God the Father, the Word, and the Spirit:

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.

- 5) *Biblical Refutation of modalism*: evidence that there are three persons but one God
 - (a) Jesus Christ is distinct from God the Father, because he is the Son of God;
 - (i) the bible always clearly distinguishes between them, as in 1 Tim 1:1, "Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the command of God our Savior and of Christ Jesus our hope, To Timothy my true son in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."
 - (ii) Jesus prayed to the Father (Lk 23:34, etc.); he was ignorant of things the Father knew (Mk 13:32); he was sent by the father (Jn 8:42; 17:3); he loved the Father (Jn 14:31); he was and is subject to the Father (1 Cor 15:28).
 - (iii) We hold in dynamic tension the facts that Jesus said, "I and the Father are One" (Jn 10:30) and yet "the Father is greater than I" (Jn 14:24).
 - (b) The Holy Spirit is distinct from the Father
 - (i) Acts clearly shows that the HS is a living, powerful personality who fills the lives of the believers of the early Church, enabling them to worship God, to pray to God and to do the will of God (e.g. Acts 5:31-32; 7:55; 10:38; 13:2).
 - (ii) The HS knows the deep things and thoughts of God (1 Cor 2:10-11); prays to God for us (Rom 8:26); is sent to us from God (Jn 14:26) and from Jesus Christ (Jn 16:7); and he speaks not on his own authority but on God's, and he glorifies Christ (Jn 16:13-14).
 - (c) Jesus Christ is distinct from the Holy Spirit

- (i) This is shown above; but explicitly, the HS descended on Christ at his baptism (Mk 1:10) and empowered him for his work (Lk 4:18), and it was through the HS that Christ was raised from the dead (1 Pet 3:18).

B) Tritheism

- 1) The T. consists of three equal, independent, divine beings, like three humans in community.
- 2) Contradicts the clear Biblical mandate that God is *one* (Deut 6:4).
- 3) Tritheistic tendencies can be found in the Cappadocian Fathers (late 4th c.).
- 4) Treatment of the problem using logic: (from Ed Wierenga's paper)
 - (a) Problem: The Athanasian creed states that the Father is God, the Son is God and the Spirit is God. If there are three individuals, not identical with each other, who are God, then there are three Gods.
 - (b) Refutation:
 - (i) There are two senses of "is"
 - The "is" of predication, as in "the sky is blue"
 - The "is" of identity, as in "Clark Kent is Superman"
 - (ii) So let the "is" in "The Father is God," "The Son is God" and "The Spirit is God" be the "is" of predication, so that you essentially are saying "The Father is divine", "the Son is divine", etc.
 - (iii) Then define "God" to mean the unity of these three person (in a sense, God is the set of all divine beings, of which there are three).

IV. MODELS OF THE TRINITY: *A brief look at a few approaches to the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity through the ages*

A) Augustine (354-430, N. Africa)

- 1) None of the persons is inferior to the Father (i.e. a rejection of *subordinationism*): He asserts that while the Son and HS might appear to be inferior, this is only in the economy of salvation; in fact, they are eternally co-equal.
- 2) This idea was later developed in something called the *essential Trinity*, which is grounded in God's eternal nature.
- 3) The co-equality of the T. went hand-in-hand with Augustine's role in the *filioque* controversy.
- 4) Augustine asserted that each person is involved in every action of the whole (the idea of *appropriation*, mentioned above)—so that humans are not merely created in the image of God; they are created in the image of the T.
- 5) Augustine (acknowledging that he had no explicit biblical support) identified the Son with wisdom and the Spirit with love, seeing the Spirit as the Person who brings about the union between God and his people, the bringer of community.
- 6) Postulating that humans are made in the image of the T., and that the mind is the apex of human existence (a very Platonic idea), Augustine argued for the analogy of the Father, Son and HS as *lover*, *beloved*, and *love itself*.

B) Richard of St. Victor (12th c.) : Believed that divine goodness and love require more than one person.

- 1) A divine person would not have anyone to love as worthy as himself if there weren't a co-equal divine person.
- 2) For the fullness of charity to have a place in the true Divinity, that person must have a relationship with an equally divine person.
- 3) As long as the second person does not have someone who shares in love for a third, he lacks the sharing of excellent joy. In order for them both to be able to share these delights, they must have a third divine person.

C) Karl Barth⁷ (1886-1968)

- 1) Barth sought to understand the T. by considering God's self revelation—What does the actuality of revelation have to tell us about the being of God?
- 2) Barth asked, how can God be heard, when sinful humanity is incapable of hearing the Word of God (and must therefore be passive in the process)?
- 3) There must be a correspondence between the revealing God and the self-revelation of God; so that the Father is revealed in the Son.
- 4) One can consider someone living in AD 33, who happens to witness the crucifixion; the *revelation* of God must be accompanied by a *recognition*, on the part of the observed, of what is revealed—i.e., the observed has to *get it*.
- 5) The acts of not just hearing the Word but the capacity to truly *hear* it are granted by the Spirit.

D) Karl Rahner⁸ (1904-1984)

- 1) Rahner's main contribution is to tie together the *economic* and *immanent* Trinities. (Here, "immanent" means immanent in reality, not immanent to us, so the "immanent Trinity" is the Trinity defined not by God's actions but by his very nature.)
- 2) He is famous for his statement that "The economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the immanent Trinity is the economic Trinity"—i.e. that the God revealed and experienced in history is the way God actually is:

'The differentiation of the self-communication of God in history (of truth) and spirit (of love) must belong to God "in himself", or otherwise this difference, which undoubtedly exists, would do away with God's self-communication. For these modalities and their differentiation either are in God himself (although we first experience them from our point of view) or they exist only in us.'

E) Stanley Hauerwas (theologian at Duke Divinity School)

- 1) Not particularly known for his contributions to the doctrine of the Trinity; however:
- 2) In lectures on natural theology (Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe*), he asserted that natural theology (inference of God and his properties from observations of nature and logic) as typically understood can only infer a unitarian God.
- 3) In order for natural theology to uncover a trinitarian God it must be rooted in the ecclesia, the Body of Christ.

F) Thomas F. Torrance (theologian from the reformed perspective, 1913-1959, Church of Scotland)

- 1) God's fatherhood can only be known through his relationship with Jesus, not his relationship with creation, since creation is inherently other from God.
- 2) Thus any natural theology which doesn't begin with God's self-revelation is no more than "a form of mythology."

V. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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⁷ This Swiss theologian sought to hold the line for orthodoxy against the liberal Protestantism of his day.

⁸ Karl Rahner was a Jesuit who taught theology in Germany and Austria, a prolific author, and probably the most important and influential Roman Catholic theologian of the 20th century.

- 3) *The Trinity*, Robert Crossley (IVP: Downer's Grove) 1987.
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 - 5) *Gender, Sexuality and the Trinity*, James Torrance, from *Worship, Community and the Triune Grace of God* (IVP: Downer's Grove) 1997; also at <http://www.apologetics.fsnet.co.uk/gender.htm>. (James B. Torrance is professor emeritus of systematic theology at the University of Aberdeen, Scotland, and the younger brother of T. F. Torrance.)
 - 6) *Social Trinity and Tritheism*, Cornelius Plantinga Jr., in *Trinity, Incarnation and Atonement* (U. Notre Dame Press: Notre Dame), Eds. Ronald J. Feenstra & Cornelius Plantinga Jr., 1989.
- B) Fun or at least somewhat useful
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 - 5) *Credo Card Game*, Chaosium Games.

VI. MORE FUN FACTS

- A) The sign of the cross became associated with the Trinity as well as the incarnation: "To make the sign of the cross in the approved manner, the priest held his right hand uplifted with the palm facing outwards towards the people, with his thumb and first two fingers extended to represent the Trinity, the remaining two fingers being flexed to represent the human and divine natures of Christ" (Rowlatt, 2001).
- B) "...the laity [in the 14th c.] were extraordinarily devout, for it was in response to popular demand that Thomas à Becket obtained papal permission in the mid-twelfth century to introduce a special feast called Trinity Sunday on the first Sunday after Pentecost; it became general in 1334" (Rowlatt, 2001).
- C) "More or less unsuccessful attempts were made to capture the essence of the Trinity using analogy: water, snow and ice, or the identical reflection in several fragments of a broken mirror... There was a passion for similitudes of all kinds among the preaching friars [of the middle ages], some of whom carried little pocket books containing prompts" (Rowlatt, 2001).
- D) St. Margaret of Antioch was said in legends developed in the 15th c. to have subdued a dragon by making the sign of the cross (associated liturgically with the Trinity). She has figured in numerous works of art since. (The photo above of a painting, from Munich's Alte Pinakothek museum, is from a triptych of the saints, including St. Margaret, pictured with the subdued dragon.)



VII. BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE TRINITY: IN-DEPTH

A complete pattern of biblical witness may be seen in the description of each person as one, holy, Lord and righteous (terms uniquely associated with God), and savior of God's people and of the world:

- A) God the Father
 - 1) The OT
 - (a) God is one (Deut 6:4)
 - (i) God is the God and lone judge of all of creation (Is 24-27)

- (ii) God is holy—set apart from his creation
 - (iii) God is the only God (e.g. Is 44:6-8; 45:20-21; 46:8-11)
 - (b) God is Savior
 - (i) God enters history and participates to save his people because of his promise, his love for them, and because he wanted to use Israel to show himself as the only Savior God to the world—e.g. out of Egypt (see Deut 7:6-11; Is 43:10-13; Ex 3:7-8).
 - (ii) Israelite worship, esp. the 3 great agricultural feasts, centered on God as savior (e.g. see Ex 23:14-17) and they worshipped him because he saved them (Ex 20:2).
 - (c) God is Spirit
 - (i) Creating with his Spirit (Gen 1:2; Job 33:4)
 - (ii) Inspiring his prophets with his Spirit (1 Sam 10:10; Neh 9:30)
 - (iii) Empowering the Messiah with his Spirit—Is 11:1-3, and through him God's Spirit will come on all flesh (Joel 2:28-29).
- 2) In the NT
- (a) God is one
 - (i) Jesus, when asked about the greatest commandment, quotes Deut 6:4, affirming God's unity.
 - (ii) Paul is insistent that God is one, esp. when describing God & Jesus, and God & the HS (e.g. Eph 4:6, 1 Tim 2:5)
 - (b) God is also savior in the NT: In the words of Mary and Zechariah (Lk 1:47, 54-55, 67-68) and in the epistles (1 Tim 1:1, 2:3, 4:10, Tit 1:3, 2:2-10, 3:4, Jude 25)
 - (c) God is still Spirit: Jn 4:24, and by his Spirit empowers Jesus (Lk 4:18) and his followers (Acts 1:8, 2:17-21)

B) Jesus Christ, the Messiah

- 1) In the OT
 - (a) The Messiah is a conquering king yet prince of peace (Is 9:6, 11:1-4; Dan 7:13-14)
 - (b) The Messiah is the savior of Israel (Mic 5:1-9) and of the world (Is 49:6, 53:12).
- 2) The Messiah has the attributes of God
 - (a) Creator: all was made through him (Jn 1:3, Col 1:16-17)
 - (b) Giver of life to all people (Jn 1:4, 5:21)
 - (c) Holy and righteous, attributes only used for God (Acts 3:14-15, 1 Cor 2:8, Jn 17:5, Is 40:5, Jn 1:9, 8:12, 1 Jn 1:5, Is 60:19-20) and is sinless (1 Peter 2:22; Heb 4:15), able to forgive others (Lk 5:20)
 - (d) He is the judge of the world (Jn 5:22, 2 Cor 5:10, 2 Tim 4:1)
 - (e) The Day of the Lord, the day of judgment, is referred to as the Day of Christ in the NT: Phil 1:6, 10; cf. Rev 6:16-27.
 - (f) Christ is the object of worship of the creation—Phil 2:10-11, Rev 5:13-14.
 - (g) Conclusion: "In [Christ] the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9).
- 3) Jesus is the savior of the world
 - (a) God saved Israel from slavery in Egypt; Jesus saves us from slavery to sin.
 - (b) To save people from their sins Jesus addresses them individually, indwelling them (2 Cor 13:5, Eph 3:17, Rev 3:20), showing them to the Father (Jn 14:6) and empowering them to live according to his will (Col 2:6-7, 2 Tim 2:1)—exactly as God promised to do through his Spirit in Ezek 36:25-28.
- 4) Jesus is Lord
 - (a) In the OT God's personal name was Yahweh, which was always spoken as Adonai, meaning "Lord". In the NT the term used for Christ is the Greek translation of this, *kurios*;

- (i) Compare Phil 2:10-11, “that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father,”
- (ii) and Is 45:23, “By myself I have sworn, my mouth has uttered in all integrity a word that will not be revoked: Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear.”
- (b) In many passages Jesus is clearly identified with God the Father,
 - (i) as in 1 Tim 6:15, Rev 17:14; 19:16, in his own words in John 8:58 (and the repeated use of the “ego eimi” in John),
 - (ii) and 1 Cor 8:4-6, “So then, about eating food sacrificed to idols: We know that an idol is nothing at all in the world and that there is no God but one. For even if there are so-called gods, whether in heaven or on earth (as indeed there are many “gods” and many “lords”), yet for us there is but one God, the Father, from whom all things came and for whom we live; and there is but one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things came and through whom we live.”

C) The Holy Spirit

- 1) The Spirit is a distinct person, not merely an influence or manifestation of God.
 - (a) The Holy Spirit (HS) has *intellect* and *understanding* (1 Cor 2:10-13), a *mind* (Rom 8:27, Acts 15:28), *sensibility* (Is 63:10, Eph 4:30) and a *will* (1 Cor 12:11).
 - (b) He *speaks* (Acts 8:29; 13:2; 1 Tim 4:1), he *teaches* (Jn 14:26), he *dwells* with believers (Jn 14:16-17), he will *fill* believers (Acts 2:4; Eph 5:18), and he will *lead* believers (Gal 5:18).
 - (c) He was *sent* from the Father in Christ’s name (Jn 14:26; 15:26), *descended* upon Jesus Christ at his baptism (Mk 1:10), *drove* Christ into the wilderness (Mk 1:12), etc. In the Greek the definite masculine article “ekeinos” is used (e.g. Jn 14:26, 16:13-14).
- 2) The Holy Spirit is God
 - (a) The Spirit is credited with all the attributes of God: *omnipotence* (Mic 3:8, Acts 1:8, Rom 15:13, 19), *omniscience* (1 Cor 2:10, cf. Is 40:13-14), *omnipresence* (Ps 139:7). He is the *giver of life*, and the one who *resurrects* from the dead (Job 33:4, 1 Pet 3:18); and he is the one *injured* by our sin (Mk 3:29, Acts 5:3-4).
 - (b) He is *holy* (Ps 51:11, Is 63:10, Lk 11:13, Eph 4:3, 1 Thess 4:8); he is the *Spirit of truth* (Jn 14:17; 15:26; 16:13); he is the *Spirit of grace* (Heb 10:29); he is the *Spirit of glory* (1 Pet 4:14); and he merits that most significant adjective *One* (Eph 4:4).
 - (c) He is unambiguously called *Lord*: “But whenever anyone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away. Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit” (2 Cor 3:16-18).
- 3) He is Savior: the HS is the one whom God works in redemption.
 - (a) He *convicts* of sin (Jn 16:8-11); he is the *agent* of new birth (Jn 3:1-8); he is the one who *lives* in believers (Jn 14:16-17, 1 Cor 6:19); he is the one *by whom* we can approach God the Father (Eph 2:18); he is the one through whom salvation was to come (Ezek 36:25-28); he *sanctifies* believers (2 Thess 2:13; 1 Pet 1:2).

D) The Trinity—Summary:

- 1) God the Father is One, the Holy God, yet the Savior and the Spirit who works in and through mankind.
- 2) Jesus Christ is identified with God the Father; he is One and Holy, the Savior of the world who by his Spirit comes to live in mankind and give them salvation.
- 3) The Holy Spirit is identified with God the Father; he is One and Holy, the agent in salvation, and the Spirit of God who indwells people and saves and sanctifies them.