

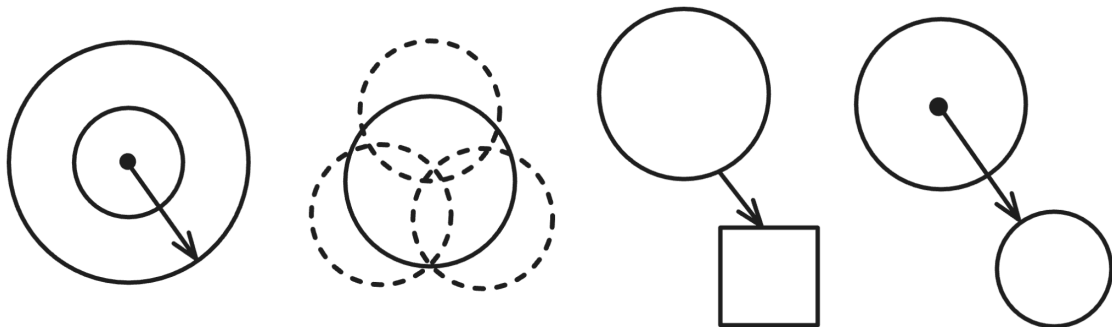
The Trinity in Church History: Trinitarian Models and Beyond

Roland Elliott, 2025, <https://thinkingthoughtout.com/trinity>

Introduction

This is the last of our four lessons on the Trinity. In the first two lessons we considered how Jesus showed himself to be God, and how the apostles found ways of articulating this in the course of spreading and defending the gospel. In the previous lesson we began looking at how the early church proposed various models to make sense of Jesus's divinity while holding onto distinctive Christian doctrines, such as the oneness and immutability of God. We surveyed the various pre-Trinitarian models that were proposed throughout the first three centuries of the early church, and in this lesson we will consider how this led into the formulation of the first Trinitarian models, and what came after.

Setting the scene



You'll recall from the previous lesson that systematic theology involves coming up with models which collect biblical teaching on a particular topic into a consistent whole. As we considered the pre-Trinitarian models, we saw the concepts and challenges that confronted

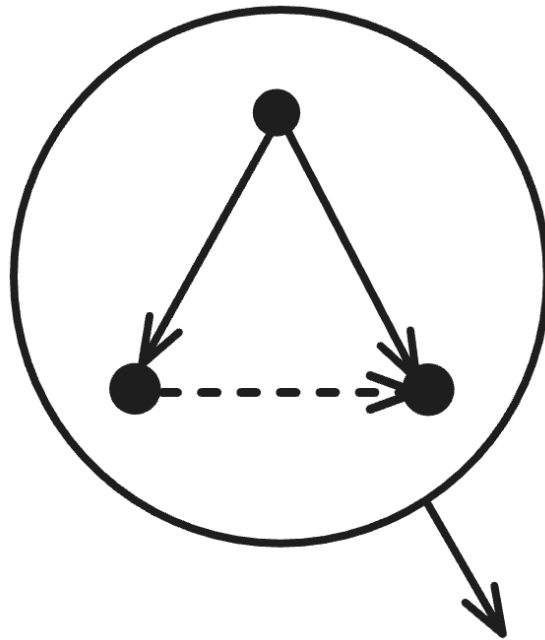
the church as they began proposing models for Jesus's divinity. We'll see some of these come up in various ways throughout this lesson.

Leading up the proposals of the first Trinitarian models, there were a few important developments. First, there was a shift in focus from the mere words being used, like *ousia* (substance, nature) and *hypostasis* (person, individual), to the meanings they are intended to convey. After the council of Nicea, there was disagreement about whether we should say that the Father and the Son were *homoousios* (of the same substance) or *homoiousios* (of similar substance, note the extra "i"). Those who defended the same substance view (which was in the creed of Nicea) wanted to avoid the error of making Jesus a mere creature, while those who defended the similar substance view wanted to avoid modalism. By letting the theology define the words rather than the other way around, these two groups were able to find common ground and unity.

Second, there was an increased interest in the Holy Spirit. Up until Nicea, the focus had been primarily on the relationship between the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit had received less attention. This is why in the creed of Nicea of 325, nothing is said about the nature of the Spirit. Eventually the church came to recognize the full divinity and personhood of the Spirit, which is expressed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed of 381 (these days, also called the Nicene Creed).

Third, both of these lead to the formation of Trinitarian statements by people like Cyril of Jerusalem and Athanasius which seem to capture all the necessary elements, but without telling us how it all fits together. This, then, leads us to the Trinitarian models.

Cappadocians: Monarchical Trinitarianism



The first Trinitarian model was developed by three theologians called the Cappadocian Fathers: Basil the Great, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory Nazianzus. This type of model is called *Monarchical Trinitarianism* today, and although each of them had slightly different emphases we can summarize the overall idea generally as follows.

The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three distinct *hypostases*, each of whom has the same divine nature. At first, this is no more mysterious than three distinct people each having the same human nature. But with God we must add that the divine nature is simple, immutable, and indivisible, so that it cannot be divided into separate beings like we have with humans. So, unlike humans—who are distinguished by existing in separate parcels of matter—the members of the Trinity are distinguished entirely by the eternal *relations of origin* or *processions*. For the Son we say that the Father *begets* or *generates* the Son, and for the Spirit we say that the Father *spirates* the Holy Spirit.

Recall that for the Logos theologians (divine-expansive models) and Origen (second god model) this described the special relation between the Father and Son, whereby the Son

exists from the very being of the Father (as opposed to creatures, which are created from nothing). Origen also spoke of the eternal generation of the Son, although he didn't think the Spirit was eternal. The Cappadocians developed this picture in two important ways. First, *both* the Son and the Holy Spirit eternally proceed from the Father, and second, the procession occurs between the *persons* rather than their natures. For Origen, the Father alone is *autotheos* (divine of himself) from which it seems to follow that the Son must be of a different and more limited nature than the Father, since he is divine from another. The Cappadocians approached this differently: they agreed that the Father alone is *autotheos*, but they proposed that this be understood as a feature of the *person* rather than his nature—in terms of the eternal processions, the Father does not proceed from anyone. This allowed them to affirm both that only the Father is *autotheos* as well as that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit all share *the same* nature. This in turn meant that all three were co-equal, rather than one being subordinate to the other by nature.

This Cappadocian proposal raised three important questions. The first is this: if the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by the relations of origin, then how is the Son distinct from the Holy Spirit, since both proceed from the Father? The answer is that even though they both proceed from the Father, the Son proceeds directly from the Father while the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *through the Son*. Thus, there is an asymmetry between any two persons whereby they are uniquely distinguished in relation to the other two.

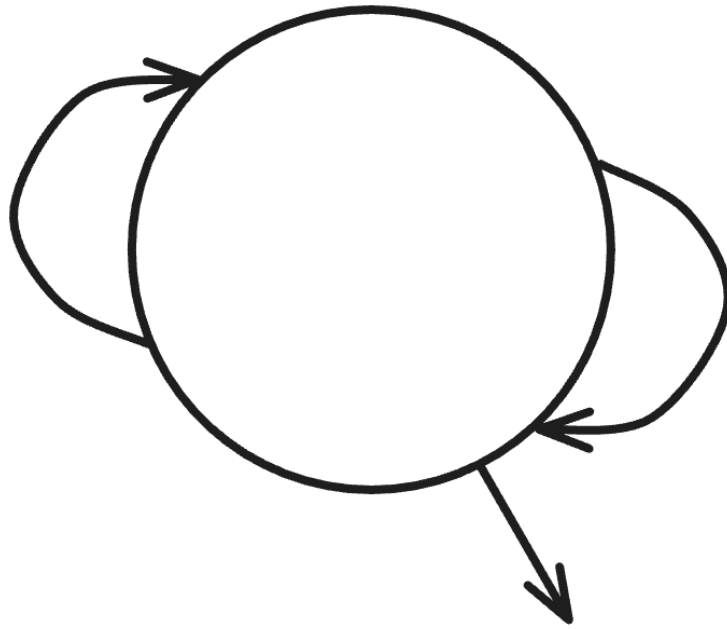
The second question is: why does the diversity of persons not result in a diversity of beings, giving us three separate divine beings? Because the eternal relations are the *only* things which distinguish the persons, meaning that everything else is identical between them. That is, there is numerically only one divine will, intellect, power, goodness, and so on. (This is called the co-indwelling of the divine persons, or the doctrine of *perichoresis*.) There is also only one divine operation, so that there is numerically only one divine act of

creation, redemption, revelation, and so on. If they were three separate divine beings they would each have their own divine attributes and operation, but because this is not the case they must be three persons in one divine being. (This is called the doctrine of the *inseparable operations*.)

The third question: how does this model avoid affirming three gods, since it affirms three distinct persons each with the divine nature? Once again, the answer comes from the fact that the persons are distinguished only by the eternal processions. The Cappadocian Fathers answered that there is only one God because there is only one Father—that is, the Father is the one true God because he is the only uncaused cause, the only source without a source, the only one of the divine persons who is *autotheos*. The Son and the Holy Spirit are fully divine because they share in the Father's nature, but because they are caused by him (receive their existence from him) through the processions they are not *autotheos*. This is why this model is called *Monarchical* Trinitarianism, because it affirms the monarchy of the Father within the Triune divine nature. You will also recall from the previous lessons that this aligns well with how the NT and early church spoke about the Father as God.

Altogether, then, we have a model which affirms three persons of the Trinity in one divine being, all of them co-equal and co-eternal, with the Son and the Holy Spirit proceeding from the Father. This Monarchical Trinitarianism has continued to play a major role through the church's history, and has been the primary way of thinking about the Trinity in Eastern Orthodoxy.

Augustine: Latin Trinitarianism



A few decades after the Cappadocian Fathers, Augustine of Hippo (and Boethius after him) proposed a different Trinitarian model, which gave rise to what is called *Latin Trinitarianism*. There are both important similarities and differences between this and Monarchical Trinitarianism.

For Latin Trinitarianism, the starting point is the simplicity of the divine nature: there are no absolute divisions or parts within the divine nature, and therefore no possibility of more than one instance of it. In order to explain how there can be multiple divine persons despite this strong sense of the oneness of God, Augustine turns to the theory of relations that had been developed by Plotinus and Porphyry. Some relations can be either symmetric or asymmetric. For example, if we compare the heights of two people then they may be the same height (symmetric) or one may be taller than the other (asymmetric), showing us that comparison of height is sometimes symmetric and other times not. This is also true of comparisons more generally.

By contrast, processions are *intrinsically asymmetric* relations. Every procession can be understood as *from* something *to* something, and this from-to structure always allows us to

distinguish the source as such from the end as such. The most common example of procession is causation, where the source is called the cause and the end is called the effect. For his Trinitarian model, Augustine considered the processions that occur in the mind: whenever I think about something there is a procession from my intellect to a thought or understanding in my mind, and whenever I love something there is a process from will to the love that I have for that person.

Now, if we transpose this to God, we find something interesting. God has (or is) a mind, so we would expect both of these processions to exist in him. But God is also absolutely simple which means that, unlike us, his intellect, thoughts, will, and love are all the same thing, the divine nature. If they weren't all the same then there would be distinct parts in the divine nature, which contradicts divine simplicity—this is why divine simplicity has been summarized as “all that is in God just is God.” What this means for us is that the processions of intellect and will just go from the divine nature to itself. If they were merely symmetric relations then this would collapse any distinction, but remember that because they are processions they are *intrinsically asymmetric*. Thus, even though they relate the same divine nature to itself, we can still distinguish between the *from* and the *to* aspects of each procession, which in turn provides us with real (relative) distinctions within the divine nature between the persons: the Father is the divine nature as thinker, while the Son is the divine nature as thought; the Father and Son are the divine nature as lover, while the Holy Spirit is the divine nature as loved. And we can name these processions just as before, as generation and spiration.

The resulting model is in some ways very similar to the model of the Cappadocians: in both cases the three persons all share the same nature and attributes like power, knowledge, goodness, infinity, and so on; in both cases, they co-indwell one another, and they act all together; and in both cases they are co-equal and co-eternal. But there are differences. First, the Cappadocian model is most naturally understood as starting with the three persons and

explaining how they are one, while Augustine's model seems to start with their oneness and explain how they are distinct. Second, for the Cappadocians there is one God because there is one Father, while for Augustine there is one God because there is one divine nature. And third, on the Cappadocian model the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, while on Augustine's model he proceeds from the Father and Son together.

Augustine's model began the tradition of Latin Trinitarianism, which has also continued to play a major role through the church's history, and has been the primary way of thinking about the Trinity in the West, including in Roman Catholicism and Protestantism.

Ontological vs economic Trinity

Both Trinitarian models emphasize the equality of the persons in the Trinity. But in another, important, sense there is subordination within the Trinity. For example, the Son submits to the Father and is sent by him into the world, and the Father and Son send the Spirit after the Son ascends. In order to account for this, we introduce a distinction between the *ontological* (or immanent) Trinity and the *economic* Trinity.

The immanent Trinity refers to who the triune God is in himself, apart from creation or the economy of salvation. The economic Trinity refers to how the triune God acts in relation to creation and in the economy of salvation.¹

In this context, "economy" refers to the distinct roles willingly taken on by the members of the Trinity in relation to one another in the acts of creation and redemption.² This term goes back to the pre-Trinitarian models of the second century, and in hindsight we can see that one of the problems with some of these pre-Trinitarian models was that they did not properly distinguish between the ontological and economic Trinity. Recall, for example, the

¹ Matthew Barrett, *Simply Trinity: The Unmanipulated Father, Son, and Spirit*, p. 78. See also, RC Sproul, ["What's the Difference between the Ontological Trinity and the Economic Trinity?"](#) for a helpful brief introduction.

² The ontological-economic distinction is not some ad hoc distinction introduced in order to get the models to work, but flows from the (very biblical) recognition that God in himself far transcends his creation and accommodates himself to our limitations for our sake.

Logos Theologians’ proposal that the Son only becomes a distinct person when the Father decides to create through him—what we would say now is that the Father and Son were distinct from eternity, and that in the economy of creation the Father creates through the Son and the Spirit is the divine presence within creation.

In fact, the distinction between ontological and economic Trinity can be seen as capturing the truth of the Logos Theologians’ distinction between immanent and manifest word: the ontological Trinity refers to how God is in himself (immanent), while economic Trinity is how God has manifested himself in creation and redemption (manifest). We can summarize some of the salient differences as follows:

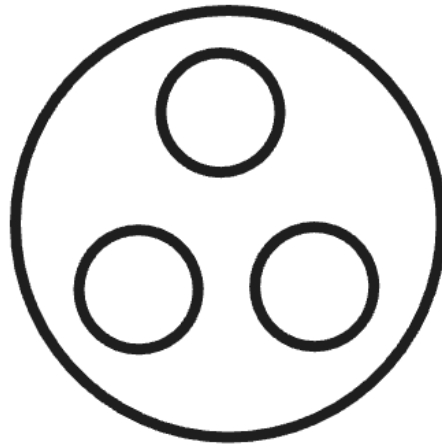
Ontological Trinity	Economic Trinity
Result of divine nature	Result of divine will (revealed in creation and redemption)
Persons distinguished by processions	Persons distinguished by roles they take on
Equality between persons ³	Subordination between persons
True from eternity	Revealed (manifested) temporally

Modern missteps

Monarchical and Latin Trinitarianism continued to be developed in different ways through the centuries of the church, as has our understanding of the distinction between the ontological and economic Trinity—it’s not like these things were laid out once in the fourth and fifth century and then left alone. Rather than try to summarize these, I’d like us to briefly look at two ways in which I think some theologians have recently gone too far, in one direction or the other. The first has to do with models of the Trinity, and the second has to do with the distinction between the ontological and economic Trinity.

³ Aquinas notes that we can in some sense speak of the Father as greater than the Son and Spirit, as a source is greater than that which arises from it. Yet, because it is divine persons which arise from the Father in this way, they are equal to the Father as regards nature.

Social Trinitarianism



In response to certain liberal criticisms of historic Trinitarianism, a new kind of model was developed in the 19th and 20th centuries. Liberal theologians argued that what is important and central to Christianity is not these “metaphysical speculations” about the nature of God, but rather the religious self-conscious feeling of absolute dependence epitomized in our faith in Christ. We see in this a shift from systematics to ethics at the center of Christianity, and with it came a rejection of the importance of the sort of systematics we have been considering up until now.

In response, some theologians proposed a Social Trinitarian model, wherein “the Trinity is a *community* or *society*, a cooperation of divine persons, each with his own center of consciousness and will.”⁴ On the historic models, persons are only distinguished by the eternal processions, but on this new model each person has their own separate set of cognitive faculties while somehow sharing all their other powers. There is no longer any need for eternal processions, and many (if not all) proponents of this kind of model reject the notion of eternal processions altogether. There is therefore no sense in which the Son and Spirit proceed from the Father, meaning that all three members of the Trinity are *autotheos*.

But here is where we start to see problems with the approach. First, we have three divine persons who are in important respects separate (because separate cognitive faculties) and

⁴ Barrett, *Simply Trinity*, p. 78.

independent (because no processions) from one another, in much the same way that conjoined twins are, which would seem to imply that there are three gods rather than one. Indeed, one of the earliest Social Trinitarians (Jürgen Moltmann) wasn't too happy with the notions of lordship and monotheism that had for so long dominated Christian thinking about God, and proposed his model in part to avoid them!

A second problem is that there seems to be another God in addition to the three persons, namely the collection of all three persons together. In the two historic models, this couldn't happen because of God's simplicity, but now that we've given each of the persons a separate set of cognitive faculties we can meaningfully collect them together into something over and above the persons.

Eternal functional subordination

Let us now turn to consider how some theologians have failed to properly distinguish between the ontological and economic Trinity.⁵ There has been an ongoing debate in recent decades among evangelical theologians over what is variously called the doctrine of “eternal functional subordination” (EFS), “eternal subordination of the Son” (ESS), or “eternal relations of authority and subordination” (ERAS). Proponents of this view (such as Bruce Ware and Wayne Grudem) have proposed that the eternal relationship between the Father and the Son is analogous to the relationship between human fathers and sons, so that the Father has authority over the Son and the Son submits to the Father. Now, everyone accepts that the Son submits to the Father, as we see for example in Jesus's words, “yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mark 14:36), but the question is whether this submission is *from eternity* and part of the divine nature, or whether this is something that only happens when the persons of the Trinity take on different roles within creation and salvation. That

⁵ For a helpful discussion of this, see the series of posts from Alastair Roberts, “The Eternal Subordination of the Son Controversy” ([part 1](#), [part 2](#), [part 3](#), [part 4](#), [part 5](#), [part 6](#), [part 7](#)).

is, is the authority of the Father and submission of the Son part of the ontological Trinity or only the economic Trinity?

Wayne Grudem has argued something like this: since the Father is eternally the Father and the Son is eternally the Son, and since the father-son relationship is one of authority-and-submission, it follows that there should be eternal relations of authority and submission between the Father and the Son.⁶ To be fair, Grudem is *not* saying that the Father and Son are separate persons or that they do not share the divine nature. But, even though the subordination he has in mind doesn't go as far as, say, Origen's, it still goes too far. After all, a relationship of authority and submission requires that there be separate wills, one which submits to the authority of the other, but if there are two wills in the divine nature then we run into the same problems we saw above with the Social Trinitarianism.

Now, with Grudem, we may ask: if the eternal relation that distinguishes the Father from the Son is *not* one of authority and submission, then what else could it be? As we have seen, then historic Trinitarian models held that it is only the eternal processions which distinguish the members of the Trinity. There is an ordering between the persons because the Father is the *source* of the other two, the person from whom they eternally derive their being—not so that they become separate beings, but that they become distinct persons sharing everything (including their will) in perfect unity.⁷ This is what we mean when we say that the Father is father because he *begets* the Son from eternity, and the Son is son because he is *begotten* from eternity.⁸ This ordering applies to the inseparable operations of

⁶ See, for example, Wayne Grudem, [“Another Thirteen Evangelical Theologians Who Affirm the Eternal Submission of the Son to the Father.”](#)

⁷ “... what is generated in God receives its existence from the generator, not as though that existence were received into matter or into a subject (which would conflict with the divine self-subsistence); but when we speak of His existence as received, we mean that He Who proceeds receives divine existence from another; not, however, as if He were other from the divine nature. For in the perfection itself of the divine existence are contained both the Word intelligibly proceeding and the principle of the Word, with whatever belongs to His perfection” (Aquinas, [ST I Q27 A2](#) ad3).

⁸ In the article by Grudem linked above, I was shocked to see that he didn't seem aware of this account of the eternal processions, despite it being *the* account of the church since the first formulations of Trinitarian models.

God as well: when God, all three persons act, the Father through the Son and the Father and Son through the Spirit.⁹ It is only when the Son takes on a human nature with a human will,¹⁰ that we can start talking about the submission of the Son to the authority of the Father. But at this point we have shifted from the ontological Trinity to the economic Trinity.

Conclusion

The development of Trinitarian models was a long and winding process. Not only did it require the affirmation of both the oneness and threeness of God, but it requires we understand the distinction between God as he is in himself and as he reveals himself to us in creation and redemption.

⁹ See Keith E Johnson, [“Trinitarian Agency and the Eternal Subordination of the Son: An Augustinian Perspective.”](#) Themelios 36.1.

¹⁰ This now touches on the doctrine of the Incarnation, which is distinct but connected to the doctrine of the Trinity. Time does not allow me to go into detail here, but the view which the church eventually landed on (called *dyotheletism*) was that when Jesus took on a human nature he also took on a human will, because the will is part of the nature.