

The Doctrine of the Trinity:

A Look at the Genetic Development of the Doctrine

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How important is the doctrine of the Trinity? Is it relevant for Christians today? If so, how is it? Where do Christians get the concept of the Trinity? How can humans with their limited mental faculties comprehend the Triune God? How can there be three, but yet one? These are some of the major questions surrounding the Christian doctrine of the Trinity. It can be a bit intimidating to leap into a theological conversation that has been ongoing for approximately two thousand years, but, despite the intimidation, it is a rewarding endeavor. Throughout the different periods of church history, men and women have wrestled with the notion of the Triune God; each person contributing to the understanding of this sacred and important doctrine of the church. By studying the theological reflections of Christian thinkers throughout the course of history, we can witness the genetic development of the doctrine of the Trinity, thus by them, we can formulate an orthodox view of the Triune nature of the Godhead which is vital to our salvation and our relationships.

1. Terms of Importance

First, before we dive into the depths of theological debate, a rudimentary understanding of the terms is necessary. The Trinity is defined as, “The Christian understanding of God as triune. Trinity means that one divine nature is a unity of three persons and that God is revealed as three distinct persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” (Grenz et al, 116). Under the umbrella of the term “trinity” one will encounter phrases like Economic Trinity and Immanent Trinity. Often, the manifestations of the three persons toward the world, especially in the plan of salvation, are referred to as the Economic Trinity. Also, the inner relations of the three persons of the Godhead are identified as the Immanent Trinity. Furthermore, one may hear the phrase Ontological

Trinity; this is the persons in the equal eternal state. These definitions will aid in the reader's ability to navigate through this work with a fuller comprehension.

2. The Source of the Doctrine

God Reveals Himself

First, all of creation declares there is a divine Artist working behind the scenes. Mankind has attempted to define this Creator, but He seemed always to be slightly out of reach. But this God desires to communicate Himself to this fallen world. Karl Barth states, "Who God is and what it is to be divine is something we have to learn where God has revealed Himself and His nature, the essence of the divine" (Barth, 29). After, revealing some of His nature through the nation of Israel, this Creator God sent His Son to declare His nature and now the Church is to relay this message to the nations. God Himself revealed Himself as a triune God in the gospel of Christ. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Secondly, many who oppose the doctrine of the Trinity will point to the absence of the word within the Bible. It is true that the word "trinity" is nowhere to be found in the canon of Scripture, but the concept is alluded to on several occasions. For instance, the Bible states, "And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (KJV, Matt. 3:16,17). It is clear that God the Son was in the water, God the Spirit was descending on the Son, and God the Father was giving his approval from his heavenly abode. Although, the word "trinity" is not used in Scripture, it is clear to see there are three distinct persons within the Godhead from this passage.

Furthermore, the doctrine of the Trinity predates the completed canon of Holy Scripture. In the first three hundred years the New Testament canon, although written, was not compiled as we know them today. The apostolic tradition known as the “Rule of Faith” clearly taught the doctrine of the Trinity. This doctrine was passed down by the Apostles to their disciples orally. The Trinity was not created by early Christians, but it was revealed by the coming of the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ of Nazareth. Through Christ Jesus, God unveiled his triune nature to humankind. Both Scripture and tradition proclaim the tri-unity of God.

Furthermore, the doctrine as we know it today developed genetically over the course church history. Although, the Trinity has eternally existed, the way in which it is reflected upon theologically is not held in a vacuum. Each theologian is subject to the historical context of his generation. These thinkers have given us building blocks in which to construct a fuller, although incomplete, understanding of the Trinity. We will survey the brilliant orthodox teachings, as well as the horrible heresies, which have been put forth down through the ages in an attempt to see how this doctrine affects our salvation and our relationships.

3. The Era of the Apologists

First, the era of the Apologist came on the heels of age of the Apostles. During this time, many great minds grappled with the idea of Jesus being fully God. The Christian movement was facing tremendous outside pressures to define their beliefs. The Romans had first viewed them as a sect within Judaism, but the Jews rejected their claim of being monotheistic. Cross states, “Therefore, leaving behind the theological discussions that had circulated within Christianity about the Hebrew Scriptures and their prophecy of a coming Messiah, these early Christian theologians responded by defending the faith, (hence the name, “Apologist” to describe them)

against charges assailed on them by unbelieving folks” (Cross, 2). The challenge for the early church was to explain how they were monotheistic while worshipping the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. For many outside this community of faith the idea of the Trinity was a stumbling block.

Secondly, as previously mentioned there is no theological reflection done within a vacuum and is subject to outside cultural forces. The Greek culture in which the early church was embedded greatly influenced much of the theology for the first two to three hundred years. Cross states, “Many Greeks envisioned a Divine Being who existed far away from this earth. Aristotle proposed the Prime Mover who set all things in motion to have existed outside the “spheres” of this world. At one point, the Greeks saw 100 of these spheres and “God” existed outside of these spheres, quite untouched by the concerns of creatures on earth” (Cross, 5). Aristotle and Plato’s views of Greek metaphysics and philosophy colored the theological lenses of Christian thinkers during this period. Again he writes, “However, Plato envisioned a Universal Soul in which everything once existed but someone the soul of humans have fallen in this world of matter (which is evil). Our goal in life is to work our way up to reunion of out pre-existent soul with the Universal Soul” (Cross, 6). In Greek thought, God was unpassable and needed an intermediary to intervene in the affairs of the created universe. In a nutshell, God was spiritual and this world of matter was evil.

Justin Martyr (AD 103-165)

First, we will visit Justin Martyr, the earliest recorded Christian apologists. His *Apologies* were address to the Emperor of Rome. Many scholars believe he wrote in order define Christian practices and beliefs. In turn, he was hoping to stem the religious persecution that was being imposed by the Romans.

Justin was very intelligent and he knew the emphasis placed on philosophy in the society in which he lived. Justin used the cultural and philosophical ideas of his day to convey the Christian faith. Cross writes,

“The consistent point that Justin and others in this category offer is that the best of Plato and Greek philosophers of the past were insights granted by the Logos of God – Jesus Christ (First Apology, 46). And so it is the Logos (Word) that becomes the Christian intermediary who reveals the ineffable God. True to Greek thought, this Ineffable One could not be described by words or be accurately imagined by representations of him. Only by an intermediary, such as Christ, could God be revealed” (Cross, 3).

Justin argued that the Father was “unbegotten” and the Son was “begotten”. He proposed that the Father and the Son were different in number, but not in will. This allowed the Son to receive worship, because He was of the same substance as the Father. He gave the illustration of the two lit torches. Cross explains the imagery put forth by Justin Martyr saying, “... the Logos is like a fire that is set by another fire; or a torch lit by another torch. The first torch and second torch are numerically distinct, yet both are fire. The first fire is not diminished by the second one that is lighted” (Cross, 4). Thus, Jesus was understood by Justin Martyr to be of the same substance as the Father. Thus, this would make the man Jesus of Nazareth divine too.

Irenaeus of Lyons (AD 125-202)

Irenaeus of Lyon was a devout supporter of the doctrine of the Trinity. Being born in Asia Minor, He was a student of the famed Polycarp. Irenaeus refused the notion of emanations as put forth by his gnostic counter parts. Cross records,

“Unlike the Gnostics who were willing to separate the Divine Christ from the Human Jesus, Irenaeus firmly establishes the necessity for their union. The Divine Christ does not escape from the human body of Jesus before the crucifixion, thereby skipping suffering and death; the Divine Christ is the same Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Man, who suffered, died, and rose from the dead (Adv. Haer.III.16.5)!” (Cross. 10).

Christ was fully God and fully man in Irenaeus view. There could not be a separation of the divinity or the humanity present in Christ. To do so would jeopardize humanity salvation.

Irenaeus was recorded as referring to the Son and the Spirit as being the “Two Hands” of the Father in creation and redemption. All of his theology was impacted by his doctrine of the Trinity. M.C. Steenberg writes,

His confession of Christ raised to the Father by the Spirit, who thus is the ‘cosmic Christ’ inasmuch as he raises with him-self the cosmos of his formation, is the bedrock of his whole theological vision, and this tri-personal reality stands as the foundation on which rest Irenaeus’ views regarding every aspect of Christian theology. Baptism, redemption, divinization, resurrection, eternal life—all are triune events wrought in a cosmos formed and fashioned by that this triad (Steenberg, 62).

For Irenaeus, the Son and the Spirit was vitally important to the Father’s plan of creation and redemption. Everything hinge on a proper understanding of the relationship within the Triune Godhead.

Tertullian (AD 160 -220)

Tertullian took an enormous leap theologically speaking when he coined the phrase *Trinitas* or Trinity. Fisher Humphreys writes, “In the West, in the first book about the Trinity ever written, Tertullian employed the Latin word *trinitas* for the same purpose; the English word “Trinity” is an Anglicization of Tertullian’s word” (Humphreys, 287). Fisher goes on to establish how important having the word Trinity is to formulating the doctrine we know now. Also, Tertullian did not refer to Greek metaphysics in his argument for the concept of the Trinity, but rather he referred to the “Rule of Faith”. This was the oral tradition passed down from the Apostles to the next generation of believers.

Clement of Alexandria (AD 150-215)

Clement of Alexandria was born in Athens, but died in Palestine. He was the teacher of the famed Origen. He was known to use what Greek philosophy that worked and discarded what did not fit in a Christian worldview. Believing the Gnostics had tainted the term, he strove to reclaim the word *gnosis* from its negative connotation. His practice could be likened to Anselm’s “faith seeking understanding”.

He understood the *Logos* to be fully God. Cross records, “As the mediator of revelation of God and the source of all rationality, knowledge, morality, the Logos bridges the vast gap between the transcendent, ineffable God and created human beings who live with the limitation of time and space” (Cross, 14). Christ the *Logos*, he suggested, was Jesus Christ of Nazareth the Teacher of who God was. This teacher came from the Father not only brought us salvation, but taught how we are to relate to God and to one another.

Origen (AD 185-254)

Finally, we come to the last theologian we will look at in the era of the Apologists, Origen. Origen's influence on the Eastern Church cannot be overstated. All other Church Fathers pale in comparison with regards to impact on the Eastern Church tradition. The main reason of Origen's impact is alluded to when Cross states, "Rather than just defending the faith, Origen systemized the faith so that thinking people – whether believers or non-believers – might be able to understand the categories of thought within Christianity" (Cross, 17). Being heavily influenced by Platonic thought, He proposed that God the Father is incomprehensible by humans. We can only know what reveals about Himself. This revelation is seen the greatest in the *Logos* Incarnate or in other words, Jesus Christ of Nazareth.

Origen focused mainly on the relationship between the Father and the Son. You can tell by Origen's writings, much like other thinkers of this period, he did not quite understand how to handle the Spirit. For the most part, the Spirit was seemingly an afterthought in his doctrine of the Trinity.

In conclusion to the era of the Apologist, it is easy to see the impact of the Greek thought processes of Aristotle and Plato. A large emphasis was placed on the intermediary between the divine and the material world. Without this basic understanding, it is impossible to understand this period. All these men grappled with how these relations affect our salvation and our overall outlook on the world. The importance of an orthodox view of this doctrine is vital in their eyes.

4. The Third Century

The next point of interest in our exploration of the genetic development of the doctrine of the Trinity is the Third Century. During the Third Century, there were many that tried to keep the monotheistic view of God by adhering to the heresy of Monarchianism. Although, there were

various forms of this heresy, it can be boiled down to two groups, Dynamic and Modalistic Monarchianism. According to Grenz *et al*, Monarchianism was “a movement in the second and third centuries that attempted to safeguard monotheism and the unity of the Godhead. By denying the personal reality of the Son and the Spirit as separate from the Father, however, this defensive attempt resulted in an anti-Trinitarian heresy” (Grenz *et al*, 80). Dynamic Monarchianism viewed Christ as being merely a prophet empowered by the Spirit. Modalism viewed Jesus as one of the modes God by which He revealed Himself as to the world.

Secondly, in the Third Century Sabellianism (Modalism) was dispelled accept in the region of North Africa. Dionysus of Alexandria wrote to refute the Libyan Bishop's Sabellianistic teaching. Actually, he overstated his case for the difference of the Father and Son, enraging the other Bishops. The Libyan Bishop then in turn wrote the Bishop of Rome, also named Dionysus. He rebuked both parties. This two opposing side's argument hinged on the whether the Son was *homoiousios* (of similar substance) or *homoousios* (or same in substance). The Bishop of Alexandria viewed the Son as being the “same in substance”. This will be of great importance in the showdown between Arius and Athanasius in the upcoming time period.

5. The Imperial Church

Arius, Athanasius, and the Council of Nicea

After Constantine's Edict of Milan, there was theological dispute that almost split the Roman Empire into to two factions. The battle raged for years until it was settled by two ecumenical councils. Although, there are many characters which were in this debate, it centered on a young priest named Arius and to begin with a young deacon, who would later become a Bishop name Athanasius.

First, this young priest began teaching that Christ was a created being. The driving force behind Arius' assertion is summed up by Winrich Lohr as he states, "Arius stresses the absolute singularity of God: He believes in one God, who alone is ingenerate, eternal, without beginning, true, having immortality, wise, good, and ruler" (Lohr, 122). It was logical that Christ was of "like or similar substance" to Arius because he was influenced by the concept of Greek metaphysics. Also, he did not see the difference between the terms "created" and "begotten"; to him they were the same.

On the other hand, Athanasius refuted the claims of Arius by saying Jesus was of the "same substance" with the Father; making him fully God. What difference does it make? For Athanasius our salvation was at stake and he argued from a soteriological standpoint. For Arius' idea to be correct then Christ was less than God, but more than human. For Athanasius, Christ had to be fully God and fully man to reunite the two. Also, he denied the need for the Father to have an intermediary to interact with the creation.

Finally, Constantine fearing the unity of the empire could be destroyed, he called the Bishops to come to Nicea to reach an agreement. There were mainly three parties involved at the Council of Nicea. They are the Lucianist (Arians), Alexander's followers, and the majority in attendance was Origenist (middle ground). Although, the works and teachings of Arius were condemned, this heresy raged on until the Council of Constantinople.

Athanasius and the Spirit

It is important to note that after the deity of Christ was settled many turned their attention to the divinity of the Spirit. Up until this time, the Spirit had not been a subject of debate, but Athanasius would rise to the forefront of the debate one more time. There were many teachings

about the divinity of the Spirit at this time. In a debate against a group called the *Pneumomachians* or Spirit-fighters, he appealed to the Spirit's importance in the work of salvation. If the Spirit was not divine our *theosis* or union with God is in peril. This issue was later settled at an ecumenical council.

Augustine of Hippo (AD 354-451)

Augustine of Hippo is one the most influential theologians when it comes to the reflections and writings on the doctrine of the Trinity. He wrote an enormous fifteen volume *Magnum Opus*, entitle *De Trinitate*. This theological wonder took over twenty years to complete. It is one on the most quoted and gleaned from works on the Trinity. Also, many scholars have suggested this was Augustine's most difficult writing.

In volumes eight through fifteen of this work, Saint Augustine delves into a deeper speculation into the Immanent Trinity. Augustine view of the Trinity was the Father as lover, the Son as the beloved, the Spirit as the mutual love between them. The love portrayed in the Triune Godhead informs us how we should interact with God and our fellowman. This will be important to Richard of St. Victor's doctrine of God in the Middle Age Era.

6. The Middle Ages

Richard of St. Victor

Richard of St. Victor when reflecting on the Trinity proposed that perfect love requires three. Richard was highly influenced by the Trinitarian concepts put forth by St. Augustine of Hippo. Cross writes, "Following the tradition of Augustine, Richard of St. Victor continues the meditation on the Trinity by focusing on the dimension of "perfect love" (Cross, 71). It is upon

this Augustinian foundation, Richard builds his argument for the “social doctrine of the Trinity”, which takes the concept to another level of theological reflection.

Thomas Aquinas (AD 1224 – 1274)

The Middle Ages produced a great Christian thinker and apologist in Thomas Aquinas. Cross states, “Whereas Richard provided a defense for belief in the Trinity by arguing for it in rational, almost philosophical terms, Thomas held that the doctrine could not be proven through such argumentation” (Cross, 73). Thomas begins with “divine simplicity”, he argues that “the relations are real and genuine” (Cross, 73). Cross writes, “In other words, when we think of the Trinity and the eternal relations developed among the distinctions, these are not accidental additions, but essential aspects of the nature of what make God truly divine” (Cross, 73).

7. The Great Awakening

Johnathan Edwards (AD 1703 – 1758)

Many may be surprised by the contribution of the Great Awakening preacher Johnathan Edwards. His work, *Discourse on the Trinity* went unnoticed and unpublished until the Twentieth Century. Cross declares, “Following upon new philosophical trends (especially those of John Locke), Edwards focused on an essential feature in his study of the divine Being, namely, the disposition” (Cross, 76). Edwards claimed the disposition of God is “to incline to communicate himself” (Cross, 76). This focus on disposition removed the idea of “being” from the metaphysical realm.

Friedrich Schleiermacher (AD 1768 – 1834)

As with John Edwards, the theology of Friedrich Schleiermacher was influenced by Enlightenment thought patterns. Cross states, “Schleiermacher represents an attempt to craft a theology after the Enlightenment Era and particularly after the philosophical writings of Immanuel Kant” (Cross, 82). Often, scholars have criticized the depth of the Schleiermacher’s reflection on the doctrine of God. He did probe the concept of a new and improved form of Sabellianism, as opposed to the orthodox view of the Godhead.

8. The Modern Era

Karl Barth (AD 1886 – 1968)

The German born theologian, Karl Barth, has been a staunch provider for theological reflection on the doctrine of the Trinity. Many scholars would argue apart from Saint Augustine of Hippo, no other writer has proposed as much.

First, Karl Barth has written extensively on the doctrine of the Trinity in his multi-volume work titled *Church Dogmatics*. In this work, he begins with the revelation and the Word of God. Barth begins with the Incarnate Christ, who reveals the doctrine of the Trinity. He goes on to reflect upon his thesis statement of “God reveals Himself. He reveals Himself through Himself. He reveals Himself”.

Secondly, it is important to mention that Barth was hesitant to use the term “person” when describing the distinctions with the God head. Iain Taylor records Barth as stating, “God reveals Himself as the one who is Lord in three modes [*Weisen*] which belong inseparably together just as they are irreducibly different: God the Father, Son and Spirit”(Taylor, 35). This should not be confused with modalism, but rather that Barth was trying to avoid the pitfall of the individualist notion of the term “persons” in modern society.

Karl Rahner (AD 1904-1984)

Karl Rahner was a German born Roman Catholic Theologian and Scholar. He contributed what is become to be known as the “Rahner’s Rule”. Cross writes, “First, we need to understand (once again) the 'economic' and 'immanent' Trinities. The economic Trinity is theology's way of describing the “salvific acts of God ad extra; the immanent Trinity describes the “distinctions of relation within God's own being” (Cross, 102). Rahner centered his doctrine around the Economic Trinity, because to reflect on the Immanent Trinity was mere speculation.

Secondly, Rahner realized the deficit in the language of “persons”, but it would not likely change due to tradition. Also, he submitted that the average Christian’s life was not informed by the Trinitarian doctrine. Gregory Havrilak writes about Rahner’s assumption, “Regardless of conciliar creeds or magisterial pronouncements, Christians ‘despite their orthodox confirmation of the Trinity... are in their practical life, almost mere monotheists” (Havrilak, 61-62). Rahner attempted to expose the practical applications of the doctrine of the Trinity through much of His writings and work. His work allows us to focus on how the doctrine informs our daily relations.

Jurgen Moltmann (AD 1926 -)

Jurgen Moltmann is a Trinitarian theologian born in Germany. Cross writes, “One of the foremost Trinitarian theologians of our time is Jurgen Moltmann” (Cross, 103). One of his famous Trinitarian works is *Trinity and the Kingdom*. Moltmann approach to the doctrine of God is different in that he begins with the Threeness of the Trinity and works his way to the unity. He focuses on the triune to reveal the God of the Bible.

Secondly, Moltmann proposed in his book *The Crucified God* that the crucifixion was an event within the Trinity itself. Christiaan Mostert writes,

The only way to avoid reducing the doctrine to abstract speculation, in Moltmann's view, is to make the *theologia salvifica* the starting point of trinitarian thinking; in other words, to begin with the incarnation and the cross, rather than with any kind of natural theology (Mostert, 162).

This gives the emphasis Moltmann placed on the cross-event. The cross-event was an event with the Trinity. He viewed both Father and Son suffering during the act of crucifixion. The Father was grieved to see the Son become the sin of the world. Also, the Son suffers physically and spiritually, being separated from the Father for the first time in eternity. This type of reflections reveals the heart and motive of God to redeem mankind.

Catherine Mowry LaCunga (AD 1952-1997)

The last theologian we will consider is Catherine Mowry LaCunga. She would have had more of an impact if her life was not cut tragically short. She was influenced by Karl Rahner's rule concerning the Immanent and Economic Trinity. Cross writes,

Along with a number of scholars we have already noted in previous pages, LaCunga suggests that the 'orthodox' rule of thumb had been to view God the Son as equal with the Father in terms of ontology (i.e., 'being' or 'substance', while viewing God the Son as subordinate to God the Father in terms of function in salvation history (i.e., 'economic Trinity'). She calls this functional inferiority an "orthodox subordinationism (Cross, 110).

This orthodox subordinationism is one of most influential contributions to the genetic development of the doctrine of the Trinity.

Secondly, she was an adamant relational aspect of the Trinity. LaCunga voice for suggested Christians “live trinitarian faith” (Cross, 112). She brings this forth from the perichorectic relation of the Godhead. Brad A. Binaui records LaCunga’s view,

The doctrine of the Trinity is ultimately...a teaching not about the abstract nature of God, nor about God in isolation from everything other than God, but a teaching about God’s life with us and our life with each other (Binaui, 16).

In LaCunga’s doctrine of the Trinity a great emphasis was placed on the relational aspect. In other words, Christians live for God and for others.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, the doctrine of the Trinity is vitally important for a Christian to have an orthodox view of the Godhead. At the beginning of church history, it appears the focus was more upon the salvific element of Trinity. Over the years, one can easily identify, after the three and one issue was settled, that the emphasis shifted to the relational aspect of the doctrine of the Trinity. We can formulate an orthodox view of the Triune nature of the Godhead which is vital to our salvation and can inform our relationships by reflecting on the different contributions of Christians thinkers down through the ages.

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