

**Dr. Robert A. Peterson, Theology Proper, Session 4,
Historical Soundings on the Trinity, Third Century
and Introduction to Augustine**

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This is Dr. Robert A. Peterson in his teaching on theology proper, or God. This is session 4, Historical Soundings on the Trinity, Third Century and introduction to Augustine.

We continue our study of the Trinity with the historical theology of the Trinity and with J.N.D. Kelly's Early Christian Doctrines moved along to third-century Trinitarianism.

The third century saw the emergence of conflicting tendencies in Trinitarian thought, which were to provide the material for later controversies. Hitherto the overriding preoccupation of Christian theism had been with the unity of God. The struggle with paganism and Gnosticism thrust this article well into the foreground.

As a result, while theologians were obscurely aware of distinctions within the one indivisible Godhead, they showed little disposition to explore the eternal relations of the three, much less to construct a conceptual and linguistic apparatus capable of expressing them. Economic Trinitarianism of the type of the early fathers continued to find its exponents in the late second and early third centuries. Its very success, however, brought to the surface a powerful reaction in circles, which fought shy of the Logos doctrine and suspected that the growing emphasis on the triplicity disclosed by revelation imperiled the divine unity.

This current of thought was chiefly evident in the West. It was called Monarchianism because its adherents, as Tertullian faced it, took fright at the economy and sought refuge in the monarchy. Monarchia in Greek, that is the axiom that there was one divine source and principle of all things.

At the same time, a diametrically opposite movement was underway in the East. This took the form of a frankly pluralistic conception of the deity, which tried, without sacrificing the basic tenet of monotheism, to do justice to the reality and distinction of the three within God's eternal being. In other words, to their subsistence as persons.

Though first associated in the first instance with Alexandria, this new approach was destined to leave a permanent impression on Greek Trinitarianism as a whole and, indeed, on Christian thinking generally. Hippolytus and Tertullian, our first task is to consider two theologians who stood more or less directly in the line of the Apologist and Irenaeus. They were the Roman Catholic, Roman anti-pope, and martyr

Hippolytus, who died in 235, and the North African Tertullian around 160 to 220, or some scholars say around 220.

Like their predecessors, both had set great store by monotheism, devoting their energies to the refutation of Gnostic dualism. Their ideas were similar in some ways, but Hippolytus was sketchier and had a more archaic flavor. Tertullian's brilliant mind was able to formulate a statement of more lasting value.

The clue to their teaching as to that of Irenaeus is to approach it simultaneously from two opposite directions, considering God A, as he exists in his eternal being and B, as he reveals himself in the process of creation and redemption. The comprehensive term they borrowed from Irenaeus for the latter was economy. Greek, *oikonomia*, Latin, *dispensatio*.

From meaning the divine plan or God's secret purpose, the word became applied in Christian theology to the incarnation, the goal of the divine purpose. Among its original meanings, however, was that of distribution, organization, the arrangement of a number of factors in a regular order or taxes, Greek word, and so it was extended to denote the distinction of father and son, father, excuse me, to denote the distinction of Son and Spirit from the one Father as disclosed in the working out of God's redemptive plan, the economy. First, then, Hippolytus and Tertullian both had the conception of God existing in unique solitariness from all eternity, yet having imminent in and indivisibly one with himself on the analogy of the mental functions of a man, his reason or word.

This is the doctrine familiar since the apologist of the Logos and Diathetos, and Hippolytus actually uses the technical term. For him, as for Tation and Irenaeus, God's word and his wisdom are distinguished, being, in fact, the Son and the Spirit regarded as imminent, but Tertullian follows a tradition that equates wisdom with the word. Tertullian is explicit, pointing out that before all things, God was alone, being his own universe, location, everything.

He was alone, however, in the sense that there was nothing external to himself, but even then, he was not really alone, for he had with him the reason which he possessed within himself, that is to say his own reason. Moreover, he brings out much more clearly than any of his predecessors the otherness or individuality of this imminent reason or word. The divine word with which God had been radocinating from everlasting and which constitutes, quote, a second in addition to himself, close quote.

Secondly, however, the threefoldness of God's intrinsic being is manifested, excuse me, in creation and redemption. According to Hippolytus, when God willed, he engendered his word, using him to create the universe and his wisdom to adorn or

order it. Later, still with the world's salvation in view, he rendered the word hitherto invisible, invisible at the incarnation.

Thereupon, alongside the Father, that is, the Godhead himself, there was another Godhead itself; there was another, a second person, while the Spirit completed the triad. But if there are three revealed in the economy, there is, in fact, only one God since it is the Father who commands, the Son who obeys, and the Spirit who makes us understand. Hippolytus is most insistent on the essential unity, stating that there is only one power and that when I speak of another, I do not mean two gods, but as it were, light from light, water from its source, a ray from the sun.

Those words made their way into some of the creeds. For there's only one power, and that which issues from the all. The all is the Father, and the power issuing from the all is the word.

He's the Father's mind, thus all things are through him, but he alone is from the Father." Again, these words shouldn't be judged by later theology, because if you do so, they sound subordinationist, as if the persons were not persons, that's a later word, as if the three were not eternal, but it's not fair to judge him on that basis. It's to commit an anachronism. Hippolytus was reluctant to designate the word as Son in any other than a proleptic sense till the incarnation, a prophetic sense.

Tertullian followed the apologist in dating his perfect generation from his extrapolation for the work of creation. Prior to that moment, God could not strictly be said to have had a son, while after it, the term father, which for earlier theologians generally connoted Father God as the author of reality, began to acquire the specialized meaning of Father of the Son. As so generated, the word Son is a person, persona, and second in addition to the Father.

In the third place, however, there is the Spirit, the representative or deputy of the Son. He issues from the Father by way of the Son, being third from the Father and the Son, just as the fruit derived from the shoot is third from the root, and as the channel drawn off from the river is third from the spring, and as the light point in the beam is third from the sun. He, too, is a person, so that the godhead is a trinity, Trinitas.

Tertullian is the first to employ the word. The three are indeed numerically distinct, being capable of being counted. Thus Tertullian can state, "we believe in only one God, yet subject to this dispensation, which is our word for economy, that the one only God has also a son, his word, who has issued out of himself, which Son then sent, according to his promise, the Holy Spirit, the paraclete, out of the Father."

Later, in the same context, he can balance the divine unity with "the mystery of the economy, which distributes the three into Trinity, setting forth Father, Son, and Spirit as three." Tertullian exerted himself to show that the threeness revealed in the economy was in no way incompatible with God's essential unity. Like Hippolytus, he argued that though three persons were several manifestations of a single indivisible power, noting that on the analogy of the imperial government, one in the same sovereignty could be exercised by coordinate agencies.

Like the apologist, he again and again repudiated the suggestion that the distinction between the three involved any division or separation. It was a *distinctio* or *dispositio*, a distribution, not a *separatio*, and he quoted the unity between the root and its shoot, the source and the river, and the sun and its light as illustrations. His characteristic way of expressing this was to state that Father, Son, and Spirit are one in substance.

Thus, Father and Son are one identical substance, which has been not divided, but extended. The Savior's claim, I and the Father are one, indicates that the three are one reality, quote, not one person, pointing as it does to identity of substance and not mere numerical unity. The Son is of one substance with the Father, and the Son and the Spirit are common with the substance of the Father.

Using crudely materialistic language, he regarded the divine Spirit as a highly rarified species of matter, metaphorically. Kantarian can say, quote, that the Father is the whole substance, while the Son is a derivation from and portion of the whole, close quote, where the context makes it plain that portion is not to be taken literally as implying any division or severance. Thus, when he sums up the matter, he dismisses the idea that the persons can be three in status, substance, or power.

As regards these, the Godhead is indivisibly one, and the threeness applies only to the grade, aspect, or manifestation in which the persons are presented. Hippolytus and Tertullian were at one with Irenaeus in regarding the three revealed in the economy as manifestations of the plurality which they apprehended, however obscurely, in the imminent life of the Godhead. Where there was an advance of Irenaeus was in their attempts, one, a, to make explicit the oneness of the divine power or substance of which the three were expressions or forms, and b, in their description of them as persons, *prosopa*, Greek, *personae*, Latin.

This latter term, it should be noted, was still reserved for them as manifested in the order of revelation. Only later did it come to be applied to the word in the Spirit as imminent in God's eternal being. There's been much discussion about the precise meaning of their terminology, some arguing that for Tertullian, at any rate, with his legal upbringing, *substantial* signified a piece of property that several people could jointly own.

In fact, however, the metaphorical sense was foremost in his mind, and the word connoted the divine essence, that of which God is with the emphasis on its concrete reality. As he remarks, "God is the name for the substance, that is, the divinity, and the word, so far from being a mere notional non-entity, is substantial, a substance composed of spirit and wisdom and reason." Hence, when he speaks of the Son as being of one substance with the Father, he means they share the same divine nature or essence.

And, in fact, since the Godhead is indivisible, are one identical being. On the other hand, the terms person and person, Greek and Latin, were admirably suited to express the otherness or independent subsistence of the three. After originally meaning face, and so expression, and then role, the former Greek *prosopa*, or face or person, came to signify individual, the stress being usually on the external aspect or objective presentation.

The primary sense of the Latin *persona* was a mask, from which the transition was easy for the actor who wore it and the character he played. In legal usage, it could stand for the holder of the title to a property, but as employed by Tertullian, it connoted the concrete presentation of an individual as such. In neither case, it should be noted, was the idea of self-consciousness nowadays associated with person, and personal at all prominent.

Dynamic monarchism, the closing decades of the second century, witnessed the emergence of two forms of teaching, which, though fundamentally different, have been brought together by modern historians under the common name of monarchianism. Dynamic monarchianism, more accurately called adoptionism, was the theory that Christ was a mere man, upon whom God's Spirit had descended. It was essentially a Christological heresy, but the circumstances in which it arose justify its treatment here, under Trinitarianism.

Modalism, so there's dynamic monarchianism and modalistic monarchianism. What do they have in common? Monarchianism is the kingship and unity of God. These errors, and they were big errors, demonstrates the church did not deviate from the unity of the Godhead.

As a matter of fact, it was so big that they tried to account for the data concerning the Son especially, and the Spirit, wrongly. But it could not be moved from the unity of God. That's good.

These other results were terrible. Christ is a mere man.

And God adopted him by giving him the Spirit. Well, isn't that what happened at his baptism? No. The eternal Son who became man was given the Spirit for him to do his earthly ministry at his baptism.

He wasn't, and yes, he was adopted in a sense, but not in this sense, of being a mere man and being adopted as some kind of a divine lesser than God being. Modalism, which alone was designated by monarchianism by the contemporaries, tended to blur the distinctions between the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The classification of both as forms of monarchianism stems from the assumptions that despite different starting points and motives, they were united by a concern for the divine unity, or monarchia.

Modalistic monarchianism. If dynamic monarchianism was a relatively isolated phenomenon with a predominantly rationalist appeal, the same cannot be said of monarchianism proper, otherwise called modalism, which was a fairly widespread popular trend of thought, which could reckon on at any rate a measure of sympathy in official circles. And the driving force behind it was the two-fold conviction passionately held of the oneness of God and the full deity of Christ.

What forced it into the open was the mounting suspicion that the former of these truths was being endangered, the unity of God, by the new Logos doctrine and by the efforts of theologians to represent the Godhead as having revealed itself in the economy as tri-personal. Three are God? Doesn't that endanger the unity of God? That is a unnegotiable truth. It was, but this result was not good.

Any suggestion that the Word or Son was other than or a distinct person from the Father seemed to the modalists to lead inescapably to the blasphemy of two gods. So consequently, the modalistic monarchians taught that there is one God, and indeed he revealed himself as Father, and in Christ he revealed himself as Son, and at Pentecost and thereafter he revealed himself as Spirit. But these were done successively, not simultaneously.

Now God, the one God, was Father. Now, the same one God was Son, no longer Father. And now the one God was revealed as Spirit, no longer Father or Son.

The use of the word mode is not decisive, for we can talk about there being three persons, three modes of being, and three ways of being within the one divine essence, and that's all orthodox ways of speaking. But what is critical is, are the three simultaneously God, or are the three successively God? Oneness Pentecostalism is a modern form of modalism, which holds to Jesus the Father, Jesus the Son, and Jesus the Holy Spirit. In the Arian struggle, those who denied the deity of Christ, the question agitating men's minds was the full deity of the Son.

Although this was an essential constituent in the doctrine of the Trinity, the latter was at first kept in the background. The Nicene Creed, indeed, merely affirmed belief in the Holy Spirit, and many years had to elapse before there was any public controversy about the Spirit's position in the Godhead. Nevertheless, a discussion of the deeper issues could not be postponed indefinitely, and here, we will trace the formulation of Trinitarian orthodoxy.

The theologians chiefly responsible for this were in the East, the Cappadocian Fathers. I need another line there, thank you, my friend. Basil the Great, 325 to 379, Gregory of Nyssa, his brother, 335 to 395, and Gregory Nazianzus, 325 to 390.

Gregory of Nyssa was the younger brother of Basil. In the West, Augustine, of course. We want to see how they did it, but there are some lines of thought that lead us to that.

The first is the conversion of a great number of homo-et-ousian churchmen to the acceptance of the homo-ousian view. Oh my goodness, did I tell you before, we professional theologians love these things because they keep us employed, these distinctions. The second was, and I'll explain what I'm talking about, the emergence of interest in the status of the Holy Spirit, culminating in his recognition as fully personal and consubstantial with the Father and the Son.

Christian theology has been attacked. Can you imagine people going to war over one Greek letter? Well, whether the Son is equal with the Father and the Father, or he's like him, is a rather important concept, and yes, it could be expressed by a letter or by a thousand words, regardless, it's an important matter. The figures largely concerned in the first of these developments were Athanasius and Hilary of Poitiers.

Both of them realized, as regards the fundamental issues, that the gap between the homo-et-ousians and the Nicene party, homo-ousians, was extremely narrow and that the final success of the latter could be ensured by establishing a rapprochement between them. So, in his *De Sinatis* 359, Athanasius made a conciliatory gesture, saluting the homo-et-ousians as brothers who, in essentials, were at one with himself, since they recognized that the Son was out of the Father's ousia, and not from another hypostasis. His authentic offspring and co-eternal with him, they were near enough to admitting the homo-ousian, which alone expressed with precision the truth which they evidently accepted.

Hilary went even further in his formulations. A further practical step of great importance was taken in 362 at the Council of Alexandria, which met under Athanasius' chairmanship. Every alert reader must have noticed and been astonished by the extent to which theological divisions at this time were created and kept alive by the use of different and mutually confusing theological terms.

At the Council of Alexandria, it was formally recognized that what mattered was not the language used, but the meaning underlying it. Yay! Linguistic progress, my friends. Thus, the formula, three hypostases, hitherto suspect to the Nicenes, because it sounded in their ears painfully like three ousia, three divine beings, was pronounced legitimate, provided it did not carry the Aryan connotation of utterly distinct alien hypostases, different in substance from each other.

In other words, three principles or different gods. What's happening is conciliation by virtue of the definition and guarding of language, but merely expressed, that is, ousia, three ousia, merely expressed the separate subsistence of the three persons in the consubstantial triad. The opposite formula, one hypostasis, so disturbing to anti-Nicenes of every school, was equally approved, its adherents being explained that they had no civilian intent, but equating hypostasis with ousia, were merely trying to bring out the unity of nature between the Father and the Son.

By this statesman-like decision, which incidentally shocked many in the West, who saw in three hypostases a confession of tritheism, the union between the two parties was virtually sealed, and we can see foreshadowed in it the formula that became the badge of orthodoxy, one ousia, three hypostases, one essence, three persons. The theory has been advanced that in making these overtures, Athanasius and Hilary were sanctioning the use of the homoousion in a home atousion sense, and that is an error which we will not pursue, if considered as father and son, the persons are two, and can properly be designated as like, the substance which they both possess, and are in one, and are is one and indivisible. This statesman-like attitude of Athanasius and Hilary was not without effect.

Coming at a time when the great body of the homoousions were growing increasingly apprehensive of the menace of unmitigated Arianism, it quieted their suspicions that the orthodox party was inveterately Sabelian, and made the homoousion theology more palatable to them. The homoousion of the Spirit, Athanasius, the second line of development, that is the recognition of the full deity of the Spirit, demands a lengthier discussion, including an account of the pioneer contribution of Athanasius. Since Origen's day, theological reflection about the Spirit had lagged noticeably behind devotional practice.

Origen created trouble in exegesis of John 1-3 to argue that the spirit is one of the things that had come into existence through the sun. Yikes. The Cappadocians had to address some of these issues.

If they were to answer the Arian jibe, that the homoousion of the Spirit seemed to involve the Father in having two sons, the Cappadocians rather differentiated between the mode of Origen of the sun and that of the spirit. Gregory of Nyssa

provided what was to prove the definitive statement. The other two Cappadocians were not as clear or emphatic.

The Spirit, Gregory of Nyssa taught, is out of God and is of Christ. He proceeds out of the father and receives from the son. He cannot be separated from the word.

From this it's a short step to the idea of the two-fold procession of the spirit. According to Gregory of Nyssa, the three persons are to be distinguished by their origin, the Father being cause and the other two caused. The two persons who are caused may be further designated for one of them is directly produced by the Father while the other proceeds from the Father through an intermediary.

Viewed in this light, the Son alone can claim the title only begotten, and the Spirit's relation to the Father is in no way prejudiced by the fact that he derives his being from him through the Son. All this is eternal, they're not created beings. Elsewhere Gregory speaks of the Son as related to the Spirit as cause to effect and uses the analogy of a torch imparting its light first to touch another to another torch and then through it to a third in order to illustrate the relation of the three persons.

It is clearly Gregory's doctrine that the Son acts as an agent, no doubt in subordination to the Father who's the fountainhead of the Trinity in the production of the Spirit. After him the regular teaching of the eastern church is that the procession of the Holy Spirit is out of the Father through the Son. As stated by the Cappadocians, the idea of the two-fold procession from the Father through the Son lacks all trace of subordinationism for its setting is a wholehearted recognition of the homo ocean of the spirit.

The Spirit is of the same substance as the Father and the Son. In other words, the Spirit is also God while there is only one God. The Cappadocians and the Trinity, the climax of the developments we've been studying was the affirmation reaffirmation of the Nicene faith at the council of Constantinople in 381.

At this time, the consubstantiality of the Spirit and of the Son was formally endorsed. The theology which prevailed as exemplified by the great Cappadocians themselves and by teachers like Didymus the blind and Evagrius Ponticus may be fairly described as in substance that of Athanasius. It is true that their angle of approach was somewhat different than his emerging from the homo ocean tradition it was natural that they should make the three hypostases rather than the one divine substance their starting point.

Like Athanasius they were champions of the homo ocean both of the Son and of the Spirit. The essence of their doctrine is that the one godhead exists simultaneously that's what sets it apart from modalistic monarchism or modalism which held

successively god exists as Father Son and Spirit. Essence of their doctrine is that the one godhead exists simultaneously in three modes of being or hypostases.

So Boswell remarks, "Everything that the Father is is as seen in the Son and everything the Son is seeing that the Son belongs to the Father the Son in his entirety abides in the Father and in return possesses the Father in entirety in himself. Thus the hypostasis of the son is so to speak the form and presentation by which the father is known and the father's hypostasis is recognized in the form of the son. Here we have the doctrine of the co-inherence or as it was later called perichoresis of the divine persons.

The godhead can be said to exist undivided in divided persons and there is an identity of nature in the three hypostases. The three have one nature namely god the ground and unity being the father out of which and towards whom the subsequent persons are reckoned. While all subordinationism is excluded the father remains in the eyes of the Cappadocians the source fountainhead or principle of the godhead.

That is Eastern Christianity to this day. The thought is that he imparts his being to the two other persons, and so can be said to cause them, yet this is an eternal impartation of being. To explain how one substance can be simultaneously present in three persons, they appeal to the analogy of a universal and its particulars.

From this point of view each of the divine hypostases is the *usia* or essence of godhead determined by its appropriate particularizing characteristic. For basal those particularizing characteristics are respectively paternity the Father, sonship the Son, and sanctifying power or sanctification the spirit. The other Cappadocians define them more precisely as in generateness unbegottenness the Father generateness begottenness the Son and mission or procession the Spirit.

Thus the distinction of the persons is grounded in their origin eternal origin within the godhead and mutual relation. The Cappadocians had thus analyzed ways in which the one indivisible divine substance distributes and presents itself and hence they came to be termed modes of coming to be. In modern language, the whole unvaried substance being in composite is identical with the whole unvaried being of each person.

The individuality is only the manner in which the identical substance is objectively presented in each several person. The Cappadocians had thus analyzed the conception of hypostases hypostasis much more thoroughly than Athanasius. Accusations that they were tritheistic are absurd and are to be rejected.

The contribution of Saint Augustine 354 to 430 the greatest father of the early church and maybe the most influential Christian in the history of the church at least through the Reformation for Luther and Calvin both regarded him as their teacher. It was Augustine, however, who gave the Western tradition of the Cappadocians gave the Eastern tradition its shape. It was Augustine however who gave the western tradition its mature and final expression.

All his life as a Christian, he was meditating the problem of the Trinity, explaining the church's doctrine to inquirers and defending it against attack. perhaps his greatest work is the long and elaborate discussion known as *De Trinitate* on the Trinity, which he put together at different dates between 399 and 419. He accepts without question the truth that there is one God who is a who is Trinity and that Father, Son, and Spirit are at once distinct and coessential numerically one in substance, and his writings abound in detailed statements of it. He nowhere attempts to prove it; however, it's a datum of revelation which, in his view, scripture proclaims on almost every page and which the catholic faith, the universal faith, hands on to believers.

This is a supreme example of his principle that faith must precede understanding. A principle made more famous by Anselm but as usual the source is Augustine. While Augustine's exposition of trinitarian orthodoxy is scriptural throughout his conception of god as absolute being simple and indivisible transcending the categories forms its ever-present background.

So, in contrast to the tradition which made the father its starting point, the Eastern tradition he began, he begins with the divine nature itself. Several corollaries follow from this emphasis on the oneness of the divine nature. We'll explore these more tomorrow I'm just giving the outlines in our next lecture I mean I'll just give some outlines now.

This leads to this distinction of the persons which Augustine sees is grounded in their mutual relations within the godhead. Third, Augustine was always puzzled to explain what the procession of the spirit is or where it differs from the Son's generation. Lastly, Augustine's most original contribution to trinitarian theology is their use of analogies from the structure of the human soul.

The function of these, it should be noted, is not so much to demonstrate god as a trinity. On his view, revelation teaches that to deepen our understanding of the mystery of the absolute oneness and yet the real distinction between the three. God willing, we will explore Augustine's teaching, which represents the crown of the West's trinitarian theology, in our next lecture.

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