

## The Trinitarian Processions

Some of you may have noticed that the model that I gave doesn't include the derivation of one person from the other which is enshrined in the confession of the Nicene Creed that the Son is begotten of the Father, light of light, very God of very God, begotten not made. The model doesn't preclude that either. It just leaves it an open question. So if you want to add the derivation of one person from another, you are free to do so, as William Hasker has done with my model. But on the model as I've laid it out, God could just exist eternally with his three sets of cognitive faculties and capacities. I, frankly, think this is a strength of the model because although the doctrine of the generation of the Son from the Father and the procession of the Spirit is a part of Nicene orthodoxy, nevertheless it seems to be a relic of the old *Logos* Christology of the Greek apologists which has no warrant in the biblical text and seems to me to introduce a kind of subordinationism into the Godhead which anybody who wants to affirm the full deity of Christ ought to find troubling.

Biblically speaking, the vast majority of contemporary New Testament scholars recognize that the word which is translated in the authorized version as "only begotten" (namely *monogenes*) does not refer to the procession of the Son from the Father. It's true that when this word is used in the context of a family, then to say that a child is *monogenes* or an only child would imply that he's the only begotten. But when you look at the biblical references to *monogenes* like John 1:14 or John 1:18 they're not talking about some kind of pre-creation or eternal procession of the divine Son from the Father. Rather, they seem to be connected with the

historical Jesus's being God's Son. It is in virtue of the incarnation that Jesus is God's special Son. Look, for example, at Luke 1:35 as an illustration of this. This is the annunciation to Mary by the angel Gabriel. In verse 35 Gabriel says to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most high will overshadow you. Therefore the child to be born will be called Holy, the Son of God." Here Jesus' being the Son is connected with the virginal conception. It's because Jesus had no human father that he could be called God's special Son. If that's right, then Jesus being *monogenes* has less to do with the Trinity than with the incarnation.

You can still see this primitive understanding of Jesus' Sonship in the letters of the first-century, post-apostolic church father Ignatius. Ignatius describes Christ as "one Physician, of flesh and of spirit, begotten and unbegotten, . . . both of Mary and of God" (*Ephesians 7*). Here Ignatius associates Jesus' being begotten with his flesh being begotten of Mary, but insofar as he is Spirit and of God, he is unbegotten. There is no idea here in Ignatius that Christ is begotten in his divine nature.

The transference of Jesus being God's Son from Jesus of Nazareth to the pre-incarnate *Logos* seems to be an invention of these early Greek apologists. I think it has served to depreciate the importance of the historical Jesus for Christian faith.

Theologically speaking, orthodox theology rejects firmly any depreciation of the Son with regard to the Father. For example, Athanasius writes, "They that depreciate the Only-Begotten Son of God blaspheme God, defaming His perfection and accusing Him of imperfection, and render themselves liable to the severest

chastisement" (*In illud omnia mihi tradita sunt* 6). Here what Athanasius is condemning is subordinationism, which is a doctrine inspired by Gnostic or Neo-Platonic thought, which conceived of God as "the One" - a kind of undifferentiated unity which then in a kind of series of stair steps descends down to the world in which you have intermediate stages that are not equal to the One but are lower-class deities. For example, Origen, who was trained under the Neo-Platonist philosopher Ammonius Saccas, speaks of the Son as a deity of the second rank, having a sort of derivative divinity as far removed from that of the Father as he himself is from creatures. He says the Son's divinity is as far from the Father's divinity as it is from the creatures below him. That kind of subordinationism was rejected by the church fathers. Origen was condemned for holding such a view. Yet at the same time these very same theologians continued to affirm the doctrine that the *Logos* is begotten of the Father. The Son in their view derives his being from God the Father. Athanasius says this: "the Son has His being not of Himself but of the Father" (*On the Opinion of Dionysius* 15). Hilary (another church father) declares that "He is not the source of His own being. . . . it is from His [the Father's] abiding nature that the Son draws His existence through birth" (*On the Trinity* 9.53; 6.14; cf. 4.9). These same theologians who affirmed the full equality of the Son and the Father also affirmed that the Son doesn't have existence in himself but derives his being from the Father. Despite their assurances to the contrary, I don't think that this can do anything but diminish the Son because he becomes an effect which is contingent upon the Father. Even if this eternal procession takes place necessarily and apart from the Father's will, the Son is less than the Father because the Father

alone exists *a se*, that is to say through himself or of himself. He has aseity. The Father exists *a se* while the Son exists through another.

It is very interesting to note that the early church fathers interpreted the Arian proof-text (John 14:28), “The Father is greater than I,” not in terms of Christ’s humanity but in terms of his being generated eternally from the Father. Athanasius, for example, affirms that the reason the Father is greater than the Son is because only the Father is unbegotten. Similarly Hilary says, “The Father is greater than the Son: for manifestly He is greater Who makes another to be all that He Himself is, Who imparts to the Son by the mystery of the birth the image of His own unbegotten nature, Who begets Him from Himself into His own form” (*On the Trinity* 9.54). Doesn’t that make the Son therefore inferior to the Father if the Father is the source and the origin of the Son? Hilary denies it. Hilary says, “The Father therefore is greater, because He is Father: but the Son, because He is Son, is not less” (9.56). The Father is greater than the Son, but the Son is not less than the Father. That’s just to talk logical nonsense. That’s like saying that six is greater than three, but three is not less than six. That just doesn’t make logical sense.

Basil, one of the Cappadocian church fathers, sees the contradiction in Hilary’s statement, but he tries to avoid this contradiction by saying, “the evident solution is that the Greater refers to origination, while the Equal belongs to the Nature” (*Fourth Theological Oration* 9). So what Basil is saying is that the Father is greater in terms of origination (because he's unbegotten, whereas the Son is begotten) but in terms of nature they both share

the same nature and therefore are equal. This reply seems to me to raise all kinds of difficult questions. Doesn't it belong to the nature of the Father as an individual person to be unbegotten? And doesn't it belong to the nature of the Son as an individual person to be begotten? Or is there a possible world in which the Father is begotten rather than unbegotten? Classical trinitarian theology would deny this. So how are the Father and the Son equal in nature if greatness refers to origination and the manner of their origination is essential to their individual natures? Suppose that they are equal in nature (their essence) but that the Father has the contingent property of being unbegotten and the Son has the contingent property of being begotten. In that case they have the same nature but the Father still has this contingent property of being unbegotten, a property the Son lacks. Wouldn't that make him greater than the Son at least in this respect?

So at the end of the day what Basil has to say is that having self-existence is not after all a perfection or a great-making property. He says, "That which is from such a Cause is not inferior to that which has no Cause; for it would share the glory of the Unoriginate, because it is from the Unoriginate" (Ibid.). That does not seem to me to be a convincing answer. To be dependent upon the unoriginated being for one's existence is to lack a ground of being in oneself alone, and that surely is not as great as to be a self-existent being that is able to exist all on one's own. It has the ground of its existence in itself. This kind of derivative being is the same way in which creatures exist. Creatures exist in virtue of being caused by another.

So despite the protestations to the contrary, it does seem to me that Nicaean orthodoxy has not completely shed the sort of subordinationism that was introduced into the doctrine of the Trinity by the early Greek apologists with their *Logos* doctrine.

### Ontological and Economic Trinity

So suppose that we drop from the doctrine of the Trinity the notion that the Son and the Spirit proceed eternally from the Father.

Remember I said the model I've offered doesn't feature it, though it doesn't preclude it. So let's suppose we drop that. How then should we understand the intra-trinitarian relations? Here I want to draw a distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity. By the ontological Trinity, I mean the Trinity as it exists in and of itself apart from God's relationship to creation. This is the Trinity insofar as God exists in and of himself apart from any relation to the created order. The economic Trinity has reference to the different roles played by the persons of the Trinity in relation to the world and in particular to the plan of salvation. So the question that is: to what degree is the economic Trinity a reflection of the ontological Trinity?

Here I want to mention a church father that is perhaps not so well known to you, but important in his own time – Marcellus of Ancyra. Marcellus was one of the leaders at the Council of Nicaea who championed the orthodox cause. But as Marcellus read the Gospel of John he noticed that the *Logos* is not referred to as “the Son” until after the incarnation. In fact you would be hard-pressed to find anywhere in the New Testament where there is a reference unambiguously to the pre-incarnate Christ as “the Son.” These observations led Marcellus to hypothesize that prior to creation the

economic Trinity just did not exist. The *Logos* becomes “the Son” only with his incarnation. So on Marcellus’ view the relations in the economic Trinity do not always mirror the distinctions within the ontological Trinity. Although they didn't agree with Marcellus’ rather maverick view, both Athanasius and the other members of the Nicene party continued to support him. Although he was pushing the boundaries of orthodoxy, they felt that he was still one of themselves and part of the orthodox party.

Similarly on the model that I’ve presented the persons of the ontological Trinity can be just as similar to one another as three individuals can be in terms of having the same knowledge, the same love, the same will, although each one from its own first-person perspective. In a possible world in which God did not create any world at all but just existed alone the economic Trinity would not exist even though the ontological Trinity would exist.

In contrast to Marcellus we don’t need to say that the economic Trinity began at the moment of creation. We could say that the economic Trinity exists eternally because the persons of the Godhead all knew the respective roles that they would play in the plan of salvation. They have foreknowledge of the different roles that they will play even if the deployment of that economy doesn't take place until the fullness of time when Christ eventually becomes incarnate and so forth.

On this view the economic Trinity can be just as eternal as the ontological Trinity, but it isn't fundamental to the nature of God or of the persons. On this view within the economic Trinity there is subordination (or maybe a better word would be submission) of one person to another. As we’ve read in the Scripture, the Son

submits to and does the Father's will, and the Spirit speaks not on his own account, but he speaks on behalf of the Son. This economic Trinity does not mirror or reflect differences between the persons in the ontological Trinity. Rather the economic Trinity is an expression of God's free and loving condescension on our behalf for the sake of our salvation. So on this view the error of *Logos* Christology was conflating the economic Trinity with the ontological Trinity and thereby introducing subordinationism right into the nature of God himself rather than seeing it as purely functional.

So those are my comments on the Trinitarian processions. What I've said is highly controversial, and I've tried to represent fairly what Nicene orthodoxy holds and how my view would differ from it. But my model doesn't preclude, as I say, the procession of one person from another; it just doesn't include it, and it seems to me that that's a strength of the model in light of these comments.

Next time I will offer a plausibility argument for the truth of the doctrine of the Trinity.