

# The Trinity – Historical Background

New Member's Class, "The Trinity Explained", Matthew Erickson

**Tertullian**, late 2<sup>nd</sup> century Latin theologian from Carthage (c.160-c.212)

- Coined the term 'trinity' in Latin: *trinitas*
- Divided history and our own personal history with God into three stages:
  - The age of the Father (Creation & Old Testament)
  - The age of the Son (The Incarnation)
  - The age of the Spirit (post-Pentecost)
- Described the diversity and unity of the Trinity with two Latin terms:
  - *Persona* (lit. 'a mask') – persons; referring to the 'three-ness' of God
  - *Substantia* – substance; referring to the oneness of God, or what the persons have in common

**Origen**, early 3<sup>rd</sup> century Greek theologian from Alexandria (c.185-c.254)

- Described the son as 'eternally begotten' of the Father
- Described the diversity and unity of the Trinity with two Greek terms:
  - *Hypostasis* – person; referring to the 'three-ness' of God
  - *Ousia* – substance or essence; referring to the essential shared oneness of God
- Arranged the Trinity in a hierarchical structure with the Father holding superior divinity over the Son and the Spirit; this is later condemned as the heretical view 'subordinationism'

**Council of Nicaea** (325)

- First ecumenical council; a gathering of church leaders by the Emperor Constantine to deal with conflict over differing views about Christ's nature
- Conflict centered around two figures:
  - **Arius** – taking Origen's hierarchy to greater lengths; saw Jesus as a divine yet created being
  - **Athanasius** – viewed the Son as co-equal, co-eternal, and of co-essence with the Father
- First declaration for Trinitarian view of God
- First declarations against specific heresies:
  - **Arianism**: The view that Jesus the Son is not divine in the same way in which the Father is divine; Jesus is understood as a divine being created in time and subordinated to the Father
  - **Modalism**: Over-emphasizing the unity of God, this view wrongly identifies the persons of the Trinity as specific modes by which the one God revealed himself; the persons do not co-exist.

### **Athanasius**, 4<sup>th</sup> century theologian and Bishop of Alexandria (c.297-373)

- Opposed Arius' misguided understanding of the Son's nature by insisting upon the truth that God is co-equal, co-eternal, and of co-essence in three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
- In forming the statement of the Nicene Creed, pushed for the wording that the Son is 'of one Being (Greek: *homoousios*; lit.: 'the same substance') with the Father'; this term was controversial in its strong claims
- Bishop of Alexandria for 46 yrs
- His fierce opposition to Arius led him into 5 periods of exile totaling 17 yrs

### **Council of Constantinople (381)**

- Second ecumenical council that followed up and built upon the conclusions of the Council of Nicaea
- Declared that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were three separate persons of one God
- Declared that the three persons are co-equal, co-eternal, and of co-essence

### **The Nicene Creed** (*also known as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*)

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, Very God of Very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father by whom all things were made; who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary, and was made man, and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate. He suffered and was buried, and the third day he rose again according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father. And he shall come again with glory to judge both the living and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And we believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified, who spoke by the prophets. And we believe one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. And we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

## The Cappadocian Fathers: Basil of Caesarea (c.329-379), Gregory of Nazianzus (c.329-390), Gregory of Nyssa (c.330-395)

- Great Greek theologians of the Eastern church whose thinking influenced our understanding of the Trinity greatly
- Influenced by the work of Origen and Athanasius
- Gregory of Nyssa's work *That We Should Not Think of Saying There Are Three Gods* refuting tritheism and affirming the common action and essence of all three persons within the action of any one person of the Trinity
- Their works were translated from Greek into Latin by Hilary of Poitiers and influenced the western tradition

## Augustine (354-430)

- Perhaps the greatest of the western, Latin theologians; bishop of Hippo and author of *The City of God* and *Confessions*
- His work, *On the Trinity*, stressed the relationships within the Trinity
- He described the Trinity as follows: The Father loves the Son, and the Son loves the Father, and the Spirit is the bond of love that unites them
- He utilized the analogy of the human psyche for describing the Trinity: just as the mind consists of three distinct faculties of memory, understanding and love/will yet is one mind, so the Trinity consists of three persons but is one God

## Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274)

- One of the towers of Western, Latin theology
- Aquinas argued that the unity of God could be grasped through reason alone, but indicated that the Trinity was something only to be grasped by revelation
- Much of subsequent western theology follows Thomas' lead in moving from God's unity to His Trinity of persons

## John Calvin (1509-1564)

- With Martin Luther, Calvin was a key figure of the Protestant Reformation
- His main written work is *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*
- Stressed importance of working from Scripture alone; argued that we must begin with the idea of God as Trinity and not add it on later; that is, there can be no understanding of God that is not Trinitarian
- Rejected the understanding of the Father as Creator, the Son as Redeemer and the Spirit as Sanctifier because of modalist tendencies; insisted on unity of all persons acting together in creation, redemption, and sanctification

## Karl Barth (1886-1968)

- After centuries where the Trinity was ignored, Barth, a Swiss theologian, emphasized the centrality of the Trinity in God's revelation of Himself
- Barth countered the post-Enlightenment, liberal tendencies to ignore the doctrine of the Trinity as a negative dogmatic statement about the unified 'Supreme Being'
- Barth's *Commentary on Romans* and *Church Dogmatics* resuscitated theological discussion of the Trinity during the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.