

Thomas F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith*, Chapter 8, “The Triunity of God”
Gary Deddo

Chapter in a Nutshell:

How the early church teachers attempted to deal with both subordinationism (Arianism) and modalism (Sabellianism) on the basis of Athanasius’ theological insights and the Council of Nicea (AD 325). The process of theological refinement that took place over many decades reached a high point in Torrance’s judgment with Epiphanius, the Council of Constantinople and the teaching of Cyril of Alexandria who affirmed that the unity of the Godhead was the whole Trinity. This was the understanding that should have carried through the Church, but did not, opening the door to the Schism of 1054.

Outline:

Part 1: Athanasius (c. 296-373)

His key contribution to the general consensus on the doctrine of the Holy Trinity as “one Being, three Persons.”

- Biblically founded in the revelation of the Son’s relationship to the Father
“I and the Father are one” “I am in the Father and the Father in me”
- Theologically Grounded in the “*homoousion*” Nicea (AD 325) and the Council of Alexandria (AD 363), “One being, three Persons.”
- Expressed in his own statements:
“There is one eternal Godhead in Trinity, and there is one Glory of the Holy Trinity”
“There is one Form of the Godhead, which is also the Word; and one God, the Father existing in himself...”; each Person, is “Whole of Whole”; each Person is “*enousios*”

Synthesized: Trinity in Unity and Unity in Trinity (ala the Athanasian Creed)

Upshot: The revelation of the being of the Son in relationship to the being of Father we come to know the being of the Holy Spirit and so know the eternal triunity of the being of the Trinity.

Part 2: Basil, the Gregories and Didymus

Central issue: how to use the key terms *ousia* and *hypostasis* as well as terms used to speak of the unity of the Trinity, such as *monarchia* (monarchy, one source), *arche* (principle or cause), *aitia* (cause) and notions of derived and underived deity, and *scheseis*, (relations).

The upshot: a recognition of the need to distinguish between the *ousia* (being) of the Trinity and the *hypostaseis* (persons) of the Persons in order to speak to both the unity of the Trinity and also the real eternal distinction of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Cappadocians: ambiguity arose among them in departure from Athanasius’ way of speaking of the Being (*ousia*) of the Godhead.

Problematic terms used primarily by **Basil and Gregory Nyssen:** “modes of existence” (*tropos hyparcheos*); “chain of dependence” or “consecutive causes” (*arche*) from the Person of the Father (alone).

Gregory Nazianzen, following more closely Athanasian and Nicene, demurred.

Key phrases: “continuous subsistent relations” eternally inherent in the being of God. No one Person subordinate to another. The *relations* are substantial—of the being of the Trinity. The *Monarchia* of the Trinity is not to be limited to one Person. It is “a unity constituted in and by the Trinity.” (321) “As divided as the Persons are, the entire and undivided Godhead is one in each person.” (p. 322)

Didymus of Alexandria, makes an advance beyond the Cappadocian ambiguity.

The key term: three distinctive modes of existence of the Persons were “enhypostatic” (*enhypostatos*) consubstantially from the person of the Father *and* the person of the Son. But substituted the Nicene formula of the Son “from the *Being* of the Father” with “from the *Person* of the Father,” perhaps referring to the personal distinctive properties of the Persons. (p. 324)

Part 3: Epiphanius and the Council of Constantinople (AD 381)

With **Epiphanius** of Constantia (Salamis) and the Council of Constantinople we reach the highpoint of theological development most directly from Athanasius and Nicea (AD 325) accepting the one being, three persons formula of Council of Alexandria).

Key terms, understanding:

One person cannot be *homoousios* with himself: real eternal personal distinctions (p. 327)

Each person has true, objective and perfect subsistence in the one being of God, and that the whole being of the Son and the whole being of the Spirit is the same as the whole being of the Father. (p. 327)

Persons are enhypostatic in God, coinhereing consubstantially and hypostatically in him.

The *homoousios* applies the inner relations of the Trinity and a whole and so the coinherence of the three Persons in their subsistent, enhypostatic relations to the extent that the Holy Spirit is “in the midst” of the Father and the Son (p. 328)

All are coequal with the Father in honour, power, glory and dominion.

None before or after in God for the relations between the three divine Persons are eternally subsistent and hypostatic in him

There never was a time when the Spirit was not.

One grace and one Spirit, all of God present *in all his acts*

The whole Trinity is the Principle of oneness of the Godhead, not just the Father.

Epiphanius: “In proclaiming the divine *Monarchia*, we do not err, but confess the Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, one Godhead of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”

All three persons are *enhypostatic*: no confounding of them (contra Sabellius) , nor any change in their eternity and glory (contra Arius).

Upshot: Led to the Creedal Statement on the Holy Spirit of the Council of Constantinople AD 381 (p. 332)

Cyril of Alexandria (c.378-444) reinforces this conclusion and that of Athanasius and Gregory Nazianzen.

Key terms, understanding:

No generic impersonal notion of *ousia*

No causal relations in the Trinity

The Father, Son and Holy Spirit mutually indwell and contain one another, while remaining what they are. (p. 338)

So Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son for he belongs to the divine being and inheres in it and issues from it substantially (*ousiodos*) 339

The Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son

TFT's Conclusion: What “God is toward us in Christ and in the Spirit, he is inherently and eternally in himself in the one being of the consubstantial Trinity, and what he is intrinsically and indivisibly in his eternal Triunity he is toward us in the incarnation of his Son and in the mission of his Spirit” (p. 339). There is one being and one arche (*mia ousia, mia arche*) and the *Monarchia* of God is the *Triunity* of God. (p. 340) Toward us, then, the Triune Giver and the Gift are One and the Same.

Observations on TFT's Agenda

TFT is involved in a program of retrieval of the best of theological developments that reach to the third level on the foundations of the first and second levels of faith seeking theological understanding.

TFT is fundamentally concerned about how our doctrine of the Trinity or assumptions about the Trinity can either uphold the reality of our salvation (soteriology) and worship of an undivided Trinity in being, act and dynamic personal relations.

Intrinsic to his calling as a minister of the Gospel, TFT was committed to contributing to the healing of theological rifts in the Body of Christ between the Western and Eastern Orthodox so that there might be a more unified and faithful witness to the Gospel in the world.

Questions for reflection on Chapter 8, "The Triunity of God"

1. Does it make a difference as to where we theologically locate the unity of the Trinity? What is gained by affirming the Unity in Trinity, and Trinity in Unity, or by affirming that the one united being of the Trinity consists of the mutual indwelling of the Persons?
2. Does the theological highpoint which locates the *Monarchia* of the Trinity in the consubstantial relations of the Persons guard best against both subordinationism and Sabellianism--which both undermine the worship and trust in the faithfulness of the God revealed in Jesus Christ according to Scripture?
3. Is it important to see that the Triune Giver and the Gift are One and the Same? Does the understanding of the unity of God residing in the Father (alone) prove a hinderance to affirming such?
4. Is TF's concern simply abstractly theological? Does the issue he's addressing impact our worship, our faith? Does it impact our soteriology and understanding of the nature, character and reality of the being of the Trinity.
5. Is TFT's "onto-relational" category of understanding a required/advised/optional theological development? Is it expendable?
6. Does the Agreed Statement on the Trinity resolve *in principle* the theological controversy between Eastern Orthodox and the Western Church? Should it continue to receive our support for the sake of theological unity, a witness to the oneness of the Body of Christ.
7. Does the alternative now affirmed by some (e.g. Swain and Barrett) that the unity of the Trinity is entirely upheld in a doctrine of God's simplicity provide a comparable or superior theological foundation for affirming the Triunity of the Holy Trinity? If not, what is missed out by the doctrine of Divine Simplicity?